

“Buckle Up”

A “Finding Mister Wright” holiday story for 2017

by Mayumi Hirtzel, ©2017

As he stood peering over the sea of diverse faces walking out through airport security, Rob McAllister flapped his hands, to keep them from sweating. Around him, a family welcomed an older member with cheers and hugs, while a man with distinguished stripes of gray through his hair waved to a young couple who trotted over to greet him, and a business driver in a black suit set aside her placard in favor of the roller luggage of a white-haired woman dressed in high heels and furs.

Rob pursed his lips and returned to his search, when a high-pitched voice piped from nearly beside him:

“Dad!”

He turned, instinctively looking for a little girl with ginger ponytails, a baby-toothed grin with a gap in the front, and pink overalls. What he saw before him was a young woman with sparkling green eyes and a smart, confident smile, who was dressed in a stylish ensemble of boots, leggings, and tartan romper, with a backpack slung over one shoulder and a puffy coat tossed over the opposite arm. At least the ponytail was the same.

He took Paige in a hug he did his best to keep short but firm. So many feelings bubbled through his head as he stood there in that moment – how beautiful she was, how adult, how strong and confident, how proud he was of her and how happy he was to have her as his daughter – but he decided in the end to keep it simple and not sappy as he drew back to arm’s length to give her a more thorough once-over. “Hey, kiddo! How was your flight?”

She shrugged, non-committal. “Eh.” She squinted those shrewd green eyes. “What’s with the beard?”

Rob smiled and rubbed his bush of whiskers. It was still short enough to be scratchy in parts, but it was getting there. "You like it?" he asked, and his daughter's nose cringed up.

"Not really. I mean, it's just weird, you know?" she said, quickly backpedaling with an equal wave of both her flesh and mechanical hands. "You've never had a beard, before."

He deflated inwardly but did his best not to show it. "I had one when you were a baby."

"When Mom says you weren't showering regularly," Paige said, with a tiny sniff that reminded him a bit too much of Serena.

Rob countered his daughter with the same answer he used to give his ex. "Because I was taking care of a baby." He rubbed his face again, suddenly rethinking the decision not to shave for Christmas. "I'm just trying it out over break."

Paige shrugged again. "It's your face, I guess."

"I'm glad you agree," Rob said with appropriate sarcasm. He smiled with fresh love; he'd missed this snarky teenager. "You've got bags?"

She clicked her tongue for a very Serena-like *tcha* sound. "I'm not going to walk around in my pyjamas for the next three weeks," she said, heading toward Baggage Claim.

"No, but you also have clothes at home."

"Old clothes." She turned her head, beaming brightly. "Wait 'til you see the outfit Mom bought me!"

Rob walked beside her in silence a moment, biting his tongue against any badmouthing. "How is your mom?" he finally grunted.

"You know: busy." They got to the baggage carousel, where Paige continued to talk as she bobbed her head in search of her luggage. "But, good. She got a promotion, with a new office on the twenty-second floor, with a view of The Arch and everything. She's, like, a total bigwig, now."

Rob grunted again. "And the boys?"

“You mean Bailey and Dex, or Brad?”

“I was referring to the twins, but if you want to talk about Brad, that’s fine, too.”

“Brad’s okay.” Her face bounced into a brief smile as she spied her bag, a wide, hot-pink roller-body decorated with a fan of university decals, all of them different. “He seems kind of, I don’t know...harried, I guess.”

Rob reached out and grabbed the handle of her bag. “Twin boys will do that.”

Paige nodded and started walking, signaling she had everything she needed. “They’re cute, and they can be pretty sweet, but they can also be really annoying, you know? Like, they fight a lot, and over nothing! I mean, one time, we were in the car, and you know how big that car is!”

Rob didn’t, but let her continue the story uninterrupted as they walked out to short-term parking.

“And they just, like, started punching each other!”

They got to the car, and Rob pushed her luggage into the trunk. He swung it shut with one more grunt. “For what?”

“I don’t know!” Paige headed around to the front passenger door, still talking. “One of them got too close to the other one, or something. And, Dad, they are *strong*. I tried to hold Bailey back, and he started kicking *me!*” She shook her head. “I swear, they’re like little savages, sometimes.”

Rob tilted his head to the side as he got in. “Well, siblings can be like that.”

Paige pulled her seatbelt across her and took a turn at incredulous grunting. “Were you and Aunt Mags like that?”

“We never got that rough.” He started the car but paused on the gearshift as a painful memory returned. “Though, she did kick me in the nuts, once, for blowing the head off her Barbie with a BB-gun.”

An abrupt peal of laughter erupted from his daughter's belly. "Oh, my God!" That quietened after a minute, and, as they wound their way onto the highway toward home, Paige muttered, "I'm so glad I'm an only child."

They drove in silence for about ten seconds before she spoke again.

"How's Daniel doing?"

Rob was touched for her asking, and grateful she didn't immediately pop in her earphones to tune him out.

"He's all right," he said, and smiled her way. "He misses you. He's feeling that empty nest syndrome pretty hard." Of course, the house had never been cleaner....

"I figured. He texts me a lot about classes, but I can tell he's trying to keep tabs."

"He loves you," Rob said plainly. "Talking about your classes has always been an easy way for him to show that."

"I get that. And, I love him, too. I just wish he wouldn't worry so much, you know?"

That felt like a loaded statement. Rob left it alone, branching down an alternate path after a minute.

"Speaking of your classes, how'd you do?"

That familiar shrug. "Good."

"Get your grades, yet?"

"I *aced* Intro to Robotics and physics. And health science."

Rob waited through a longer pause before asking, "What about comp core?"

"A-minus," she said readily.

"And your American history class?"

A brief pause. "Um, solid B."

Rob suppressed a hum at an internal itch. “B is good.” He spared his STEM-focused daughter a quick, wry smile. “I know it’s not your favorite subject.”

She huffed in her seat. “All that colonial war stuff is just so *boring*! And they never talk about any of the women. I mean, there’s some, but mostly, it focuses on a bunch of old white guys.”

“Well, history comes from research, just like science does. We need to have reliable sources, and, unfortunately, there weren’t as many for women and minorities, back then. But, there are a lot of modern historians making some headway, slowly but surely.”

“Emphasis on the slow,” she grumbled before bouncing up with more enthusiasm. “There’s a crossover history and engineering class about women in engineering in the spring, and I totally want to take that, but I had to have a 101, first.”

“I thought you’d already chosen your classes for the spring?”

“I’ve got room for an elective. Plus,” she added with a giddy swing to her voice, “Doctor Ives teaches it, and he is *totally* hot.”

Rob turned his frown to the road rather than to her. “That should not be a deciding factor for a class.”

Paige clicked her tongue. “It’s not a deciding factor, it’s just a perk. And you know you sound like Mom?”

“Nice to know your mother and I still agree on some things.”

She rolled her eyes. “Just don’t try to talk to me about boys, please.”

Rob nodded at the road. “Okay,” he said, vowing to keep his curiosity in check.

She continued on her own anyway. “I mean, it’s not like I don’t know about safe sex. Marshall told me about IUDs when I was ten.”

That line of conversation made his gums ache, so he changed the subject. “Speaking of Marshall, he’s bringing the family for Christmas dinner.”

Paige's happy nature rebounded with a croon as she put her mechanical arm to her chest. "Oh, are they coming for me?"

"Well, you and the dinner."

She settled back into her seat. "How is Marshall? I haven't heard from him in a while."

"Up to his neck in nursing classes and ER shifts."

Paige clicked her tongue again. "Aw. Poor Marshall. I hope Daniel's helping him."

"You know Daniel. He likes Marshall to need him." Rob snickered. "Big brothers are like that."

"Dads, too," Paige said.

Rob allowed her that truth, but added, "That's why it's so hard for some of us to let go."

"Which is why some of us go away to school."

"Touché."

Paige was quiet a moment. "Is Liam talking, yet?"

"Short sentences," Rob told her, and she hummed.

"Wow. He couldn't even say 'dada' last time I saw him."

Rob looked at her and smiled, a bit sadly. "They grow up quick," he said, and she smiled at him, too, but then faced front and promptly gasped.

"Dad!"

He tensed, gripped the wheel with one hand, and threw out his other arm in front of her.

"Jesus!" he said, but a more focused glance around showed no obstacles in the road.

She pointed out the window. "Kittens!"

Rob followed the line of her point to a large white tent set up on the county green. A sign draped over the road-facing entrance declared, *Cat Adoption*, with a request in smaller print that said, *Give a furry friend a home for the holidays.*

"Can we see them?"

Rob had slowed down at her outburst but started the car to speed again. “What? No! Daniel’s cooking dinner, and Marshall’s probably already at the house.”

“Daddy, *ple-e-e-e-ease!*” Paige whined, showing a wanting grimace. It was a face she used to get her way since she had been three years old, and they both knew it. They also both knew he couldn’t say no to it, then or now. But he wouldn’t – he couldn’t – give in without at least laying down some ground rules.

“Ten minutes,” he ordered. “Ooh and aah, and then we’ve got to go.”

“I can do that.”

Less than five minutes later, she was in front of a cage, cradling a big orange tabby with a fluffy face and a swishing tail, who balanced in her arms only a bit off-center because of a missing front leg.

“He was hit by a car when he was a kitten,” the closest attendant told them. “So, they had to amputate.”

“Dad,” Paige said, dropping her pitch. “We *have* to get him.”

Rob balked at her. “Are you crazy? That is a special-needs animal.”

“His needs actually aren’t that special,” the attendant interrupted. She was a perky, college-age young woman, very similar to Paige in manner as well as grit. “Aside from missing a limb, he’s perfectly typical.”

Paige beamed and cuddled the cat close to her cheek. “Just like me!”

“You are anything but typical,” Rob muttered, and Paige pulled a quick face in reply.

“Dad, it’s a sign,” she said then. “What are the odds of *us* finding an amputee cat at Christmas?”

Rob made her set the cat back in its cage and tried to steer her into safer territory out of sight, but she didn’t move more than two steps from her potential new surrogate sibling.

“You’re going back to school in two-and-a-half weeks,” he said in a hushed hiss. “You can’t take a cat with you.”

She lowered her voice, too, but not her determination. "I wasn't planning to take him with me. He needs to be with you."

"What makes you think we want a cat?"

She threw her mechanical arm up at him. "You just said Daniel had empty nest syndrome!"

"For you, not an animal! Both Daniel and I work. We can't come running back to the house in the middle of the day just for a pet."

"It's a cat," she said, almost glowering. "Not a horse." She stepped close enough to put her hand on his coat sleeve. "You guys have *so much love* to give. I should know! And, this little guy needs a home," she said, indicating the cat again. "He needs *us*, Dad. We know what it's like to be different."

She stopped, a sign that she'd spoken her peace, leaving Rob to regard the cat in silence. Buckle, according to the information page hanging on the cage, looked up and blinked back at him with green eyes not quite so bright as his daughter's, but with a similar kind of interest.

Rob put out his hand in a test. He'd been around cats on the farm growing up, but those had been barn animals, standoffish, open-air creatures that could be better described as vermin-hunting employees than pets. This cat bumped his hand with its head when he offered it, though, and purred loudly and low in its throat at his gentle scratching, as if to say, *We're going home, now, right?*

"Well?" Paige prompted.

Rob sighed...but smiled, too. "Yeah, okay."

"Thank you!" Paige squealed, but Rob didn't let her go too far.

"We still have to ask Daniel." He gave her a look of fair warning. "If he says no, it's no."

"Got it," Paige said, already reaching for her phone. Rob listened to her preamble with no more than half an ear, because Daniel was as capable as Rob was to saying no to Paige when she set her mind to something, which was to say, not very capable at all.

While his daughter worked her magic on his husband over the phone, Rob turned his attention to the hovering and hopeful attendant. “He’s had all his shots, right?”

The young woman smiled wide. “Of course! He’s also been neutered.”

“Lucky you,” Rob mumbled to the cat, who burped a “mur” from behind his teeth, like a sympathetic, *You don’t have to tell me, buddy.*

Daniel agreed to Paige – because of course – though the adoption process took some time. There was paperwork to fill out, with references and information on veterinarians and clinic options, plus a trunk’s-worth of feline accoutrements they called the Cat Starter Kit, including a small supply of food and litter, a blanket, a box, and a carrier. He’d brought less stuff than this back to the base apartment when Paige had been born. But she beamed at the cat in the same beatific way she’d done as a baby held in his arms, Rob couldn’t help but smile.

When they got home, Paige greeted everyone for brief hugs and kisses before leading Rob up to the rec room on the second floor, where she put his litter box and opened his carrier. She got some bowls for food and water, eased him out into the closed room, and led Lilly and Liam in a gentle, whispery introduction.

Rob left them to it, returning downstairs to the less starry-eyed adults.

Caitlin shook her head over her glass of wine. “I can’t believe you let her talk you into getting a cat for Christmas.”

“She can be very persuasive,” was Rob’s excuse.

Marshall settled his arm around his wife, closed his eyes, and laid his head on her shoulder. “At least that will keep them entertained tonight.”

Daniel snickered at his brother. “So long as they don’t get any ideas, eh?”

Marshall gave a grunt. “Then we’d really need to clean the house,” he said. Caitlin just grimaced and drank from her glass.

Rob sidled close to Daniel with a sheepish smile. "Are you mad at me?"

"No," Daniel assured him with an easier smile of his own. His gaze swung around the room.

"This place has felt a bit empty without someone to care for."

"You're always welcome to care for my children," Marshall said, still leaning against Caitlin with his eyes closed.

Both Rob and Daniel chuckled, and Rob looked around the room, too.

"We'll have to make a few changes," he said, silently considering what convenient place might be good for Buckle's food and water dish, and litter box. There was an open space at the kitchen island that didn't get a lot of foot traffic, and he could install a cat pass-through in the basement door.

Daniel nodded. "Maybe some climbing furniture, and a little bed to put in front of the fireplace." He looked at Rob. "You think we should look into an organic diet for him, as well?"

Rob raised his brows but didn't counter. "Sure."

Paige came down the steps carrying Liam, with Lilly at her side. "I think he's settled, for now," she said. "But I closed the door so he'd feel safe." She passed Liam to Caitlin and grinned. "Can we eat?"

Dinner conversation among the kids was dominated by pet-talk, most of it coming from chatty Lilly, with little Liam doing his best to keep up. Paige ran interference for the adults, thoughtfully keeping the predominant topic away from Lilly and Liam getting a pet of their own, to the somewhat safer territory of how a three-legged cat was no less normal than a four-legged one.

"What about a five-legged cat?" Lilly asked.

Paige considered that. "I don't think I've ever heard of a five-legged cat."

"I bet it could run lots faster than other cats." Lilly looked at Marshall. "Right, Daddy?"

"I don't know, darling," Marshall said, picking at the remnants of his potatoes. "But I wouldn't want to find out."

After dinner, they exchanged family gifts – two bottles of wine for Rob and Daniel, and a pair of earrings for Paige; Lilly and Liam got hand puppets while Marshall and Caitlin went home with a new duvet and several containers of leftovers – and the kids went back upstairs to visit with Buckle, whom Paige was already calling Bucky. They left him in his temporary room when Marshall and his family left, and Paige grabbed a late evening shower. Daniel loaded the dishwasher, and Rob went to start a laundry.

He opened the door to the rec room cautiously for Buckle’s sake, only to find the cat waiting at the doorway.

The expectant look on Buckle’s face prompted Rob to ask, “You want to come out?”

Buckle burped an affirmative, “Mur.”

“Okay.”

Rob opened the door slowly, and the cat walked out in his bouncing gait. He looked left, right, then headed toward Paige’s room.

“Hey, there, buddy,” she said, just having come from the bathroom. She passed by Rob without even glancing his way. Moving straight for the cat, she bent down and scratched Buckle behind the ears with her flesh hand; the empty left sleeve of her pyjamas was tucked inside the chest for sleeping. “You want to check out my room?”

“Mur,” Buckle said again, and walked inside with a high swish of his tail.

Paige giggled from the doorway. She turned to Rob, her smile still in place. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome. You like him, huh?”

“He’s kind of like a little brother.” She grinned. “Without the punching.”

Rob laughed his agreement. He was about to head into the rec room to start the laundry when she padded over in her slippers, paused at his side, and rose up to kiss his cheek.

“Love you,” she said.

A powerful warmth spread through him, a sense of openness and good spirit. "I love you, too."

"I really think this is a good thing," she said. "He's going to be happy here."

Rob chuckled. "I hope so."

"This is a great place to live. And you guys are a great family." She bumped her shoulder up in a playful shrug. "I should know, right?" She didn't leave him time to answer, as she moved into her room, her focus turning to something Buckle was trying to do.

Rob smiled after her, listening to the quiet swings of her voice from the hall for another moment before heading on with his chores.

After loading the laundry and starting the washer, he peeked into Paige's room. She was propped up in bed with a book, with Buckle curled up next to her hip.

She glanced up and smiled at him. "Night, Dad."

"Good night, sweetheart," he said from the door. "It's nice to have you home."

She nodded at Buckle. "I think he thinks so, too."

"I think you're right," Rob said, and laughed to himself. His daughter was here, even just for a while, and now they had a cat.

It was better than an empty nest.