

Belle's Challenge

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By

Connie Gotsch

Illustrated By

John Cogan



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Awards and Praise for Belle's Star

First Place 2010 Juvenile Fiction National Federation of Press Women Communication Contest

First Place 2010 New Mexico Press Womens Communication Contest

2009 & 2010 New Mexico Book Award Finalist (Juvenile Book grade school to junior high)

Winner Silver Recipient: 2010 Mom's Choice Award® for Juvenile Level 2 Books (Ages 9 to 12)

"I highly recommend this book for all children who love animals and especially for children who have suffered abuse, bullying or other difficult situations in their homes and who need to learn to trust."

~ Nancy Marano, editor, PETroglyphs (www.petroglyphsnm.org)

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Connie Gotsch, who completed final edits on the manuscript the day she died. Her love for dogs spills out in every book in the Belle series. At her request, one dollar from the sale of each Belle book is donated to a new animal shelter in Farmington, NM, where she lived. Her passion for the arts lives on in the Connie Gotsch Arts Foundation.

A special thank you to Margaret Cheasebro who helped Connie with the final edits of this book, and who was instrumental in reviewing the manuscript after Connie's death. This book, a wonderful tribute to Connie, would not have been possible without the dedication and support of Margaret.

~ Geoff Habiger, editor - Artemesia Publishing

Preface

As I wrote this preface to *Belle's Challenge*, one of my three dogs kept nudging my hand at the keyboard, but he had a hard time getting my attention. That's because I was so wrapped up in the story woven by Connie Gotsch, who would have chuckled at the competition between dog and keyboard.

Connie had many loves – her work at public radio station KSJE, her writing, the arts, her friends and fellow writers, and dogs, especially her own rescue dogs, Kiri and Ben. In the Belle trilogy, we feel that love in her often humorous presentation of our canine friends. If you've ever wondered what dogs are thinking, it seems at times that Connie does get into their furry heads, and they sound distinctly like Connie herself. She doesn't miss an opportunity to show us their side of things.

We also see a great love of young people. It's clear that Connie never forgot what it was like to be a pre-teen. In her books, Connie explores the issues of today's young people and does it gently and perceptively. We see in Darcy Connie's own determination and sense of justice.

The series began with Belle's Star, when abusive owners throw a frightened puppy from their truck at a convenience store, and 12 year-old Darcy and her Auntie Ellen rescue her. The spirited Belle isn't the ideal pet for a while but must learn trust and discipline. In the process Belle offers powerful lessons about abuse and bullying and the potential to survive and thrive.

Connie's penchant for word play shines through the books. This is a peek at the wizard behind the curtain. In spoken and written word, Connie was a conduit for language. That doesn't mean it was easy. Connie was legally blind, and, while it may have slowed her down a

bit, it didn't keep her from doing what she wanted to do – everything from travel and photography, to advanced degrees to her radio work and her books. Besides the Belle series, she wrote *A Mouth Full of Shell* and *Snap Me a Future*.

From her birth on January 3, 1948, to age 16, Connie and her family lived in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, until the family moved to Princeton, New Jersey. This probably inspired the cross-country move for Darcy in this book. Connie knew well what it was like to be the new kid.

She earned her bachelor's degree in fine arts and master's degree in radio, TV and film at New York University and her doctorate in communication and education from Northern Illinois University. She taught and worked in broadcasting in the East and Midwest before moving to New Mexico. For 22 years, she was director of programming at KSJE public radio in Farmington.

In 2007 New Mexico Press Women named Connie the Communicator of Achievement, the organization's highest honor, based on professional achievement, community service and service provided to the state affiliate.

With the publication of *Belle's Challenge*, the series comes to an end. Cancer took Connie Gotsch from us on July 15, 2012. She was 64. A professional to the end, Connie completed the final editing of the book hours before her passing, with her longtime friend and collaborator, Margaret Cheasebro.

We miss Connie, but she left a great deal of herself behind – especially in Darcy and the spunky Belle.

Sherry Robinson, September, 2012

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Chapter 1

Just No Fun

Retching, I spat the last of breakfast into the tissue Darcy held to my mouth. My mouth felt like I'd been eating sand, and my throat burned. Would this torture never end?

Darcy wiped my mouth and stroked my head, sadness darkening her blue eyes. "Poor little dog. I'm surprised there's anything left in your tummy. Being car sick isn't fun, is it?"

No, it isn't. I tapped my stubby tail on the seat to show how much I agreed with her.

She caressed my neck, sending golden hair flying onto her cheeks. "Poof. Your fur tickles, you little fox face, you."

Bending she whispered in my pointed ear, "I'll tell you something else that isn't fun, Belle. Moving across country. I'm going to miss Auntie Ellen."

I pushed my black muzzle against her arm and sniffed, detecting dead leaves, the aroma of sadness instead of her usual happy lily of the valley scent.

"But," she continued, "I don't think I'll miss Uncle Jim. We can think of leaving him as a good thing about moving to New Mexico."

Yes, we can. I nuzzled her face. (Uncle Jim despised animals and put Auntie Ellen's dog, Painter, and her cat, Misty, outside with a 'git.' He kicked my butt more than once when I didn't jump out of his way.)

But Auntie Ellen loved me and Darcy's other dog, Buster. I already missed her as much as Darcy did.

In the front seat, Darcy's father, Bob, flexed his large hands on the steering wheel. "A lot of nothing out here, that's for sure." The scent of dust mixed into his normal odor of shaving cream and ink jet printers.

Darcy's mother, Margaret, switched on the radio. Static grated my ear drums.

Buster stuck his head out the window. Lucky he could do that without getting sick. If I stood up, I'd barf again.

Margaret turned off the radio. "I think we have a big adjustment ahead. We're not in Illinois anymore."

I sniffed her to gauge her mood. Usually she smelled of lily of the valley like Darcy. Today Margaret was wilted lily of the valley.

Lifting my head from Darcy's lap, I looked out the window at land that seemed to fill the world with grass

and pebbles. Rocks jutted into a sky empty except for the sun. I thought its heat would fry me. No wonder Margaret had wilted.

Panting and drooling, I glanced at Buster. How was he managing with his black coat?

He stood enjoying the wind, his Irish setter fringe fluttering on his legs and tail. He'd gotten that fringe from his mother.

"Rabid skunks," I said to him on the dog channel. Only canines could hear it. "How much longer is this trip?"

Except to draw his head back through the window, he didn't move the solid Labrador Retriever body his father had given him. "Bob told Margaret we'll get to our new den today."

A shiver ran from my nose to my tail. "Thank dog heaven there's nothing left in my stomach."

"Think about something nice to forget your belly."

"Okay. I hope I can do dog agility wherever we end up." I put my head back on Darcy's lap.

"I'm sure you can. Stop worrying," he replied and stuck his head out again.

"We herding dogs need jobs, otherwise we get in trouble." I sighed and closed my eyes.

I didn't need to remind him. I'd grown up wild in a barn with no discipline. Darcy and Auntie Ellen rescued me from that life, and offered me a chance to be a pet, though I had no idea how to be one. During the last cool time when the leaves turned gold, I'd dug out of Darcy's yard, knocked over waste baskets, and lured Buster into the creek by Auntie Ellen's house, getting his long hair

filthy. Together, we knocked over the grill grate, spewing ash across the lawn.

Margaret and Bob wanted to give me to a farmer, so I could have a job herding cattle and stay busy, but Darcy begged to enroll me in 4-H dog agility to teach me discipline. Because she, Buster and I loved each other, and I had gotten top marks in basic obedience school, her parents granted her request.

During the cold time and the flowering time, Darcy and I worked together. I performed so well jumping fences and running on dog walks that her parents let me stay with them.

Now I must use the discipline I learned in agility by learning to fit into a new place. I wondered how hard that would be.

The car lurched. Bracing my feet against Darcy's leg, I forced my thoughts to find something else nice to focus on. How about Misty, and Painter?

With her fluffy coat, Misty resembled a white lion. Sadness made my eyes burn. I shook myself. Why was I even thinking about her? Who'd play with a stupid cat that grabbed my favorite ball and raced around agility weave poles with it? Bones, I would. I had. Trying to snatch the ball back, I'd learned how weave poles worked. I'll think of you, Misty, if I ever do agility again. I'll miss both you and Painter.

Orange, blue, brown, and black splotches speckled Painter's smooth white body. He smelled earthy, like the terrier he was. An image of Auntie Ellen's yard popped into my mind. Bright bobbing flowers, paw-tickling grass sloping to a creek. Painter and I often raced on

its banks while Buster wallowed midstream catching branches and turtles.

Pressing closer to Darcy, I whimpered. Buster turned and nuzzled me. Thank dog heaven he was here.

Darcy rested one hand on my neck and held a folded paper with the other. "Here's Appleton." She tapped the page. "According to the map, it's in the Four Corners where Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah touch."

Was our new town called Appleton? Fine, as long as I could get out of this flea bitten car soon.

The vinegary odor of worry mixed with the dry leaf smell on Darcy as she folded the map and stuck it into a pocket in the car door. "It's going to be weird walking into a strange school."

Margaret reached across the seat and took her free hand. "I'll feel the same way walking into a strange job, when I find one."

"I hope my new school has a soccer team and a chorus," Darcy sighed.

I licked her hand. All of us had things we hoped for in this new place – things that might or might not be. All of us but Bob, that is. He knew he'd be installing computers, and he loved that as much as I loved liver flavored dog treats.

Patting me, Darcy stared at the back of her father's head. "Dad, why couldn't you have waited until I went to college to change jobs? It's so brown here, it's like another planet. I wonder if Mars looks like New Mexico."

"According to what I've read, Mars may look very much like New Mexico," Bob answered turning to her,

a grin lighting his broad face. Mischief crackled in his brown eyes before he faced the windshield again.

Margaret squeezed Darcy's fingers. Someday, Darcy would be tall and strong like her, but with Auntie Ellen's small nose, mouth, fair skin, and heart-shaped face, instead of Margaret's prominent features.

Margaret let Darcy go. "There's a town in New Mexico called Roswell with little green aliens on its lamp posts," said Margaret. Amusement flickered in her brown eyes. "Maybe they're Martians and you can ask them what Mars looks like."

Darcy put her chin onto her palm. "Meeting a Martian might actually be cool," she said and smiled. "The desert is pretty in a way." She rubbed my shoulder. "Oh well, at least I'll have you, Belle."

I leaned against her, letting her sun colored tresses tickle my face. Yes, I'll be here for you, no matter what.

The car slowed, and Bob pointed through the windshield. "There's Appleton," he said, and pushed damp brown hair back on his head. "We'll be home in two clicks of a computer tech's mouse."

Darcy, Buster, and Margaret leaned forward. Easing to my feet, I put my chin against Margaret's shoulder to steady myself, and stared at our new town.

Either side of the highway, brown dens seemed to rise out of browner earth. Sunlight flashed off gray metal barns with trucks and tractors in front of them, and people clustered in front of little white food burrows with giant hamburgers on top.

Gagging, I dropped back onto the seat beside Darcy. The air stank of left over French fries and the special

water that made cars go.

Darcy heaved a long sigh and smelled of dried leaves. Bending, she whispered in my ear, "Is this dump ugly or what?"

Closing my eyes, I nuzzled her and braced my ears against the snarl of what Darcy called an 18-wheeler rumbling up behind us. Rabid skunks! If I heard one more of those, my hearing wouldn't be worth fleas.

But before the roar could deafen me, we slowed further, and turned. The truck's thunder vanished. So did the stench of greasy food and water for cars.

I caught my breath, smelling and hearing nothing for about as long as it takes to sniff and pick up a dog treat. Then, I smelled green leaves, grass and fresh water. Shadows cooled my face. Had we left the highway for a quiet street? Maybe one with houses on it? I longed to stand up and look, but my stomach swayed like a branch in the wind.

Darcy sat up. "Trees! Lots of them. They have apples and peaches. Look at the pretty houses. Whew! I was scared for a minute. The edge of town looked like the moon."

Bob and Margaret laughed, and Buster thumped his tail against the back of Bob's seat, as the car turned once more, and stopped.

"Here we are," said Bob. "Let's look around. The moving van will be here any time."

With a turn onto the nice street, this trip was over. Thank you, dog heaven.



Chapter 2

A Warning

Darcy undid her seat belt and stretched her arms. They reminded me of the limbs of the colts I'd seen on the farm where I was born.

She flexed her hands and opened the door. Buster and I dived out of the car.

The pavement scorched my paws. Holy fleas! I couldn't get over one torment before I faced another.

Spotting a tree in the middle of a gravel yard, I bolted into its shade, collapsed at the base of the trunk and gulped.

A brand new smell enveloped me – some kind of plant with a clean sharp odor. Wonderful after the car!

Margaret must have smelled it, too, because she

sniffed as she lifted her big frame off the seat and stepped onto the drive. "Mmmmm...Sage brush. The first thing I smelled when we came house hunting last month. I fell in love with the place"

"Nice, isn't it." Bob nodded, drawing quick small breaths through his nose.

Darcy walked up, smoothing her green shorts over her hips and adjusting the belt at her slim waist. As her slender fingers moved, her coltishness disappeared, and she resembled a young woman.

She picked a peach off a branch above my head. "These are ready to eat." She bit into the thick ball. Juice trickled into the gravel. "Yum. Point for New Mexico's side."

Bob smiled. "This part of town used to be an orchard."

"In the desert?" Darcy stared at the brown rocks at the place where the earth and sky met.

"There's water underground, and three rivers meet about a mile from our house. People irrigated their trees. They grew all kinds of fruit here. But mostly apples."

"So the town is called Appleton, right, Dad?" Taking another bite, she surveyed a den at the end of a walk, and looked at me. "Guess that's where we live, Belle. What do you think?"

I followed her gaze. The den resembled a giant dog biscuit plopped on the gray rocks. Behind it, I saw a line of other dens, and way beyond that, huge flat topped boulders.

A colt again, Darcy kicked the ground. "Pretty enough, but where can we practice agility?"

Someplace, for sure. Stomach rocking, I looked around, but saw only more dens in a row on either side of ours.

“Let’s go in and you can look around, Darcy,” Margaret suggested, smelling excited, like lightning.

“It would be kind of nice to know where I’m living,” Darcy grinned. “Though I’d rather know who’s living around me. I hope they’re nice.”

Bob dug in his pocket for a key and started up the walk.

Margaret followed, and I had to laugh. Tall as she stood, he stood taller.

I dove into the shadows they cast. Buster panted beside me.

Bob unlocked a screen door and a carved wood front door that creaked when he pushed it open. Cool air fanned my face. Absolute dog heaven. I ducked through a darkened hall, and skidded on slickness into another burrow. Buster careened off a wall and flopped onto the floor beside me.

Darcy turned on a light and looked around. “Ohhh, Spanish tile. Cool, Mom.” Her flowery smell mixed with lightening.

Beautiful slick Spanish tile. Standing still, I explored with my nose. The burrow had a sweet, smoky aroma, and a round fireplace in one corner. The white walls smelled like fresh paint.

Darcy spotted the fireplace and her eyes lighted. “Whoa.”

Bob laughed. “That’s a kiva fireplace, Darcy. See the benches either side of it? They’re called banco’s. They’re

in the bedrooms, too."

Darcy took off down a corridor toward the back of the den while Buster lurched toward a door opposite the fireplace. "Food burrow's this way," he called.

Bob, Margaret, and I followed him into an area smelling of unfamiliar spices.

Darcy's steps tapped in and out of burrows at the back of the den, then she rejoined us, and opened a glass door leading to a patio. "Look at the trees out there." She stepped onto flagstones. Buster followed. She pointed to a running stream gurgling through the yard. "Is that an irrigation ditch?"

"Yup," said Bob with a glance at some apple trees on the bank nearest the house. "Comes off the river. And we're allowed to use the water in our yard."

I saw grass clumps beyond the flagstones. The stream glided between the green tufts. Dancing into the grass, I realized it grew taller than me. It might even hide Buster. I buried my face in its verdant sweetness. More dog heaven. Breathing my fill, I snuffled into a wide bush with tiny grayish leaves that stretched above my head. It gave off the fresh sharp scent that Bob and Margaret had called sage.

Buster ambled to the stream and drank. Darcy returned to the den.

I kept sniffing the sage brush. Each breath soothed my stomach. In the time it takes to eat a bowl of food, I began to feel almost well again.

Buster lifted his nose from the water and shook. Tongue lolling, he strolled toward a footbridge leading to a den behind us. "Hey Belle. Let's visit the other

bank.”

“You go,” I replied, keeping my nose in the sage. Dog biscuits, I could make a bed in these branches.

Buster trotted across the bridge, and soon I heard him rummaging near the den behind ours.

Its door opened, and the odors of leather, perfume, and expensive beef cuts wafted out, mixing with the smell of the sage.

Peeking out of my refuge, I saw a child skip across flagstones, her red braids swinging over her tan t-shirt. Freckles spattered her nose. Spotting Buster, she clapped her pudgy hands. “Hi, doggy.” She smelled like snapdragons.

Buster lifted his ears and wagged his tail. He always made friends fast.

Plump legs churning, the little girl bounced up to him and patted his shoulder.

“Katherine!” someone shouted from inside, possibly an older girl, judging from the rose perfume that rolled out of the house as she spoke. “Get away from that dog. It’ll bite you.”

Round face twisting into a scowl, Katherine glanced over her shoulder and stuck out her tongue in the direction of the speaker. Kneeling, she flung her sturdy arms around Buster. Their noses touched, and he licked her neck.

A girl about Darcy’s age burst out of the den. Sunlight glinted off her neat, red ponytail. She placed her hands on her hips. “Come back here, Katherine, or I’ll tell Mother.”

This girl had a snapdragon smell similar to Kather-

ine's, masked by rose perfume. Far away as I sat from her, the scent made me sneeze.

"Oh, Emily." Heaving a sigh, Katherine stood up and turned toward the den, a dry leaf smell tingeing her snapdragons.

The big girl ran at Buster, clapping her hands. "Scram! Get away from our house." The reek of pepper covered her perfume.

Jumping out of the bush, I growled at her. "How dare you talk to him that way! Buster didn't do anything to you."

"Never mind, Belle." Buster called to me on the dog channel as he trotted toward the footbridge. "She smells nasty. I'm out of there."

"Good idea," roared a dog voice from the den next to ours. The den's screen door flew open and a square-jawed, black and tan animal jumped out.

I sniffed the earthy light scent of a female terrier but the largest one I'd ever seen. She bounded to meet Buster at the footbridge, hair fluffing around her face. The rest of her coat lay in close cropped waves along her body. "Be careful. Those humans will hurt you," she woofed, looking him in the eye without lifting her head. "Especially that older girl, Emily. She's scared of dogs, but she pretends she hates them."

Buster scuttled back to our side of the stream. Racing across the yard, I nudged him toward our den.

Darcy appeared at the glass door. "What's going on? What's all the barking?"

Red pony tail bouncing, Emily yelled from her bank, "Keep your mutt off our property."

Smelling her pepper and sour stomach under it, I dashed to Darcy in case she would need help.

The black and tan dog joined Buster. "You'd best go with her, or you could end up in the dog pound."

Buster's ears drooped until they hung below his chin. "I was just looking around. We're brand new here."

The big dog cocked her head. "Welcome to the neighborhood, but stay out of that yard."

Emily marched back into her den, her movements reminding me of a willow tree angered by a wind storm. When she disappeared inside, I exhaled in relief.

But now another red-haired person burst out of the den, strode across the footbridge, and glowered at Darcy with glittering green eyes. She moved like a cat ready to kill a snake.

Darcy froze in our doorway and began to smell afraid, like sour stomach.

Buster and I stepped between her and the woman. The other dog stood nearby.

Margaret appeared, a box in her hand. Behind her, two men set down the food burrow table.

"What's the matter?" Margaret said.

The woman looked at the box and the men. "You must be moving in."

Margaret nodded. "I'm Margaret Simmons. What's your name?"

The woman's coarse features softened. "You may not realize it, but dogs are not allowed to run free in Appleton."

Margaret stepped outside and slid in front of Darcy. "I'm sorry. We didn't realize that."

The woman forced a smile. "All right, now you know. I'm Mrs. Robinson." She paused, then added, "The wife of Appleton's mayor." She arched her stubby neck.

Margaret eased her hands onto our collars. "Nice to meet you. If dogs are not supposed to run here, we won't let them. Thank you for telling me, Mrs. Robinson."

The stench of sour stomach rolled off Mrs. Robinson. "Why don't you build a pen for them? A lot of people do that."

I looked at the sky. Please, dog heaven, don't make us live in a pen.

Mrs. Robinson peeked at the black and tan dog. "You go home, Jazzy."

Cocking her head, Jazzy opened her jaws and snapped them shut, teeth clattering. She looked like she was trying to catch a fly, but I didn't see any flies to catch.

Mrs. Robinson gasped, scrambling backwards, nearly tripping on a sage plant. Her odor turned to the metallic smell of panic. "Don't you snap at me, Jazzy."

Margaret gaped at Jazzy and laughed. "What are you doing, girl?"

Mrs. Robinson's voice trembled. "Those Airedales scare me to death when they do that," she gulped. Recovering, she glared at Margaret. "Some people think it's cute."

Jazzy clattered her teeth a second time, as if she were snatching a treat out of the air.

"It doesn't look like she's trying to hurt anything,"

Margaret said, swallowing her grin.

I wiggled my nose. Jazzy smelled earthy, like a normal friendly terrier, but with nutmeg and cinnamon on her, too, the scent of a fun-loving dog. Lifting my chin, I looked down my muzzle at Mrs. Robinson. Come on, flea brain. Jazzy's quirky, that's all. She doesn't mean anything by snapping the air.

Mrs. Robinson looked at us and stiffened, as if holding her ground. "I've called the police on that Airedale, and I'll call them on your dogs if you don't control them. They're dangerous, and they should be locked up." She edged away from us, ready to leap if we moved. When she neared the stream, she turned on her heel and hurried to the footbridge. Once across, she settled into a gliding walk and held her head high.

Eyes wide, Darcy stepped out of the den, smelling vinegary. "Do you think she'd really call the cops?"

"I don't know. She seems afraid of dogs, so she might be overreacting to their being out," replied Margaret, glancing at Jazzy and chuckling.

"Wonder why she's scared," Darcy mused.

Margaret shrugged. "I don't know, but let's put Belle and Buster on their leashes until we find out exactly what the law is."

Darcy grasped us by our collars. Margaret disappeared into the den, returned with our leashes, and went in again.

We cowered close to Darcy.

The door to Jazzy's den opened. Another girl about Darcy's age stepped out, her short black curls bouncing. Now what was coming? Nose twitching, I tried to

sniff out the girl's attitude. She smelled like sage brush.

Jogging to us, she grabbed Jazzy's collar. "How did you get out?"

Jazzy cocked her head and clattered her teeth at the air. "I opened the food burrow door," she said on the dog channel.

Buster and I laughed.

Darcy gaped at the Airedale and then at the girl.

"Does that dog, like – always, snap that way?"

"Yup, that's part of being an Airedale. Some of them have an instinct left over from their rat catching days, I guess. They were taught to snap at their prey." She grinned at Darcy. "I'm Susan Krebs. Who are you?"

I saw Darcy give Susan that sizing up look humans use when they meet each other.

I don't know if Darcy liked her, but I liked Susan's aroma.

Darcy introduced herself and us.

"Congratulations." Susan rolled her eyes. "You get to live across from the Robinsons."

Darcy kicked a stone. "Nicest folks in town it looks like."

"The little one, Katherine, is okay, but I think the others eat sour pickles for breakfast." Susan wrinkled her ample nose and plopped sturdy hands on solid hips.

Darcy smiled at her. "It would seem like that." Her flowery scent mixed with smells of vinegar and sour stomach.

They looked at each other for about as long as it takes to eat a dog biscuit, then flexing strong shoulders, Susan said, "I'm twelve." Her face brought to mind a full

moon. "I'm in 7th grade."

"Me too," said Darcy.

Susan nodded. "Then we'll be in the same school."

"Cool!" Darcy said.

Falling silent, they balanced themselves first on one foot and then the other.

After what seemed like time enough to eat three bowls of food, Susan asked, "You want some lemonade? I think we can find dog biscuits, too."

"Okay." Darcy stopped fidgeting and stood up straight.

She must be beginning to like Susan.

Susan's den had a glass door to the food burrow, like ours. She and Darcy took us in. After rummaging in the cool box where humans keep their food, and digging the best smelling dog biscuits out of a hole in a wall, they settled on Susan's blankets in her sleeping burrow. Buster and I sat down on the floor and eyed the treats.

"You got it down pat, don't you?" Jazzy dropped on her haunches, too.

"Of course," I said, liking her spunk.

Darcy sipped her lemonade. "So what's with these Robinson people?"

"They're just rich jerks." Susan reached into the box and threw a treat to each of us. "They're lawyers and big shot politicians who think they're *it*."

"Is Mrs. Robinson, like – afraid of dogs?" asked Darcy.

"Yeah," Susan replied. "But I don't know why."

Patting me, Darcy glanced around the room, spotting pictures on a bulletin board. One showed girls clustered

around a soccer ball and a wooden eagle. "Is that your team?" she asked, an eager breath in her voice.

Susan grinned. "Yeah, we were league champions last year."

"I played on a championship team too, back home," Darcy said.

"Good, you can try out for our team," Susan invited. "But there's a lot of competition for spots."

Darcy nodded. "There always is." She smelled like lightning, excited.

Jazzy lowered her ears. "I don't think your human knows what she's getting into, Belle. That team won a regional tournament against four other states. They're hot dog biscuits."

I lifted my ears. "Don't sell Darcy short. She's no old gnawed bone."

Jazzy cocked her head and gave me her best smart-aleck look. "Don't speak until you see Susan play."

"You watch Darcy play before you talk. You don't know her from a chewed up shoe, so don't be a smart-aleck."

"Stop me." Jazzy clacked her teeth.

Buster slid between us. "Hey, it's a human issue. Let them deal with it."

I leaped straight over him at Jazzy. I'd have won a prize ten times longer than myself for that move in an agility contest.

Jazzy sidestepped me. I skidded into a closet. Susan's smell enveloped me as a pair of slacks fell onto my head.

Darcy leaped off the bed and grabbed me. "Belle! Cut it out." Retrieving the slacks, she hung them on a hook.

Susan guffawed.

Jazzy's chin whiskers bounced, and a quizzical expression filled her eyes. "I'm glad you didn't land on me. I'd have been in trouble."

"I like your sense of humor, but don't be such a smarty bones," I retorted. "Judge Darcy's soccer playing after the tryouts."

Jazzy lowered her ears.

Darcy escorted me back to Susan's bed. "Belle is a jumping bean. She won some agility prizes in Illinois."

Susan scratched my back. "Dog agility. We had that here one time."

I looked up at her. Had? What does that mean? Dog heaven, please not what I think it does.

Susan continued. "I took Jazzy, but the people who organized the agility games moved away, and no one else wanted to take over their job."

My heart sank lower than a skunk in its hole.

Buster let his ears hang. "I'm sorry, Belle." He touched his nose to mine.

Darcy leaned down and scratched my head. "Guess we're going to have to do agility by ourselves." She looked at Susan. "Are dogs allowed loose on your own property?"

Susan drained her lemonade glass. "Yes. As long as you're there with them."

I thought of racing in an arena with a crowd cheering. Leaping flea-sized fences in the yard could never compare to that. My stomach shook, and I tried to think of something pleasant to calm it.

A breeze stirred the curtains at Susan's window. I

smelled the plant I liked.

Turning to Jazzy, I said, "I love the scent of sage brush."

"Me too," she answered. "It smells good when it rains."

I kept my nose on the aroma, the best thing I had found so far in New Mexico.