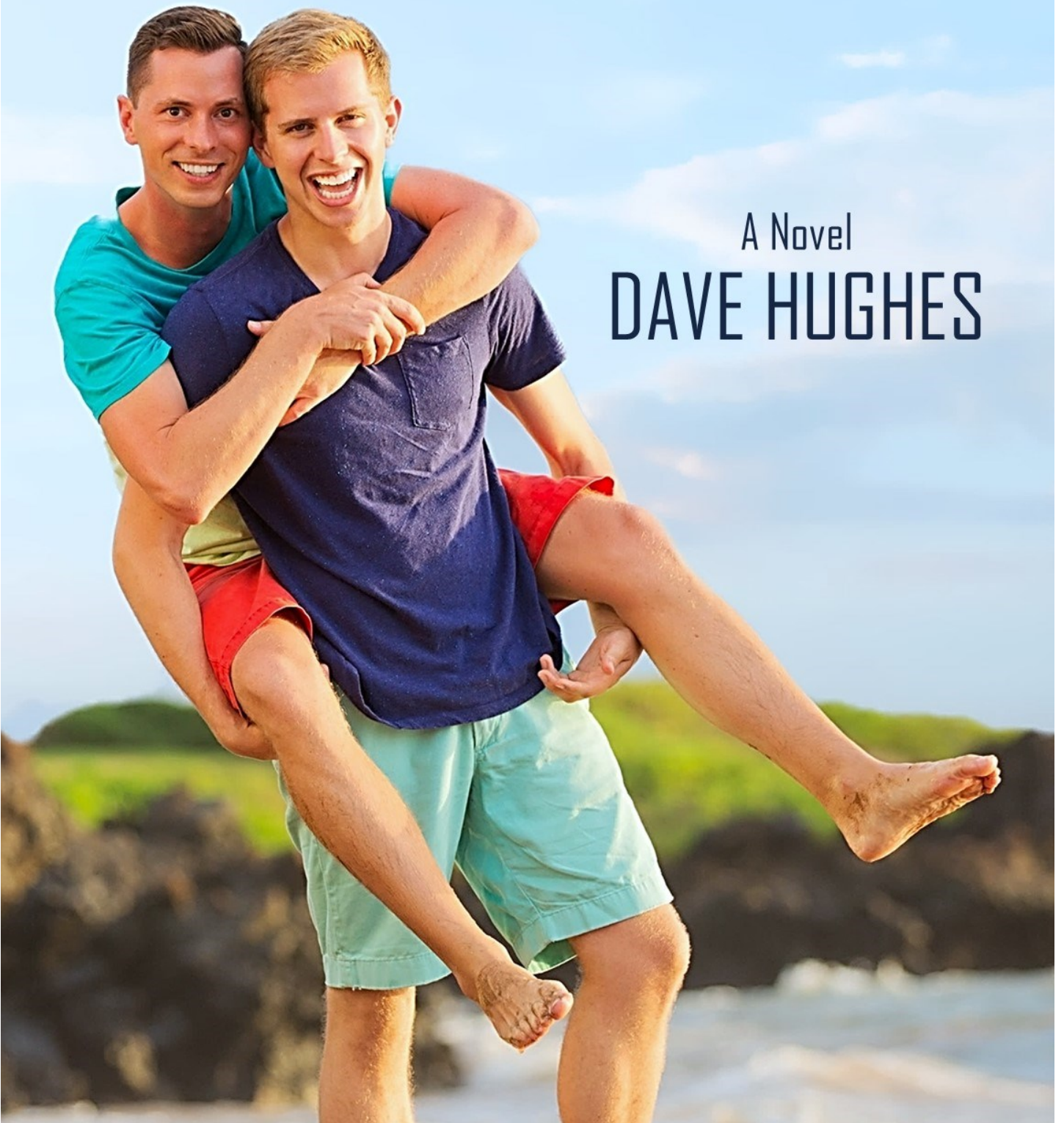


MAYBE NOW

A Novel
DAVE HUGHES



An excerpt from

MAYBE NOW

A novel
by Dave Hughes

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An Advancement Opportunity

Tuesday, January 8, 2019

At 2:50 p.m., Ryan Robertson pulled open the heavy glass door leading into the Regional Headquarters building of Technovations. He entered a modern, opulent lobby that was bathed in sunshine thanks to the two-story floor-to-ceiling tinted glass windows. He scanned the well-maintained potted plants, the beautiful artwork, and the waiting area with comfortable seating. Ryan flashed his employee badge to the security guard at the front desk, who nodded and allowed him to pass. He walked over to the elevators. When he pushed the Up button one of the cars immediately opened for him. He stepped into the elegant wood-paneled cube and pressed 4 – the building’s top floor. The doors closed with a quiet whoosh and the elevator smoothly began its ascent.

The Regional Headquarters building, or RH as it was known, was one of five buildings on Technovations’ Scottsdale campus. It was the one Ryan had been in the least since he rarely needed to meet with anyone in the company’s upper echelon. But yesterday, he received an invitation to meet with Richard Caldwell, Senior Vice President of Human Resources and Workforce Development. He had no idea why.

Technovations was a casual workplace. A polo shirt and nice jeans or casual slacks were the norm. For today’s meeting, he wore a light blue freshly dry-cleaned dress shirt and a nice pair of dark slacks. He debated wearing a tie, but even the higher-ups rarely wore ties around the office.

The elevator eased to a gentle stop and the doors slid open. Ryan stepped into a lavishly-appointed foyer, with elegant dark wood paneling, high-grade maroon carpeting, and plush chairs. He approached the large desk, where a well-dressed middle-aged woman sat with perfect posture in front of her monitor. She looked up and smiled. “May I help you?”

“My name is Ryan Robertson. I have a 3:00 appointment with Mr. Caldwell.”

The receptionist glanced at her monitor and nodded. “I’ll let him know you’re here. Please have a seat over there. If you would like coffee, iced tea, or water, please help yourself.” She gestured toward a small table that held a Keurig machine and two 5-gallon glass dispensers, one with iced tea and one with water. Several lemon slices floated atop the water. An assortment of snacks was pleasingly arranged in a small basket. Ryan wasn’t sure how long he would be waiting, so he didn’t want to get too invested in refreshments. He poured himself a glass of water and sat down.

While he waited, he couldn’t help but think, *Why am I here? It probably isn’t for a bad reason – if that were the case, I’d get called into HR or escorted out by security. Am I dressed well enough? Maybe I should have worn a tie.*

After the longest five minutes of his life, he heard an alert sound on the receptionist’s computer. She glanced at the monitor, clicked on something, and stood up. “Mr. Caldwell will see you now. Right this way, please.”

She led Ryan through a wooden double door and down a hallway. Ryan recognized most of the names on the nameplates as he passed. Although Technovations’ main headquarters was in Silicon Valley, many executives chose to be based in Scottsdale, where real estate prices were lower and the surroundings were still serene and upper-class. She reached an open door and took a few steps inside. Ryan followed her in.

A middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair stood and walked around his large desk. He wore an expensive-looking dress shirt, but no tie. As he approached Ryan, he smiled and extended his hand. “Rich Caldwell.”

Ryan shared a firm, manly handshake with Mr. Caldwell and tried to look confident. “Ryan Robertson. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Caldwell.”

“Rich! Please call me Rich. Would you like water or iced tea or anything?”

“No sir, I’m fine. Thank you.”

Rich nodded to the receptionist, who took that as her cue to leave. She closed the door behind her. Rich walked back to his chair and gestured toward the guest chair facing the desk. “Have a seat.”

After they exchanged a few pleasantries, Rich said, “So, Ryan, it looks like you’ve been with Technovations for about six and a half years.” Ryan nodded. “Where do you see yourself in the next five or ten years?”

Ryan paused for a moment to compose the best possible answer. “With Technovations, if at all possible. Given that, I’d like to look for assignments in other divisions so I can learn more about what Technovations does. In terms of advancement, I hope I can make it at least as far as Project Manager.” Rich nodded but didn’t say anything. *Is he waiting for more?* Ryan let out a nervous chuckle. “I know that’s not too specific. But with everything moving so quickly, it’s hard to know what new technologies will exist in five or ten years. Like with AI. Who knows what kind of opportunities that will bring? I’m grateful to work at a company where I can be part of advancing technology, whatever that ends up being.”

Rich smiled. “You’re right. Things change quickly. Hell, five years ago most of us would never have anticipated some of the projects we’re working on today.”

“I guess you just have to be flexible and adapt to whatever comes along.”

Rich’s smile was disarming and Ryan was starting to feel less nervous. Rich seemed satisfied with the answers Ryan had given. “So, let’s get to why I invited you here today. At Technovations, we’re committed to developing our talent from within. Whenever we have an opening at the VP or Division Manager level, we prefer to elevate someone with a proven track record who understands our culture and our methodologies, rather than hire someone from outside. To that end, we created the Leadership Development Program, or LDP as we often call it. Every year, we select twenty individuals who have displayed leadership potential. We put them through a series of training courses and give them a variety of assignments throughout the company. Each person is paired with a mentor – someone at the Division Manager or VP level. The program lasts four years. By the time you’re through you will have gained the skills and experience to perform well at higher levels in the company. Of course, there are no guarantees for what positions might become available and where you might end up, but you’ll be well-positioned for advancement and career success. And of course, the skills you gain will be a great benefit to Technovations as well.”

“Sounds like a wonderful program.”

“Thank you. This program has been in place for ten years and we’re pleased with the results. It’s my baby, so to speak. It earned me my promotion to VP.” He smiled proudly. “Each year, we ask everyone from Department Managers on up to identify individuals within their organization who might be good candidates for advancement. You have been nominated. I’ve looked over your past years’ performance evaluations, and they’re quite impressive.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I see that you’ve been a first-level manager for the past two years. You’ve received some of the highest Manager Feedback Survey scores in the company. That’s quite an accomplishment for someone who’s only been managing people for two years. Your direct reports think very highly of you.”

“Thanks. I have a really great team. They’re very dedicated and they work well together.”

“And that’s a reflection on you. You have created a work environment where people flourish and succeed in their roles. With that said, I’d like to offer you a spot in the LDP. Now, before you say yes, you should be aware that this will involve extra work in addition to your regular responsibilities. Your manager will do her best to give you some bandwidth for this, including covering for you while you’re taking training classes.”

“Sounds good so far.”

“One aspect of this program involves putting you on a rotation of assignments in various organizations within the company. At least one of those assignments will be at one of our overseas sites so you can learn about the international aspects of our business. That means you’ll have to live somewhere else for a year. We provide the housing and a generous per diem to cover food and other incidental expenses. Are you married?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Any kids?”

“No.”

“Well, if you and your wife decide to have her move with you, we would cover her airfare and increase the daily per diem. If not, we’ll pay for a round-trip ticket for you to visit home every three months. Or if you prefer, you can use that ticket to have your wife come visit you.”

Rich’s assumption that Ryan was straight threw him off balance. *What should I do now? Should I say something or let it go? Technovations includes sexual orientation and gender identity in their non-discrimination policies and I haven’t had any issues up to this point, but now what?* Before he could figure out if or how to address that issue, Rich asked, “Do you have any questions about the program?”

Ryan thought quickly. “Yes. Tell me more about having a mentor. What sorts of things would we talk about?”

Rich smiled. “A mentor is a more senior person who is willing to give you advice, whether that’s long-term career guidance or help with day-to-day matters such as navigating workplace

challenges. They may introduce you to people that would be helpful for you to know or provide other resources. Think of them as a role model or a trusted advisor. Every mentoring relationship is different. It depends on the people involved and the mentee's needs.”

“How will my mentor be selected?”

“We'll host a kick-off event for this year's LDP class in a couple of weeks. You'll meet the others from this site who will be part of this year's class. The higher-level managers who have volunteered to be mentors will be there too. They'll introduce themselves to the group and talk about their backgrounds and interests. Then there will be some social time where everyone mingles. You can chat with the ones who seem like they might be a good fit. You'll probably find that you click with one or two people. Then you will indicate your top few choices for your mentor, and we'll do our best to match you up accordingly.”

“It sounds like having a mentor involves forming a personal relationship as well as a business relationship.”

“Yes, it does. You'll get to know each other pretty well. If you decide that you and your mentor aren't clicking or you aren't getting what you want from the relationship, it's okay to say that and select a different mentor. It happens sometimes.”

Ryan thought for a moment. He remembered the promise he made to himself when he left home at 17 and began his adult life on his own in Los Angeles: He would be openly and proudly gay. Hiding his gayness from his parents had taken a toll on his happiness and self-esteem, and he vowed he would never hide again. “Are there any people in your pool of available mentors who identify as LGBT?”

Ryan studied Rich's face to gauge his reaction. Rich's expression conveyed surprise, but not shock or disapproval. “Well... uh... there are none I'm aware of. It's not something we ask.”

“Okay.”

“But I'm sure most of our senior managers wouldn't have any problem with it. Having an inclusive culture is one of our corporate values.”

“Well, I'm sure I'll be able to find a mentor who would be a good match.”

“So... Are you interested in participating in the Leadership Development Program?”

“Yes! Definitely! It sounds like a very special opportunity.”

“It is. Do you have any other questions for me?”

“No, none at this time.”

“Very well. You’ll receive an invitation to the kickoff event I mentioned earlier. I believe it’s scheduled for Friday, January 18th.”

“Great! I’m looking forward to it.” They both rose from their seats. Rich extended his hand across the desk and Ryan shook it. “Thank you for giving me this opportunity!”

“You’ve earned it. We’ll be in touch soon.”

Ryan turned and left the office. As he walked down the hallway toward the lobby, he glanced into some of the other offices. *I could sure get used to working in these surroundings!*

Ryan walked across the parking lot to return to his building, elated by this development. He decided to stop by his friend Eddie’s cubicle. Ryan rented a room in Eddie’s house during his summer internship while he was in college. They remained good friends. As Ryan thought more about having a mentor, he realized that Eddie had been an informal mentor since that summer.

When Ryan arrived at Eddie’s cubicle, he was catching up on his emails. “Hey!”

“Hey! What’s up?”

“Got a few minutes?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s see if there’s an empty conference room.”

Eddie locked his computer and stood up. Since it was late in the afternoon, they found an empty room easily.

Ryan said, “I just got some great news! I’ve been selected for the Leadership Development Program!”

“Wow! That’s fantastic! Congratulations!”

“Thanks. I’m really excited about it. I just came from a meeting with Rich Caldwell. There was one thing he said that got me thinking. He said I’d have a mentor. And he said the mentor and I would develop a pretty close relationship. I asked him if there were any LGBT people in upper management positions, and he said he didn’t know of any.”

“That’s true. There aren’t any – at least none who are out. We’ve talked about that in Techno-Pride, our LGBT employee group. Everyone in that group is an individual contributor or a first- or second-level manager. No higher-ups are in the group and no one knows of any.”

“I wonder why that is. There are dozens of VPs, Division Managers, and Principal Engineers. Statistically, there must be a few who are gay.”

“You would think. But either people have decided they need to stay in the closet if they want to advance, or there’s a lavender ceiling. Maybe you’ll be the first one to break through it.”

When Ryan arrived home, he planted a juicy kiss on his husband Aaron’s lips and gave him an enthusiastic hug.

Aaron said, “Well, you must have had a good day.”

“I had a fantastic day. I’ll tell you all about it over dinner. How was your day?”

“Not as good as yours. Just another day in paradise, if you consider the Food World pharmacy paradise. At least it was a little slower than usual.”

“I feel like going out for dinner. How about you?”

“Yeah, sure. You pick the place.”

“How about Kahuna’s Tiki Paradise?”

“Your day was that good, huh?”

“It was. Anyway, let me change and we’ll get going.”

Forty-five minutes later, they were sitting in Kahuna’s, Mai Tais in hand and dinner orders placed.

Ryan said, “Okay. So today, I was invited to a meeting with the VP of Human Resources and Workforce Development. He told me I’ve been identified as someone with leadership potential and he offered me a spot in their Leadership Development Program.”

Aaron said, “That sounds exciting!”

“Yeah. So I told him I was definitely interested and grateful for the opportunity. Then I asked what was involved. He said I’ll be assigned a mentor and we’ll meet once or twice a month. There will be training classes they’ll send me to every so often. Later, they’ll put me on a rotation of assignments in different parts of the company so I get exposed to a broader view of how the company works.”

Aaron said, “That sounds amazing! I’m really happy for you!”

“Thanks! I’m still trying to wrap my head around it. Anyway, just so you know, at least one

of those rotation assignments will be in a foreign country.”

At that moment, their server appeared and delivered their entrees. “Is there anything else I can get for you? Maybe another round of Mai Tais?”

Ryan was in a celebratory mood. “I’d like a Tropical Itch.”

Aaron felt like he needed another drink. “I’ll have a Doctor Funk.”

When the server left, Aaron said, “So, you’re going to have to work someplace else?”

“Just for a year. But I’m not surprised. Almost everyone who’s made it to the upper ranks of our company has worked overseas at some point during their career. They say it’s important to learn about the international parts of our business.”

“When would that happen?”

“I don’t know. Not right away.”

“So, what about me? Does that mean we have to be apart for a year?”

“Not necessarily. Usually, when someone takes an overseas assignment they move their spouse and kids there too. Since we’re married, you could come along. They’ll pay for it and give me a higher per diem.”

“What would I do for a year? Just sit around in some apartment?”

“You could get a job at a pharmacy for a year, couldn’t you?”

“No. It doesn’t work that way. I’d have to sit for that country’s board exam and pass it before I could get a job. And that would interrupt my career path here, such as it is.”

Ryan thought for a moment. “Well, okay. Maybe it would make more sense for you to stay here. But they’ll pay for visits home once a quarter, or I could use that funding for you to come and visit me.”

Aaron sighed.

“We can chat on Zoom every day or at least several times a week. Anyway, we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. At this point, I don’t even know if I’ll make it that far in the program or where they might send me.”

“Well, okay. But I’m not crazy about having to spend a year apart.”

“I get it. I don’t like that part either. But it’s still a ways off. We’ll figure it out. But this is a great opportunity! Very few people get a chance at this. And those senior-level people make at least a half-million dollars a year. At least! Think about the traveling we could do! Think about the house we’d be able to buy!”

“Is the money really that important to you?”

“It’s not just the money. It’s also the challenge and the opportunity.”

Aaron said, “I’m happy enough with what we have.” He took another bite of food and chewed it thoroughly. “But if it’s that important to you and it’s something you really want, I’ll support you.”

Ryan’s face lit up. “Thanks, honey!” He reached across the table and squeezed Aaron’s hand. “I love you.”

Aaron tried his best to smile. “I love you too.”

The Kick-off

Friday, January 18, 2019

A few minutes before 3:00, Ryan returned to the RH building for the Leadership Development Program Kick-off. This time, two other passengers joined him in the elevator. They were dressed much like him – neat dress shirts and slacks – so Ryan assumed they were heading to the same function. The riders glanced at each other and smiled but nobody said anything.

The elevator doors opened on the fourth floor. This time, double doors at the other end of the foyer, opposite the receptionist's desk, were propped open. A sign by the door announced, 'Welcome LDP Class of 2022!' Ryan headed toward the open doors and the other two followed.

Rich Caldwell was standing inside the door greeting the arrivals. He was brimming with enthusiasm as he shook each person's hand. "Welcome! Glad you could make it. We'll start in about ten minutes, so feel free to get yourselves something to eat and drink and find a place to sit."

Ryan scanned the room. Along the back wall was a buffet table, covered in a dark red tablecloth. It offered hors d'oeuvres including jumbo shrimp, taquitos, meatballs, bacon-wrapped scallops, sandwich rolls, fresh fruit, and a large cheese-and-cracker assortment. White plates were stacked at the beginning of the buffet, along with a basket of rolled cloth napkins containing real silverware. Ryan picked up a plate and a rolled napkin and took a little bit of everything.

In the corner beyond the buffet table was a portable bar. Two bartenders wearing white shirts and black bow ties were serving cocktails, beer, wine, and soda to the attendees.

Ryan decided to choose a seat at a table and place his plate and napkin there before returning to the bar. There were four round eight-person tables, with several unclaimed seats at each. Ryan saw a lectern near the front of the room opposite the buffet table, so he chose a seat facing forward. He walked over to the bar and got in line behind two others. He was impressed by the selection of liquors and wines on offer, and the bar was well-stocked with mixers. The

bartenders seemed to know what they were doing. Normally at such a set-up, he'd play it safe and order something basic like Jack and Coke. But he took a chance and asked for a Mai Tai. It wasn't quite as good as the Mai Tais at Kahuna's Tiki Paradise, but it was decent enough.

He returned to his table and sat down. There were four men seated at the table already. Two were older men, presumably executives who would be part of the mentor pool. Ryan guessed the other two were in their mid- to upper-30s, so he assumed they were fellow LDP participants. Nobody seemed to know each other except the two executives. Everybody focused on eating their hors d'oeuvres. They exuded a combination of nervousness and anticipation. Ryan smiled at the others and said, "Hi. I'm Ryan Robertson." He extended his hand to the men seated on each side of him, and they replied with their names. Ryan stood and walked closer to the other two and shook their hands. That broke the ice at the table and the others relaxed a bit.

Ryan scanned the room and counted 24 people. There were four women among the participants, one of whom was African-American. He spotted a couple of Asians and Latinos. Ryan, at 29, was probably the youngest person in the room. Most of the other participants were in their 30s or early 40s. He assumed those over 45 were the executives.

A few minutes later, Rich Caldwell closed the double doors and approached the lectern. He stood in front of it and addressed the gathering without a microphone. "Good afternoon and welcome to the kick-off for this year's Leadership Development class. As I look around the room at the bright young faces here, I think, 'You are the future of Technovations.' And I feel good because that means the future of Technovations is in excellent hands!" People politely clapped. That seemed a little over the top to Ryan, but he admired Rich's optimism.

Rich gave a brief overview of how the program would work and the types of training the participants would receive. He went over the schedule for the rest of the year. Ryan noticed a small table with ten swag bags bearing the Technovations logo. As Ryan would soon discover, they contained several books about management and leadership, a notebook embossed with the company logo, a coffee mug, a lanyard, and a leather RFID-blocking passport cover.

After Rich concluded his overview, he asked each executive to come forward and state their name, describe their position, and share some information about themselves. Before long, they all sounded the same. Many of them seemed rather stuffy and uninteresting.

Then Rich asked each participant to come forward and state their name, job title, department, and something interesting about themselves. Everyone seemed so mindful of the first

impression they were making to company executives that nobody allowed much of their personality to shine through. As each person finished, Rich handed them a swag bag.

By the time it was Ryan's turn, there was no energy left in the room. Everyone was tired of hearing people introduce themselves. Each introduction sounded about the same, and it was unlikely that anyone would remember any details about anyone else an hour from now. He stood quickly, walked briskly to the front of the room, and flashed a big, friendly smile. At 6'6", he was a commanding presence, but he was determined to present himself as a friendly, confident, and interesting person. "Hi, everyone! I'm Ryan Robertson and I'm thrilled to be here! I'm a manager in the Quality & Reliability Department. As for something interesting about myself, I play the trumpet. I love jazz. I play in Desert Jazz Connection and Desert Pride Wind Symphony."

Ryan scanned the room. The last statement elicited no response. People looked like they had never heard of either band, which wasn't surprising. The word 'Pride' had not registered with most people. He added, "Those bands are made up mostly of members of the LGBT community."

Ryan scanned the room again. That last statement woke people up. The younger people seemed not to care, but the older people looked surprised that someone had dared to say that.

He reminded himself to keep smiling and stand tall as he walked confidently back to his seat.

As the last three people introduced themselves, Ryan looked around the room to see if anyone was looking at him. He wondered how his introduction had landed with the others – especially the executives.

After everyone finished, Rich said, "Thanks for sharing a little bit about yourselves. Now, I'd like you all to stand, circulate around the room, and mingle with others. I'm sure you'll find a few people who have common interests. Help yourself to more refreshments if you like. When we reconvene in half an hour, you'll have an opportunity to indicate your preferences for a mentor on the form you'll find in your packet."

Everyone stood. Ryan waited to see what other people would do. Most people headed back to the buffet table and bar. He selected some more food and asked for a Coke. He observed whether the other participants were approaching the executives or vice versa. He decided to start with Rich Caldwell. Rich hadn't specified whether he was among the available mentors or not.

After they shook hands, Ryan said, "This is quite an event you've put on! Now I'm more excited than ever to be part of this program."

Rich smiled. “Thank you. Your enthusiasm showed during your introduction. And by the way, I appreciate that you mentioned the nature of the bands you play in. Even though we have all the right policies in place, I still get the impression that LGBT people are reluctant to mention their status at work. I want that to change. And that will only happen if people start doing it.”

Ryan said, “I agree. I decided a long time ago I’m not going to hide. But yeah, I think a lot of LGBT people at work still censor themselves to some extent. We’ve talked about that in the Techno-Pride group.”

“How pervasive do you think that is? I’d hate to think that people still don’t feel comfortable bringing their full selves to work.”

“It’s not so much of an issue among the people in the group. But I think it says a lot that only a small percentage of the LGBT people at work even belong to the group.”

Rich frowned. “What do you think we can do about that?”

“Well... Another thing we’ve noticed is that there are no higher-level people in the group. Everyone’s an individual contributor or a low-level manager. Maybe if more people at higher levels were visible, people wouldn’t feel like there’s a lavender ceiling.”

“Let me think about what we could do to change that. Like I said in our meeting, I’m not aware of any LGBT people among our executives. In fact, after our meeting, I emailed all the local managers who are department heads or higher. I asked if anyone identified as LGBT and would be willing to serve as a mentor. I didn’t get any responses.”

“Perhaps you could visit a Techno-Pride meeting and have a roundtable discussion with the members. You’ll get a better feel for people’s experiences and it would mean a lot to the group to see that you’re interested.”

“That’s an excellent idea. Well, I suppose I should circulate some more. But I’ll definitely be in touch.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much!”

Ryan and Rich shook hands, then turned to see who they might talk with next.

Ten seconds later, a 50-ish man excused himself from the person he was chatting with and approached Ryan. “Hi, Ryan. I’m Bob Fordham. I’m the Division Manager for Government Affairs and Community Relations.”

“Hi, Bob. Nice to meet you.” By now, Ryan had learned that these executives preferred to be called by their first names. They shook hands. “Tell me more about what you do.”

While the executives were introducing themselves, Ryan decided he'd prefer a mentor from one of the technical divisions. But Bob seemed interested in meeting him so he was okay with chatting for a few minutes.

Bob said, "It's my organization's job to maintain good relations with the federal, state, and local governments where we have locations. At the federal level, we focus on tax laws, import and export laws, and winning government contracts. At the local level, we deal with tax issues, our involvement with local schools, and deciding which charitable organizations the Technovations Foundation contributes money to."

"That sounds interesting."

"Oh, it is. But that's not why I wanted to introduce myself to you." Bob's demeanor changed. He seemed a little nervous and he began speaking more softly. "Our 17-year-old son recently came out to us. Of course, we love him and we want him to be happy. We want to be supportive parents. But... well... this kind of came at us from left field, so we're still processing this information and figuring out the best way to deal with this. Do you think maybe we could meet sometime and talk about this some more? I'd love to get your advice on how to handle this situation."

Ryan smiled. "Sure. I'd be happy to. My calendar is up-to-date, so whatever works for you is fine with me."

"Thanks. I'll find a day to take you to lunch sometime soon."

"That would be great. I'll look forward to it."

Bob seemed like a nice guy. He presented himself as a real person, not just a business figure. And indirectly, they had something in common. At least Ryan knew his orientation wouldn't be an awkward subject with Bob.

Neither of them had anything else to say at the moment, although they knew they'd have plenty to talk about soon. Bob glanced at his watch. "We have about ten minutes left, so why don't we mingle a little more?"

Ryan nodded and they shook hands.

Ryan found a couple more people to chat with during the remaining ten minutes. Then Rich called for people to return to their seats and he made some closing remarks. He reminded people to indicate their choices for a mentor or mentee and leave their forms in a tray on a small table near the door.

Ryan listed Bob Fordham and Rich Caldwell as his choices.

On Tuesday the following week, Ryan received an email notifying him that Bob Fordham would be his mentor. It occurred to him that this mentor relationship would work both ways.

Looking Ahead

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Desert Pride held its spring concert on Sunday afternoon. Aaron and Ryan played in the concert, and Ryan's younger brother Brandon, a junior at Arizona State University and a player on their basketball team, came to watch. After the concert the guys helped load the instrument truck, then they headed home for their Sunday dinner. In the interest of time and minimal effort, they stopped and picked up Chinese food.

Once they had settled in, Brandon said, "The concert was awesome, guys! I'm looking forward to playing with the band again now that basketball is over and I'll have Thursday nights free."

Ryan said, "They're taking this Thursday off, but they'll be starting up again the first week of April."

Aaron said, "You had a pretty good season. And you got a lot of playing time."

"Yeah, starting the season with eight straight wins was pretty amazing. Too bad it didn't last. For a while, we were having fantasies that we could go undefeated all season. That really motivated us."

"Still, going 22-9 in your regular season and getting to play in the NCAA tournament is pretty decent. I'll bet it's a relief to be through with it, though. It must be challenging to balance your classes with daily practices and traveling to games."

Brandon said, "Yeah, but it's gotten easier every year. I'm used to it now. Since they offer some classes that are a half-semester, I'm taking more classes during the second half so I can take fewer classes during the rest of the year. And I took a couple of classes last summer."

Ryan said, "Speaking of summer, you'll be a senior next year. Are you going to take classes this summer, or have you thought about getting an internship?"

“I’ve been so focused on basketball and midterms, I haven’t thought about it.”

“I think it’s a good idea. My internship at Technovations paved the way for me to get a job there. Regardless of whether you end up working at the same place where you intern, it’s a valuable experience and it will look good on your resumé. It pays well, too.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I’ll start looking into it.”

“Technovations has a Public Relations department. They have a department that handles internal communications, too. They might have an opportunity for someone who’s majoring in Communications. I know the guys who are in charge of those organizations. If you’re interested, I could see whether you could get an internship there this summer.”

“That would be awesome! And if I stay here this summer, I’d be close to work.”

“Cool. I’ll check into that tomorrow.”

“Thanks! So what else is happening with you guys?”

Ryan said, “Well, I got some exciting news. Remember how I told you about the Leadership Development Program I’ve been accepted into?”

Brandon said, “The one where they might send you overseas for a year at some point?”

“Yeah. So I just found out I’ll be going to Auckland, New Zealand for a year starting in September.”

“Auckland?”

“Yeah. A couple of years ago, I got to go to our office there for two weeks, and I really liked it. I’m excited about it.”

Brandon glanced at Aaron. He was unusually silent and not smiling.

Brandon said, “Won’t it seem weird being away from home for an entire year?”

“Yeah. But they’ll pay for three trips home, and I can use one or two of them to have Aaron fly there instead of me flying home. Anyway, it’s part of what I have to do to stay in the LDP. I’m looking forward to it. It’ll be interesting to learn what it’s like to live someplace else and see how their society is different from ours.”

“And that means you won’t be able to play in your bands.”

“That’s true. Although I guess I could take my trumpet with me. But it won’t be too hard to get my chops back after a year off.”

There was a lull in the conversation. Aaron hadn’t said anything up to this point. Ryan seemed oblivious as he dug into his Chinese food. Brandon glanced at Aaron again. Aaron glanced

back. Finally, he spoke. “So what about me? Have you given any thought to how this will impact me?”

“Well, of course. I’ll miss you. But as I said, we’ll get to see each other three times during the year. And we can talk to each other on Zoom anytime we want.”

“That’s hardly the same. So I’m supposed to stay here and take care of the whole house by myself. And be lonely.”

“You lived alone for two years before you moved in with me.”

“Yeah, and I was miserable. One of the benefits of marrying you was that I’d have someone to share my life with ... not to mention my bed. This will be like being married and being single at the same time.”

“Oh, come on. It’ll only be for a year. And you have all your friends in the band you can hang out with.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

The escalating tension in the room was making everyone uncomfortable.

Brandon said, “Couldn’t you go too? What do they do for straight people who are married and have kids? Maybe you could get a job as a pharmacist there.”

“Ryan suggested the same thing when this first came up. But it’s not that easy. For one thing, I’d need to get a work visa. And I’d have to sit for exams again to get licensed to practice there.”

Ryan said, “I read somewhere that they have a list of occupations that are in demand. If you work in one of those fields, that will qualify you for a work visa.” He pulled out his phone and started searching for information. After typing, tapping, and scrolling for half a minute, he said, “Here it is! Retail Pharmacist is on the list.”

Aaron said, “Let me see.” Ryan handed him the phone and Aaron read the information surrounding the listing. “It says you must have a job offer from a New Zealand employer to get this visa. You can’t just enter the country and start looking for a job once you get there.”

“You should be able to stay for a while as a visitor as if you were on vacation.”

“Maybe, but... No. I’m not interested in quitting my job and disrupting my career. Besides, we’d have to leave the house vacant for a year. Who would take care of the pool and the hot tub and mow the grass and stuff?”

Brandon said, “I could do that. I come up here once or twice a week as it is.”

Aaron said, “Thanks, but what if you get a job somewhere else after you graduate? And once basketball season gets underway, you won’t have much time. It’s probably best if I just stay here and be lonely for a year.”

Ryan was visibly annoyed that Aaron was so fixated on the negative aspects of this arrangement. “Okay, okay. I’ll turn it down. I’ll drop out of the LDP and stay here with you.”

Aaron let out a huge sigh. “No. That’s not right either. I don’t want to be the one to quash your opportunity for advancement. I know this is important to you and I need to support you.”

Brandon said, “I could live here with you during my senior year. I’m getting tired of living in the dorms.”

Aaron said, “Thanks, but would you really want to drive back and forth to campus every day from up here in Scottsdale? That’s like, what? A 20-minute drive each way? And isn’t your scholarship paying for your dorm? Besides, part of the experience of going to college is the social life. You’d miss out on all that.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

Ryan said, “We’ll figure out how to make it work. It’ll only be a year. So anyway, I was thinking I’d come home for Christmas—”

Aaron interrupted him. “And would you still go to Ohio with me to see my folks?”

Can’t he go for Thanksgiving or some other time? I guess I need to give a little too. “Yeah, we can do that. And then you could come to New Zealand in the spring, which would be autumn there. Maybe you could come for your birthday in March!”

“I’d have to see when Desert Pride’s spring concert is. But yeah, going there in the spring would be nice.”

Ryan turned to Brandon. “And then I could come home for your graduation. Do you know when it is?”

Brandon checked his phone. “Monday, May 11th.”

“Wow. That’s earlier than I thought. UCLA’s was in mid-June, but I guess since you’re on semesters, it’s earlier. But anyway, I want to be here for that. So there we have it. Then I’ll be back for good in September.”

Aaron still wasn’t happy about it, but he’d deal with it. There was nothing more to say.

In Like a Lion

Wednesday, March 11, 2020

At 10:00 p.m., Aaron logged onto Zoom for his weekly video chat with Ryan. It was 6:00 p.m. Thursday in Auckland. Moments later, Ryan joined. “Hi, Honey. What’s up?”

Aaron sighed. “It’s getting crazy around here. Everyone’s starting to panic about this Coronavirus thing. Just today, Arizona State announced they’re moving classes online for two weeks starting Monday.”

“Really? How’s that going to work?”

“I don’t know. I guess they’ll set up a Zoom meeting for every class.”

“Wow. I wonder if Zoom has the bandwidth to handle all those simultaneous calls. Especially if colleges and universities across the country will be doing the same thing.”

“I guess they’ll find out. Anyway, Brandon wants to come and stay here. Already, three guys on his dorm floor have it.”

“Yeah, sure, of course. Speaking of Brandon, what does that mean for his basketball team?”

“Well, the regular season ended last Saturday. But they’ve canceled the Pac-12 tournament. I don’t know about the NCAA tournament, but I’ll bet it gets canceled too – or at least postponed. I guess it depends on how long this thing lasts.”

“Wow. It sucks that his last season has to end like this.”

“Yeah. They finished 20-11, so they may not have even made it into the tournament, but still... Oh, and Desert Pride just canceled their concert this coming Sunday.”

“Seriously? After you guys have spent the last two and a half months rehearsing for it? Is it really spreading that much there?”

“Well, it wasn’t our choice. Maricopa Cultural Center canceled all events in their venue for the next month. So, what’s it like there?”

“We’ve only had five cases so far. All of them are people who had just returned from either Italy or Iran, and so far they’ve only infected a couple of people in their immediate families. The government is watching it closely. But so far, people aren’t very concerned.”

Aaron said, “God, I can’t wait to come see you next week. It will be so nice to escape this craziness for a couple of weeks.”

“Maybe after two weeks, you’ll want to stay.”

“After spending two weeks with you, I won’t want to come home anyway. But who knows? If it gets much worse here, I might change my mind.”

“I’ll do my best to convince you. And with Brandon living there, the house won’t be empty.”

“Well, hopefully, this will all be over soon. If everyone stays home as much as possible and wears masks when they go out, we can probably nip this thing in the bud.”

“I hope so too, but it’s spreading like wildfire in Italy and Iran. And there was that cruise ship that got quarantined in Japan. Almost 700 people got it.”

“But enough of all that happy talk. What have you been up to?”

“Well, we’re on the tail end of summer here, so it’s still warm and sunny. Last weekend, the gay hiking group I belong to went for a hike up to the top of Mount Donald McLean. It was kind of strenuous, but man! The views were amazing!”

“Sounds nice. So, they have good hiking in New Zealand?”

“Oh, yeah! All over the place. Michael connected me with this group right after I got here, and they haven’t gone to the same place twice. And they’re all within an hour or so of downtown Auckland.”

“Sounds nice. Maybe you can take me on one of those hikes while I’m out there.”

“Definitely! I’ll add it to my list. I’ve already got a lot of things I want to show you.”

“Do they have a gay running group there, too?”

“Yeah, they do, but it’s not like ours. Their runs are a lot more leisurely. They go for about an hour, then they go someplace for brunch. For many of them, it’s more about the brunch than the running.”

“Sounds like it’s not quite your speed.”

“Yeah. It’s nice from a social perspective, but it’s not the kind of running I want to do to stay in shape.”

“They probably gain more calories at the brunch than they lose with their running.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, sounds like you’re meeting a lot of people and you have plenty of things to do.”

“Yeah. I guess after six months, I’ve gotten pretty well acclimated.”

“Well, don’t get too acclimated. You’re coming home in six months.”

“I’ll make the most of it and enjoy it while I can. But yeah. It’s hard to believe I’m at the halfway point already.”

“Yes, I know. Believe me, I’m counting the days. It’s been six lonnng months. And the next six are going to seem even longer.”

Ryan smiled playfully at Aaron. “You’ve never complained about things being too long before.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Yet another reason I can’t wait to see you. I hope one of the things you have on your list of things to do when I visit is *me*.”

Ryan grinned. “Every day. And twice on Sunday.”

Aaron and Ryan gazed longingly at each other. Aaron reached down. It was already starting to grow. As soon as the call ended, he would head to the master bathroom as usual.

Ryan looked like he was having the same thoughts. “Well, honey, I should probably let you go.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Just think! In ten days, we’ll be together again!”

“Ten long, slow days. I can’t wait!”

“Well... give Brandon a hug for me. And tell everyone in band I said hi.”

“I’ll post that to our Facebook group. Remember, rehearsals have been canceled.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I forgot. Sorry. Anyway... I love you!” Ryan puckered his lips and kissed the air in front of him.

Aaron air-kissed him back. “I love you too!”

“Bye!”


“Bye!”

They ended the call. Aaron walked briskly to the master bathroom, his cock tenting his shorts.

Canceled

Friday, March 13, 2020

At 4:00, Aaron took a quick break. He stepped into his tiny office at the back of the pharmacy and popped open a can of Diet Dr Pepper. He checked his phone and saw a message from Ryan.



Hi Sweetheart. Terrible news. The New Zealand government just announced that starting March 16, everyone entering the country must quarantine for two weeks. Shit! XOXOXO, Ryan.

Aaron yelled, “SHIT! ... FUCK! ... GODDAMMIT! ... GOD! FUCKING!! DAMMIT!!!”

He cocked his right arm but stopped himself an instant before he hurled his phone into the wall. He dropped the phone onto his desk and started pacing back and forth, uttering more swear words under his breath.

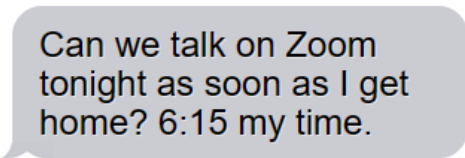
In the pharmacy, the techs glanced at each other apprehensively, wondering what had just happened. Most of their faces were covered by masks, but their eyes conveyed fear and uncertainty. They hoped that none of the customers, who were waiting on the other side of the Plexiglas shields that had recently been installed at the registers, could hear that. They tried to go about their business and deal with customers as if nothing was wrong, but they were filled with dread about what might happen when Aaron emerged from his office.

Aaron picked up his phone. He saw a notification from United. His flight had been canceled.

He took a couple of chugs from his soda, then walked out the door. As he passed his staff, he muttered, "I'm going for a walk. I'll be back soon."

Aaron paced up and down the rows in the parking lot, brainstorming possibilities for how he could overcome this obstacle. Maybe he could get a flight out tonight that would arrive in Auckland on March 15. Maybe they could meet in Hawaii or Tahiti or Australia or something. Maybe Ryan could come here. He should be able to get back into New Zealand when he returns.

Aaron realized he needed to get back into the pharmacy. There were probably customers he needed to consult with before he could release their prescriptions. As he headed for the entrance, he texted Ryan.



Can we talk on Zoom tonight as soon as I get home? 6:15 my time.

He entered the pharmacy and tried to remain courteous and level-headed as he spoke with the customers.

He could sense the uneasiness among his staff. When no customers were waiting at the counter, he pulled everyone together and said, "I just found out that if I go to New Zealand I'll have to quarantine for two weeks. That means there's really no point in going."

Everyone shook their heads. Lauren, the lead tech, said, "Wow. That totally sucks. I'm sorry."

Others muttered, "I'm sorry," and returned to their tasks.

Aaron retreated to his office. The hopelessness of it all was settling in. Hopefully, he could hold it together until 6:00 without crying on the job.

When his shift ended, he drove home quickly. At 6:15, he logged onto Zoom. Ryan was waiting for him. "Hi, Honey. I'm really sorry."

"Hi. Yeah, me too. So anyway, I was thinking. What if I can get a flight out tonight? It would arrive in Auckland on March 15. Or how about this? Is there someplace else we could meet? Like maybe Hawaii or Tahiti? What if you came here?"

"Well, maybe, but if I left the country, I'd have to quarantine for two weeks when I got back. And do you really think it's a good idea for either of us to be getting on an airplane at all? Let alone for a long flight."

Aaron sighed. "Yeah... I suppose you're right. Shit. I was looking forward to this so much."

“Me too. But it should all blow over in a few weeks. Hopefully, I can still come home for Brandon’s graduation on May 11. And we can rebook your flights for sometime in the summer.”

“Yeah, I guess. But it sucks. And not in the good way.”

“I know. But we should do what we have to do now and stay safe.”

“That means my birthday is going to suck, too.”

“At least you’ll have Brandon there. How’s he doing?”

“Okay. He moved his stuff in last night. Today’s his last day of in-person classes.”

“He’s wearing a mask, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how many other kids are. We’ve run out of them at the pharmacy. I pulled the last few boxes off the shelves so my staff would have some for a little while longer. Just in time, too. People were starting to hoard them. They’re telling everyone to wear cloth masks.”

“It’s better than nothing.”

“True. Okay, well, it’s 6:30 and I’m hungry.”

“Hang in there, honey. We’ll get through this. Tell Brandon I said hi.”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you too. Bye!”

“Bye!”

Ryan disappeared. Aaron stared at the blank screen for a few seconds longer, then walked into the kitchen and chose a frozen entrée from the freezer.

Thank you for reading this sample chapter.

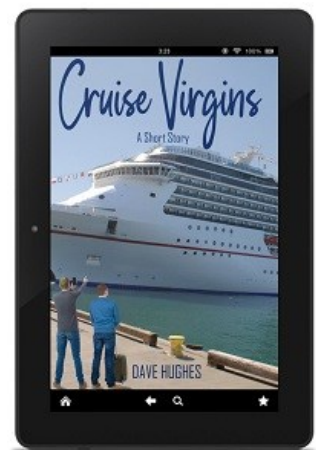


Maybe Now will be released on September 27. The eBook version is now available for pre-order from most eBook vendors. Click on a logo to pre-order an eBook.



If you live in the Phoenix area, you are invited to the book release party for *Maybe Now* on Friday, September 27, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. The event will be held at Exposed Studio & Gallery, 4225 N. Seventh Avenue, Phoenix. Hors d'oeuvres, wine, and water will be served. Dave will present a brief author talk at 6:30, followed by Q&A.

For more information, and to subscribe to Dave's newsletter, please visit AuthorDaveHughes.com. You will receive a free short story, *Cruise Virgins*, when you subscribe. You'll also have the opportunity to purchase *Maybe Now* at a special subscriber discount.



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Fiction

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About the Author

This is Dave Hughes' sixth novel in the "Gay Tales for the New Millennium" series.

Before writing fiction, Dave wrote three retirement lifestyle planning books, *Design Your Dream Retirement*, *Smooth Sailing Into Retirement*, and *The Quest for Retirement Utopia*. Dave created the website RetireFabulously.com, which enables readers to envision, plan for, and enjoy the best retirement possible. In addition to writing hundreds of articles for RetireFabulously.com, Dave's writing has appeared on US News & World Report, LBTSr.com, Medium, Yahoo! Finance, CNN/Money, Next Avenue, Tiny Buddha, and others.

Aside from his writing, Dave is also a jazz musician. He plays trombone and steelpan in various bands in the Phoenix area. He owns an embarrassingly large collection of jazz, Brazilian, exotica, steel band, jazz/rock, and vocal ensemble CDs and videos.

Before retiring early at age 56, Dave was a software engineer for 34 years, working for companies such as Intel, Computer Sciences Corporation, McDonnell Douglas Space Systems, and NCR. Throughout his career, his assignments included software development, customer support, training, course development, and management.

Dave resides in Chandler, Arizona with his husband Jeff and their dog Maynard.

Dave is available for interviews, book readings/signings, speaking engagements, and panel discussions. You may contact Dave at Dave@AuthorDaveHughes.com.

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