

ERIK

TG Search and Rescue

July 18, 2008

(with “Spy” as a Featured Guest)



Book # 1 of a Series

Lee J. Pullen

Written in Beecher, Wisconsin

Second Edition
March 21, 2012

First Edition
February 14, 2012

Dedication

To A.J. Marhofke and the memories of his amazing 911BC dogs,

Molly Mae and Zip

911BC is a nonprofit, volunteer forensic evidence team based in Summit, Wisconsin. The “BC” stands for Border Collie. While not every team member uses a Border Collie, each is a professional. Please visit their website www.911bc.org for more information.

Dedicated February 14, 2012

Readers Comments

"As long as children build snowmen in front yards and grown men write tenderly about beloved dogs, there is hope for the world."

Pat Goetz, Racine

(ed. note – Ms. Goetz is an established Wisconsin writer)

Featured Guest

The “*Featured Guest*” in this book is my Grandson’s Australian Cattle Dog or Blue Heeler, Spy. That is his actual name and his traits are accurately presented here. His mother’s horse, Gambler, a Polish Arabian, is mentioned as a guest.

Each future book will have a different real pet as a “Featured Guest”.

Introduction and Acknowledgements

A special thanks to my wife, Gail. She has a special love for all animals. I love you! Happy Valentine's Day!

Thanks to my friends and relatives who have read and re-read each of the drafts of this book. Their comments and suggestions have been immeasurably helpful.

It will be noticeable to the reader that I am in awe of H.O.P.E. Safehouse and the wonderful work that they do for animals. Please visit their website at www.hopesafehouse.org. And send them a donation if you are moved to do so.

“HOPE takes in animals that have been abandoned, abused or injured, give them the medical attention they require, and re-home them through adoption. HOPE does not take animals in from the general public, but rather ones that meet the above criteria, or are on death row at the humane societies or animal shelters.”

While this book is a work of fiction, it is a story I believe could have happened had certain events come together. Some of the characters in the book are loosely connected with my family. The reader is cautioned that real Search and Recovery teams would not do their professional work in the manner described in this book of fiction.

The inspiration for me to begin writing again is solely from the friendship and wonderful books written by best selling author Janet Elaine Smith, who lives just six miles away in Amberg, Wisconsin. Please visit her website at http://janet_elaine_smith0.tripod.com/. She also heads a Christian writers group in our area.

**Lee J. Pullen
Beecher, Wisconsin
February 14, 2012**

Chapter 1

Oh No! Not Today!

“Good morning TG, do you want to play ball this morning before breakfast?” That was a silly question, she is a Border Collie and of course she wants to play ball. She always wants to play ball unless she is working. They did not have any jobs to do today, so she, being the Production Manager of TG Search and Rescue, had the day off. Skip and TG had just come off a long back to back string of jobs and he was looking forward to a few days of rest and play with his dog. Since it was a clear, warm summer morning in far northeastern Wisconsin, they could go across the county road in front of their house and play ball out on their private airstrip. There was plenty of room out there away from the deep woods around the house. “Bring me your tennis ball and we can go outside to play.”

A bright-eyed, happy, black and white, sixty pound bundle of energy with tan, expressive eyebrows came running into the room and sat in front of Skip with her left-front paw raised. She did not have her tennis ball with her.

“Oh no! Not again today!” he complained. “We are not getting another job today, are we?” And then his business phone rang. “Someday you are going to have to explain to me how you know when it is going to ring.”

“TG Search and Rescue, Skip Jordan speaking, how may we help you?” he said into the phone.

The voice on the other end was not frantic, so it was not some individual asking TG to find their lost cat. No, this one sounded like a voice of authority. “Good morning Mr. Jordan, this is Sheriff James Patterson of El Dorado County, California. We need your help in recovering an autistic fifteen year old boy who has been missing since yesterday afternoon. His mother specifically requested you and TG.”

“You do know we are in Wisconsin, don’t you?”

“Yes she knows that and I told her we have other rescue groups in this area, but she does not want anyone but you and TG to search for her son.”

“May I ask why?”

There was a pause before Sheriff Patterson answered. “I can’t answer that on this phone. Do you have a secure phone I can call you on?”

A bit surprised, Skip answered, “Of course. Go to our website www.TG_SAR.org and click on the phone icon. You will need two passwords. Let me know when you are ready.”

“OK, I have it open and it wants the first password.”

“Type in 082604-capital-T-capital-G, then hit the enter-key. The second password is your badge number. Let me type it in at my end before you hit enter.

“OK, my badge number is 1320.”

“Got it. The channel is open now – and this will be your password at any time in the future that you wish to call us.” Skip’s techno-savvy daughter, Elizabeth, had developed this app for their business several years ago and has improved it several times since then. Many security organizations across the country have said they appreciate its ability to safely handle sensitive information.

Using the secure connection, Patterson began, “The boy’s mother is a widow of an FBI agent. She does not want anyone on her property that might have a loose tongue. She wants to live in seclusion where her husband’s killers hopefully will not be able to find her. She heard her husband speak highly about you and said she has met the two of you.”

“Really? Who was her husband?”

“Agent Karl Peterssen.”

“**The** Karl Peterssen from Philadelphia? The Golden Boys Gang killed him about nine months ago. We worked several cases for him; he was one of TG’s best friends. We were invited to his son’s birthday party a couple of years ago. He and TG hit it off really well together.”

“Stella went into hiding when he was killed and she moved out here with Erik to live on a large old ranch with the Marshall’s who are relatives on her mother’s side.”

“Sheriff, do you expect foul play from the Golden Boys in Erik’s disappearance?”

“No, that’s not likely. Erik often took walks with his great-uncle, but yesterday the old man hurt his leg and couldn’t go for a walk. When Erik turned up missing, they thought he had just gone out for a walk by himself. But when he wasn’t back by dark, they called me. I probably made a mistake, but I said if he wasn’t back by 4 a.m., I would call you. I thought he probably stopped to pick up stones or watch a bird or something like that and when it got dark, he would find his way home with all the light from the full moon we are having.”

Skip pressed a button on his desk with one hand and brought up the Southwest Air website on his computer with the other. He spoke into the microphone on the computer, “Scott, how soon can you get the chopper ready and file a flight plan to Chicago’s Midway airport?”

“I’ll be ready in twenty minutes, Dad, and we will land at MDW at 0742. I’ll set you up with the special security clearance section the

maintenance people use. You can be at your gate, I'm assuming Southwest, for a flight as early as 0800."

"Sheriff, I will be on a flight out of Chicago at 8:25 our time, arriving Sacramento at 10:50 your time. Can someone meet us there in an unmarked squad?"

"How did you pull all that off so fast?" he exclaimed.

"We have a great team here. They are highly skilled and have built a complex computer system that takes care of a lot of details. And they are all family members. Sheriff, give me the coordinates of the ranch so I can explore the terrain on the computer before we get there. When we arrive, I will first want to visit with Stella and the uncle. TG will search the immediate area around the house while I'm gathering information inside. Then she and I can head out on our search before one pm. Our bags are always packed and ready. My son, Scott will have our chopper ready soon so I will talk to you again from the squad. But call me anytime before then if you need to."

"I can't thank you enough, Skip. I'll call Stella right away. Thanks from her, too; she will be glad to see you. Bye."

"Bye."

"Suit up TG. We won't be able to play ball for a while and we will have to have our breakfast in the chopper." TG scrambled for the closet and hit the specially built pedal that opened the door. She pulled her custom made work vest out of the closet and pulled the recharging plugs out of Skip's heavy backpack for him before he even reached the closet which was only twenty feet away.

"You already know who we are looking for, don't you? And since you met Erik a couple of years ago, you already know his scent. Let's hope we can find him right away. I can already hear Erik's mother saying your full name, 'Thank God'! Give me your vest so I can get you hooked up. I will just put it on loosely until we get to Midway."

TG used her highly developed mental telepathy to send Skip mental images of a Southwest Airline jet and of Erik at his 13th birthday party.

"That's right," Skip replied, "and you are the best search dog in the world so if anyone can find him, you can."

Skip thought about the cute little Border Collie puppy that was barking on his porch about four years ago. When he opened the door, she scooted in and jumped up onto Skip's favorite chair claiming him for her own. He remembered seeing her several times before that out in the fields near his house. She had just stood there watching him and wouldn't budge when he called to her. She must have been studying him before deciding if she wanted to live there.

He put her description in the Peshtigo Times newspaper and on several radio stations, but after two weeks with no viable leads, he knew he had a Border Collie. He certainly had no idea of what this dog-person relationship was going to develop into and especially not the extent they would be able to communicate with each other. He felt very lucky she had chosen him.

TG lost her baby teeth at Skip's house so the vet was able to determine she was only fourteen weeks old when she had apparently run away from some cruel person and had chosen Skip instead. The vet put her birth date at about 8/26/04. They were inseparable and rapidly went through all levels of obedience school, CGC (Canine Good Citizenship), and TDI (Therapy Dog International.) But the activity she really excelled at was Agility. She loved climbing the A-frame, walking the plank, running through tunnels, jumping through an elevated tire, walking up-over and then down a kid's see-saw, racing through the weave poles and jumping over various hurdles. She progressed so quickly that Skip didn't have to yell out commands nor use hand or body signals to tell her which obstacle to do next. Instead he found if he just pictured them in his mind, she would go to the object and perform the required trick. When Skip finally figured out how to communicate in this manner with her, they both honed this new skill to an incredible level. Now they could "talk" to each other through mental pictures and thoughts as well as with words from Skip. Through these pictures she gave Skip an accurate picture of what the cruel guy looked like that she had run away from. He thought it was odd that they had never seen him in the area. That made him question just how far she had come to get to his house.

One day he learned about Search and Rescue dog teams and decided this would be the ultimate activity he could do with his incredible dog. They went through intensive training and took on missions with nearby police and sheriff departments. All of their work was without any compensation of any kind which was a perfect outlet, Skip thought for his very comfortable financial situation. During these first missions he realized TG's capabilities - NO - *his* capabilities could be greatly enhanced with better technology. And they could get to far off locations if he had his own air support, too!

That is why his son, Scott, a military flying ace and licensed FAA mechanic joined the team. With his guidance they purchased a Bell 417 helicopter and a V/STOL (vertical and/or short take-off and landing) specially modified Harrier GR.9A Jump Jet. At the same time, Skip's daughter, Elizabeth (Beth to most people) came on board with her superior skills as a technology-geek and inventor.

Today's flight to California would normally have been in his Harrier, but it was still one day away from completing its most recent upgrade. Scott said he would fly out in it the next day to pick them up for their return to

Wisconsin. They were both confident that Erik would be returned to his mother by then.

Scott was on time as usual. Skip and TG jumped into the Bell with his backpack and buckled in. The interior was large enough for seven people including the pilot. TG had her own padded play area in the back which she used after finishing her breakfast.

The sky was clear and the wind was calm as they lifted off from Jack Pine Knob, their private air strip. On the way to Chicago, Scott was busy on the radio with the FAA flight controllers and air traffic around Green Bay and Milwaukee as they cruised at 260 mph. He was also re-confirming with airport security to make sure the team would pass security quickly enough for them to get to the Southwest Air gate for their flight to Sacramento. Their florescent yellow chopper with a large reflective red International Red Cross sign on both sides was easily noticeable to all other air traffic especially with today's bright sunlight.

These were the official colors of TG Search and Rescue that were also used on Skip's clothing and on TG's work vest. Their clothes were specially made for them by L.L.Bean® from a waterproof, but highly breathable rip stop, tough material not yet available on the open market. It also shed burs to keep them out of TG's fur when she had to run through weeds. His was replete with special pockets that eliminated a lot of the stops he would otherwise have had to make to dig things out of his back pack. This maximized the amount of time they could keep moving in the field. Usually the only stops were to dispense drinking water for both of them, but his equipment enabled them to be ready for anything they might encounter.

TG's work vest identified her as a companion working dog which gave her legal entry into stores, taxicabs, buses, airplanes, etc. Besides the bright color and Red Cross symbol, it was a functional canine life preserver with a video camera and fully maneuverable lights that Skip could control from up to one-half mile away. He did not need control from that distance as she worked both open fields and crime scenes in such a way she was never more than 500 feet from Skip. They were always in contact with each other. It was just the way they worked. Her vest also had a built-in speaker so he could ask TG what her situation was if she was not mentally communicating with him and he couldn't see her. They both had transmitters so they could be located by command post commanders in various situations.

Chapter 2

Flights

The ride to MWD in Chicago was uneventful and they arrived thirteen minutes early. Scott said the traffic was light and the controllers vectored him straight onto a landing pad next to the Southwest Air terminal. They were met by a ground control vehicle that carried them to the security entrance. They passed through quickly and were led to the ladder connected to the plane's jet way. Ladders were no problem for TG and she scampered up as fast as a squirrel climbing a tree which astonished the ground crew. Skip chose not to tell them she's just as fast going up a steep ladder as she is going down. And she's faster than Skip in either direction.

They were directed by a friendly stewardess to their seats at the front of the plane. TG liked her because she could smell that the lady had a dog at her home and dog-people are good people. She stowed Skip's large backpack for him. He let TG take the window seat so she wouldn't come into direct contact with any of the other passengers who were just beginning to board the plane. Some people, he knew, were afraid of dogs – even dogs with friendly faces, like TG's. He also threaded the seat belt through the special loops built into her work vest so anyone could see that she couldn't bother them. Skip reflected, "What a shame some people are afraid of pets. If they had a bad experience in their past then the pets' owners would be to blame. But some people just weren't raised with a pet and in his point of view, their parents would be to blame in that case. They were missing out on a huge amount of love pets can give to them. Some people in nursing homes have even been afraid of TG and they are just the people that need a lot of extra love. What a shame."

Nearly everyone that filed past smiled at her and/or said something friendly about her today. Many were impressed with the large Red Cross patches on her vest. There were two people, a woman and a man that were not delighted to see her. Their faces registered near panic and they turned their heads to avoid Skip's eyes. But they were too late. Skip already recognized them as did TG from Erik Peterssen's birthday party. They were FBI agents and today they were obviously working under cover. Skip didn't smile nor even wink at them so nobody else would notice he had recognized

the agents. But they knew – they were professionals. A man, woman, and a teenager were between them. Skip sent a message to TG and asked her if she knew this family – she didn't. He thought that they might find out when the time was right.

The plane boarded, doors locked, and it taxied for a smooth take off. Skip was busy popping his ears as they gained altitude and TG just laughed at him, passing a message of, "I don't have to pop my ears! That's another one for me."

As they reached their cruising altitude, the pilot came on the speaker. "We want to welcome everyone flying with us on Southwest Airlines today. You probably noticed two special guests in the front when you boarded today. They are Skip Jordan and his dog, TG, from the "TG Search and Rescue" team. Together they have located many missing persons all over the country. Skip says he just follows his dog and she is the real brains of their team. They do not accept any payment for their work. We are proud that we are their designated carrier and I am pleased to announce that Southwest Airlines is refunding their ticket purchase today."

A loud cheer and applause echoed through the aircraft. The passengers on the other side of the aisle waved in greeting. Skip nodded to them and mouthed a "thank you" to the stewardess.

"Wow TG, we haven't been greeted like that before. That is because you are so wonderful, you know."

She just wagged her tail and sent him an image to take off her seat belt. He loosened it, but wouldn't unbuckle it completely. He didn't want to take a chance she would get out of her seat, walk back and "out" the FBI agents that she knew.

When she asked for her ball, Skip said, "You know you can't play ball when there are so many people around. That is only on our own planes that you can play ball. Here is your Teddy Bear L.L.Bean® made for you. You can entertain yourself with it for a while."

That did entertain her for most of the trip, but anyone who knows anything about Border Collies, knows they crave action – lots of it. TG knew this was going to be a long trip and she endured it the best she could.

They were on the right side of the aisle so they did not have direct sunlight shining in on them as they flew in a westerly direction. With the cabin air jet aimed at her and a soft plastic container of water hanging from the front of her seat, she did not get overheated. Skip passed the time working. He pulled out his specially setup laptop and downloaded satellite images. He went over every square yard of the very large ranch and the surrounding area. He looked at the elevations and explored the canyons. The American River ran through a corner of the ranch from the mountains to the

northeast. Nothing else was too remarkable and it looked like they would be able to cover it all on foot. The Eldorado Forest appeared healthy in spite of the very dry conditions in the area – probably due to the many smaller rivers coming down off the mountains. He checked both recent and older satellite flyovers and used Beth’s new programs to compare and highlight any differences – perhaps he could see at least one image on today’s flyover that could point him to Erik? Nothing, but if he was in those trees he probably wouldn’t be visible to satellite, anyway. If TG led him in that direction, he would at least have some idea of where to look.

Something caught his attention. He was so busy looking at small images that he didn’t see that there had been a land shift. It wasn’t a large shift, but it was there none the less. It must have been from the earthquake ten months ago, which would have been just before Stella and Erik moved out there. It ran very close to an old, abandoned railroad that crossed the river. He hoped he would get a chance to explore that area after they rescued Erik. Earthquakes fascinated him.

After a long ride, TG put her paw on Skip’s arm and urged him to look up. When he did, he watched the seat belt light go on and heard the tone on the speakers. He said, “You continue to amaze me, TG. OK, let’s tighten our seatbelts again. When you are ready, you can give your Teddy Bear back to me. I’ll put it back into its pocket for you.”

They landed at Sacramento and were allowed to be the first to deplane. Skip already had TG’s non-slip booties on her feet so that she wouldn’t slip on the polished tile floors in the airport. They moved quickly along the jet way to the boarding area. A young man flashed his credentials to Skip and identified himself as Chief Deputy Sheriff John Alexander and he asked them to accompany him to his waiting unmarked squad car. Skip had TG on a leash with a magnetic release. It gave them maximum flexibility, while meeting the airport’s requirements of having all dogs leashed. Skip would rather have left her off-leash. He thought, “TG’s not a dog; she is a four-legged human.”

Very few words were spoken to each other as they moved toward the main terminal. As they passed the security location, there were quite a few people waiting to meet incoming passengers. Suddenly TG went on alert. It wasn’t noticeable to anyone else as she only raised one ear. Skip stopped and grabbed the Deputy’s arm and quietly told him, “Bomb Alert” as he pushed them both over to the wall. Skip simultaneously released TG’s magnetic catch on her collar.

TG kept walking alone at the same pace for another 10-15 feet. Deputy Alexander asked, “What is she doing?” Where is she going?”

“Watch, and get your cuffs out.”

TG suddenly turned around and paused to make sure she had a clear path, and then poured on full power, gripping the polished floor with her non-slip boots. As they watched, she leaped into the air slamming her 60 pounds into a man's upper-back between his shoulder blades. As he went crashing down onto his face, she snarled loudly at him, letting him know he had better not move an inch or he was going to lose some important part of his body.

Some people gasped, others screamed. Skip yelled, "Now! Cuff him!" The security personnel locked down the entire airport immediately without even knowing why. Securely cuffed, the Deputy rolled him over and saw that the man was bleeding from his broken nose, but what made him gasp was that the man's shirt was now torn open revealing a massive bomb strapped to his chest.

The Deputy turned the prisoner over to a Sergeant Deputy Sheriff who had been there for a routine inspection of the regular security detail. Deputy Alexander vouched for Skip and TG and the three were allowed to quickly leave the airport.

After loading Skip's backpack and the three of them into the waiting squad, the driver, Deputy Goepfert asked, "What the heck was all the raucous about in there?"

John just answered, "TG flattened a terrorist." Then he and Skip laughed at Goepfert's wide eyes.

Skip asked the Deputies to keep him informed on who the terrorist was and who his target was. Silently he was wondering if it was the two FBI agents and the family they were accompanying to ... where?

Since Deputy Alexander did the cuffing, he would certainly be involved and would let Skip know. He thought Skip had asked to be informed only because of TG's accumulating stats - - he had no way of knowing about the agents that had been on their plane.

They left the airport quickly. Skip thought Deputy Goepfert must have been either a race car driver or a designated get-away-car-driver for bank robbers before he joined the Sheriff's Department. They weaved skillfully through the traffic until they got out into the countryside where they got up over 120 mph.

TG thought, "Wish I could put my head out the window."

Skip said, "Forget about it."

John said, "Forget about what?"

"TG just asked if she could have her head out the window and I was answering her."

"Oh" – long pause – "You two communicate on a different level, don't you."

"Yep, and she taught me how to do it. She's the most incredible dog

I've ever had the good fortune to meet.”

“Now it is all coming together. This is why your team is so successful, isn't it?”

“Yes, that and because I never force my will upon her. She reads more different senses than I do and each of her sensory inputs is so much more developed than mine. Also, her brain is far superior to ours and she can make brilliant decisions from all that input. My job is communicating her needs and discoveries to you and other humans involved. Also I've got an incredibly skilled staff that brings many more tools to the human side of the equation to complement and maximize TG's efforts. TG's title in our organization is Production Manager. She's the one who accomplishes our goals and our whole team knows it and so does she.

“The Sheriff said I could answer your questions and he will talk with you when we get there.”

“OK.” Skip began firing questions. “Do you have any more news or thoughts on Erik?”

“Still a big zero on that score, but that is primarily because Stella won't let anyone onto the property and Sheriff Patterson is giving in to her wishes. I don't get it. That is not our usual operating procedure.”

“She probably has her reasons and Patterson either knows what they are and is not telling or he doesn't know and isn't pushing her for some reason. Who will man the command post and where will it be? I have some hi-tech equipment I want to put into use there.”

“Sheriff Patterson is parked outside the house and has not moved his squad since early this morning. Our command vehicle just arrived there and either he or I will always be on duty inside of it.”

“Good. I will have to explain our equipment only once then – to both of you at the same time. Who is inside the house – names and relationships?”

“Stella, Erik's mother; her aunt, Mildred; and Mildred's husband, Willard Marshall. They all live in the main house. There is also an empty, older house nearby that is nearly the same size. I heard she has someone moving in there fairly soon that will help with the farming. They only have chickens at present. There is some unused farm equipment in the barn, but no animals in there. The chickens are in a separate coop. There are no other buildings, no exposed outside wells or cisterns and no swimming pool. They did let us search both of the houses including the underground tunnel that runs between the two houses. It was meant to be used as a storm shelter for both houses. We also searched the barn and chicken coop. Nothing turned up.” Deputy Alexander sounded as if he was reading a report.

“Tunnel? Is there one leading to the barn, too?” Skip asked hopefully.

“We have not found any and they have not disclosed any to us.”

“I will ask TG to check it out. What are they doing while Erik is gone?”

“They are just looking out the windows and praying. Praying for both you and Erik.”

“Strange.”

“What, that they are praying for you?”

“No, that the uncle, at least, isn’t out on a tractor or something looking and calling for Erik.”

“He said he wants to, but he can’t walk right now.” John interrupted himself with, “This next road goes back into their place.”

Skip called up to the driver, “Goepfert, drop us off here and we’ll walk in. Then quickly continue driving to Reno before you stop at some highly public place. There is a chance we are being tracked with a bug under the car that somebody could have put there at the airport when you were looking for us. I don’t want anyone to be able to locate the ranch. Here’s \$200 so you can have a nice lunch there before you return to your station.”

Goepfert replied, “10-4. Thanks. I’ll let you out and get moving again, quickly. Good luck Skip – to you and TG, both.”

“Thanks, we will need all the luck we can get. OK, TG, out we go. Let me grab my backpack. OK, Goepfert thanks for getting us here so quickly. Go!”

John grinned at Skip’s obvious reference to Geopfert’s driving.

Chapter 3

The Ranch

Starting out on their walk to the ranch house, Skip used something that looked like an Amazon Kindle®. John had never seen one up close, but Skip's device was almost twice as big as a Kindle. John didn't know what it was. Skip called the FBI on it to tell them he thought the family with the FBI agents was in grave danger and he had sent his driver, Deputy Goepfert, to Reno as a diversion.

Curious, John asked, "You think that terrorist back there was targeting a family with FBI agents? Where were they?"

"I saw them get onto the plane with us in Chicago. I'm just speculating for now and wanted to give the feds my opinion."

"You work with the FBI and the International Red Cross?"

Skip slowly and carefully chose his words, "We have helped them both on some occasions."

They both walked in silence for a while. The houses could not be seen from the highway as they were just beyond a hill. As they crested the hill, they could see the two houses, barn and chicken coop arranged in a circle in a large flat, dry valley. Farther down the long dusty driveway Skip observed, "I recognize all of this land from the satellite photos."

"You are able to get Sat photos?"

"My daughter, Beth, is a wizard with electronics – even secure systems. She has a satellite parked overhead right now."

"Amazing. There is Sheriff Patterson just ahead."

TG raced ahead to begin her job. She remembered Erik's scent so she was ready to begin by searching the area around the house.

"Sheriff, this is Skip Jordan. Skip, this is Sheriff James Patterson. And TG is over there – already at work."

They exchanged greetings with the Sheriff saying, "Call me Jim."

"Thanks, Jim. This is a piece of equipment my daughter makes for us. You may keep it after we leave, but please keep it at the command vehicle while we are here. You will be able to see instantly where both TG and I are as well as watch our paths. With it we can both talk to each other at any time. It is always on and active. Its battery will last 14 days without a charge and it will fully recharge after being totally exhausted by exposing it to any source

of light 25 watts or greater for just 4 hours. Here's the volume control."

John recognized it as the device Skip had used to call the FBI.

"I am giving you a second unit which you may give to Stella. Our communication will be only between the two of us unless you touch this switch which allows Stella to be in the communication loop. I'd recommend keeping her out until we find Erik, alive. At that time and with a boy with autism, it may be useful to have Stella and Erik communicate with each other. Well, I don't know, but maybe he will only be able to listen and see her, but it could still prove useful. The channels are as secure as possible. Everything goes through three scrambling layers – each protected by a password that changes every 37.4 minutes. The devices will tell each other the new password at a precise moment before each change. We can say anything over these devices, which we call *TG Pads*.

"Especially because of the incident at the airport, we may encounter attempts to discover our whereabouts. Edward, my grandson, is at our command center 24/7. He is watching the available satellites to see if there are any unusual attempts to download images of this area. I sent your driver on up to Reno after a momentary stop to let us out, in case they had a bug on his car. Got this, Ed?"

"I'm on it Grandpa!" came a voice from the TG Pads.

Jim said, "I'm pleased to see you so well prepared – both physically and mentally and even TG is already out working. I want you to call all the shots. Just let me know what I can do."

"Thanks for your support, Jim. Let's go into the house to see what information Stella has that might help us. TG, we are going inside. Give me twenty minutes, OK?" he called.

TG answered with a short bark. Jim glanced over at her as she continued her search.

Stella and Mildred were standing, waiting at the door. Through her tears Stella greeted Skip. "Mr. Jordan, thank you so much for coming on such short notice. I just thought since Erik loved TG so much, if he was hiding somewhere, he would come out to hug and pet her. That is why I asked for the two of you. This is my mother's sister, Mildred and her husband, William, is over there in the chair. Please come in, you too, Sheriff."

From the outside the two houses looked very similar with this house being the larger. It was built of exposed logs and it had a wide covered porch across the entire front of the house which faced east. Willard had it built as a single story home with a ramp in the event he or Mildred would someday need a wheelchair. It appeared to be solidly constructed. Given the number of windows, it could have at least five bedrooms plus an office and two or three bathrooms.

“Thanks, Stella, it is good to see you again, too, but please call me Skip. Let me be up front with you. You are living here because you are afraid, right?” She nodded slowly. “And you are bringing in a family to live here in the old house – a family that is in witness protection, right?”

She nearly fainted. “How, how - - did you find out?”

The Sheriff’s jaw dropped to the floor, “You didn’t tell me that, Stella! Is that true?”

After gathering her strength, she slowly replied, “Yes, the people that are coming saw that gang murder Karl and they were threatened for coming forward. Karl would have wanted me to protect them. They should be here soon.” She was very agitated.

“Stella, sit down.” He waited for her to sit. “Sheriff, that explains the attempted bombing at SMF that TG foiled. The gang will know there was no explosion. Don’t let that guy have any outside communication or this could get very ugly, fast!”

Jim immediately left the house as Stella was crying too loudly for him to radio his headquarters from inside the house.

“Bomb? Are they hurt? How did the gang find out? All three family members were taken to three different states to fly alone from there to Chicago, then as a family with two of Karl’s agents to come here. And the gang found all of that out and now the gang can find them and me, too. What will happen to us? Can’t that gang ever be stopped? I’ve got to call the FBI to help us!”

Mildred and Willard looked at each other with fear in their eyes.

“Stella, stop! What would Karl do? He would spring into action and demand you stay off the telephone, right? So do just that! Stay off the phone! Sheriff Paterson is very capable. He already has the terrorist in captivity. There was no explosion and his deputy cuffed the gang member, so that makes another one of them that is in jail. Just let him do his work. In the meantime, you need to focus on getting Erik back. What does ‘TG’ stand for?”

Whimpering, she answered, “Thank God.”

“That’s right. Now I want to talk separately to each one of you and then go out searching for Erik with TG. You can pray while we are gone. Be sure to thank and praise God before you ask him for Erik’s safe return.”

“Stella you are first. Can we go into the kitchen?” Jim was coming back into the house when they were headed to the kitchen. “Jim, I want you in here, too.” Jim nodded and joined them at the kitchen table.

“You can fill the Sheriff in on all the details about the family coming here when I’m done asking about Erik. So fill me in on his disappearance. What happened?”

“Willard usually takes Erik for a long walk every afternoon. But he fell and hurt his leg yesterday morning so they couldn’t go on their walk yesterday.”

“How did Erik react to that?” Skip had a lot to learn about autism and he wanted to get all the information he could in a very short time.

“He didn’t seem to understand,” she said. “He got very demanding and kept pulling and jerking Willard’s hand to get him up. Finally, Erik just went outside alone. I thought he was going out to watch his chickens. He did that a lot – watch his chickens. I thought he should have a dog to play with. After he met TG, he talked a lot about her, but I just haven’t gotten him one yet. They are so expensive and I did not get much from Karl’s life insurance. If Erik had a dog, maybe he wouldn’t have wandered off by himself. Oh I just don’t know what to do. I am so afraid he has fallen down one of those rocky hills and hurt himself. He has got to be cold and hungry after being out all night.”

“Stella, don’t worry! TG will find him quickly. What was Erik wearing when he left?”

“Just what he always wears. Jeans, tee shirt with the Philadelphia Eagles on it and sometimes an Eagles black hoodie. He liked to watch the Eagles with Karl, before” Her voice trailed off. “He usually just walks around the yard or watches his chickens for hours on end. He has never even gone up to our mailbox alone.”

“Thanks, Stella. I want to get out with TG, but I want to talk to Willard and Mildred first. So if you think of anything else later that might help us, please tell the Sheriff, here, and he will contact me. OK?”

She nodded and rose to leave. Skip and the Sheriff rose and opened the door leading back out to the living room. As they all moved into the room, Skip said, “Willard, let’s talk to you and Mildred over by your chair so you don’t have to get up.”

They pulled up some dining table chairs for Mildred and the two of them and they all sat down.

Mildred nervously asked, “Can I get you something to eat or drink after your long trip from Wisconsin?”

“No, but thank you. TG and I ate breakfast on our plane trip to Chicago and I carry enough food and water for TG and myself in my backpack to last at least three days. Willard, how is your leg?”

“Kind of sore, but I should be able to walk on it in another day or two. I’ve been on this ranch long enough to know how to take care of myself for something as simple as this.”

Mildred added, “He was born right in the old ranch house over there.”

“So you know the land very well, do you? I looked at a topographical

map of the area, but is there anything unusual about it that I may have missed?”

“Nah. It is just hills and valleys with some woods thrown in. We are in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains so there are a lot of small to medium size rivers. The American River is big enough though and in some places, wild enough that people come out this way to raft down the whitewater. I never did that. I had too much respect for the rivers.”

Interrupting, “Are they deep?”

“Most of the smaller ones are only creeks this time of year, but where the American is quiet, it is pretty deep and wide, too.”

“Have you taken Erik to see them? How does he react to them? Has he ever been swimming in any of them? Can he swim?” Skip was firing off questions too fast for Willard to answer after each one.

“He just looks at them without any apparent understanding of them as far as I can tell. No, I’ve never had him swimming so I don’t know if he can swim or not.”

Stella added, “He has been in water, but he hasn’t learned how to swim.”

Skip went on, “What does he do when faced with an obstacle? What I am looking for is whether he always turns in the same direction to get around it. Does he try to figure out what to do when, say a large rock is in his way?”

Jim had been listening intently and added, “Good questions.”

Willard thought for a moment. “Well, he does just seem to stop when he walks up to a really big rock. Let’s see Now that you have me thinking about it, he does always turn to his right – even though that is not the obvious way around the rock. To me at least, it isn’t. Wow, I hope that helps.” He realized information like that might be really useful and he felt good about giving it to Skip.

“Thanks, Willard. You never know. TG will be able to follow his tracks, but if I can see a definite obstacle out there, we might be able to angle to the right and have TG pick up his scent when we cross his path again. A couple of those and it could save us a whole lot of valuable time. If I make a mistake and we get out in front of him by doing that, TG will know it and we will cut back towards the obstacle and find him there. But it could save us a lot of time.

“Mildred, do you have anything to add?”

“No. I don’t think so. But he is a very nice boy and Willard and I dearly love him. Will you let us know when you find him?”

“I will be in constant contact with the Sheriff, here, so he will let you know when there are any developments in our search. Willard, I am giving you a modified version of our TG Pad. Jim and Stella also have them. With

yours you can constantly see where we are. It will draw a line to show our entire path. These two blinking spots show the current location of both TG and me – we each have our own blinker. See, right now TG is out on the other side of the barn and as you can see from her path, she has already covered the entire area around the houses and barn. If at any time you recognize our location and you have been there with Erik, let Jim know what Erik did there, whether he liked it there, or anything else about it. See this button up here in the corner? Just push it and it will call the Sheriff. He will open up a phone line to you from his pad and you can talk to each other using these pads. Kind of like a cellphone. OK?”

“Yeah,” he replied tentatively. “I never saw one of these things before.”

“It is new. My daughter invented it just for us to use. Don’t be afraid of it. You can drag your fingers around it like this and it will zoom in or zoom out so you can see the land detail better. Anything else you can tell me about the land?”

“Well, my great grandfather, James W. Marshall got this land just before the Great Gold Rush of 1848. He was the one who discovered gold just beyond the northern edge of the ranch. He showed it to Captain John Sutter, who confirmed it was gold. They both dragged their rock collection, he called it, down to the town to sell it. When word got out about the gold, it started a crazy time. People came here from all around the world to find gold. All these towns around here were started by the prospectors. They drove out or killed all the friendly Indians that used to be here. It was awful. Now there is nothing but a lot of old dried up mines out there – a couple of them are on our ranch.”

“Can they be of any danger to Erik?”

“Nah. My dad made sure they were all sealed off. He even ripped up most of the tracks and sold the iron to the government during the war. He left the rails on the bridge over the American. He said they would help to stabilize the bridge, in case he ever wanted to use the bridge for anything. He never did use it. I’ve been on it with Erik and it is still pretty solid.”

“With Erik? How did he act? Was he afraid of heights?”

“You sure fire off a lot of questions, don’t you? Yeah, we have been over it. I hold his hand so he won’t slip through the open spaces between the ties. It is a good 70 foot drop through the ties to the river. There wasn’t too much danger to us. The open spaces are only four inches wide.

“He always enjoyed everything about our walks so I didn’t think he was afraid of heights or anything like that. We used to look at quartz rocks over there by the mine. He thought they were pretty. There was a lot of quartz mixed in with the gold in them days so there are lots of piles of quartz

over there.

“We never went any farther than that. When he had his pockets full of his special “gold” he called it, we would go back across the bridge and head for home. You don’t think that is where he went do you? If you find him there, maybe he can’t walk if he picked up too many rocks and shoved them all in his pockets!”

The image of Erik anchored in place with all of his pockets bulging with rocks was almost comical. Thanks, Willard. That sure is a lot of really good information. We will put it to good use. It is 12:35 and I’ve got to join TG outside.”

He got up and shook Willard’s hand before he shook Mildred’s and thanked her again for her offer of food. He almost wished he hadn’t refused it, but there would be time for that when they got back with Erik. Then he hugged Stella.

“Remember to pray for Erik and us. Don’t forget your guests will be here soon. That will keep you plenty busy. Two of Karl’s FBI friends are with them. I’m sure it will be good for you to see them again. Tell them “hi” from me. I recognized them when they boarded the plane in Chicago, but didn’t risk blowing their cover by saying anything to them.”

A look of understanding swept over Stella. “So that’s how you knew they were coming.”

“That’s when I started putting two and two together. When TG discovered the terrorist with the bomb at the Sacramento airport, I figured they were the targets. I asked myself, why were they coming to the Sacramento area? Well, you were in hiding at this place and if the FBI placed them here with you, you could all benefit from the added protection. The FBI is taking special precaution to prevent the gang ...” he didn’t want to name the gang in front of her, “from discovering your location so they are not driving directly here. They are taking the long way here. It will take an extra couple of hours for them to arrive. Don’t worry about Erik! Keep a clear head and let the Sheriff know everything that happens and also tell him anything else that comes up that you may think of. Just have Willard punch his button on the TG Pad and that will call Jim. OK, everybody? We will be in touch.”

He nodded toward the door and both he and Jim headed outside. When they were outside, he touched a button on his collar next to a microphone and said, “TG, come in for some water before we head out.”

TG came running toward them from around the barn.

Jim shook his head and lamented, “I sure wish I could go along with you. I would love to watch TG work.”

“Let’s work that out sometime, Jim, but right now you have your hands

full right here. Remember to keep us informed of everything.” TG was busily drinking from a spout extended from Skip’s backpack. “Ed, you got everything under control up there?”

“10-4 Grandpa – loud and clear.”

“Do me two more things, Ed. Call H.O.P.E. Safehouse and see if they have a young, but fairly mature Blue Heeler your Dad can pickup in Racine on his way down here tomorrow. I want to give it to Erik so it can herd him back home when he goes out on walks without Willard.

“That brings up the second thing. Load your Grandmother and the whole team onto the Harrier tomorrow – that means you, too. We can all vacation at Rene’s dude ranch for a few days while TG trains the new dog. Rene is only about 50 miles from here – of course, you already knew that.

“Fantastic, Grandpa. Thank you. Their phone is ringing, got to go. Good luck!”

Skip just looked at Jim and smiled.

Jim observed, “You told me TG was smarter than you, but I’m definitely not so sure about that. Your mind must have been really working while you were in the house.”

Skip laughed. “Well maybe TG gave me those messages while we were in the house - - you just never know.” He slapped Jim on the back. “Thanks, I am going to enjoy working with you on this one, Jim. Got to go.”

“TG, find Erik.” And off they went at a very brisk walk given the heat of the day and the 70 pound pack on his back. Skip recorded their starting time, “1242 PDT, 18 July 2008, beginning Search Phase.”

Chapter 4

Search

They headed up and over North Hill and were quickly out of sight of the ranch buildings. The ground surface was smooth, packed dirt with a few critter holes dotted here and there around the ground. TG did not pay any attention to them – she was working. After about fifteen minutes, Skip checked in with the Sheriff. “Jim, just checking in. Everything OK on your TG Pad?”

“This thing is amazing! I can see you, I can hear you, and I can see TG out in front of you.”

“Yeah. Ed said you were trying out some of its features.”

“He knows that?”

“Yup, he can see every time you touch anything, if he wants to.” Laughing. “But he can’t actually see you, so if you have to relieve yourself behind the barn, he won’t be watching.”

“Well that’s a relief - - ahh, no pun intended.”

“Cute. Jim, make sure Willard is able to use his Pad. Better to give him a few practice runs. Ed won’t mind.”

Ed chimed in, “Willard has already been zooming in and out on your trail, Skip, but he hasn’t called Jim yet.” Ed often called him Skip. It was quicker than saying Grandpa each time.

Jim said, “OK, I will check with him in a few minutes. I just learned the witness protection family will be here in another two hours. They took a detour to Reno, too. The names that they flew out here under will be changed again as soon as they arrive. I don’t have that information yet.”

Ed said, “I do, I got it on our direct line to the FBI. They will be known as Dale and Dorothy Jones and their fifteen year old son, David. They don’t have any pets.”

Skip offered, “He should be a good companion for Erik. I’m sure in time he will be able to communicate with Erik better than anyone else. Stella will be kept occupied with their arrival and knowing TG is on the job should ease her stress somewhat.

“We are making good progress. Erik wandered both left and right quite a bit, so the direct line to him will be somewhat shorter. This will reduce the time for us to get back after we find him, too. TG says he stopped just to look

around several times and that will also work in our favor. She says his scent is almost twenty-four hours old. I just love working with her. She communicates frequently with me so I'm not left in the dark.

"Beth, someday maybe you can develop a device that can process scents as efficiently as TG does?"

Beth answered, "You already have TG. What would you do with something like that?"

"We could equip every sheriff in the country with one!"

"It would be easier to train all of the country's Border Collies and definitely a lot quicker. Hey, that's something you and TG can do after you retire from all these SAR runs you go on." She used the common abbreviation that stood for either Search and Rescue or Search and Recovery.

"I don't know the meaning of that word, *Retire*. If I get to where I can't keep up with TG on foot, I'll use the ATV on all of our jobs.

The land was still flat enough for this part of the trail and TG kept doubling back to read the trail twice more as they walked quickly to find Erik. Skip thought TG was, therefore, operating at four times his own speed. He was kind of wishing he could have been able to bring the ATV in their jump jet. But if he had, then TG wouldn't have been at the Sacramento airport to stop the terrorist from killing the Jones family and a lot of other people, too. God has a reason for everything that happens – we may not understand it or even recognize it at the time, but it is always there. Looking at his TGPad, he saw they might not have been able to use the ATV over some of the terrain up ahead, anyhow.

"TG, any change?"

She shot back a message that told Skip they continued to be getting closer. But they still had a long way to go if Erik was still moving away from them. Then she "said" something Skip did not expect. She had been trying to communicate mentally with Erik. With his autism that was not as easy as it would have been with someone else. She had been sending him pictures of the birthday party and how much they had enjoyed each other. She said there was some response from him. It was joy so she knew he was alive and she did not think he was currently in any pain. She tried to get into his head so she could see what Erik was seeing – what his surroundings looked like. The picture was not clear.

Skip told her that was probably because of his autism, but to let him know what she "saw" and maybe he could put the pieces together.

She said they came in flashes, but they were disconnected. They were so disconnected that she could not tell if he was moving or was standing still. She saw a forest of trees, then a lot of water like a lake, then just the sun in the sky, then some branches overhead, then a robin flying. Just all

disconnected.

Skip repeated all this so Jim could hear her report.

Ed added, “Skip, I’ll call your brother’s wife. She used to work with autistic kids. Maybe she can add something to these. Actually, it could look like a lot of different scenes up ahead that he could be seeing. Maybe the lake means it was an obstacle and he had to stop for it.”

“Thanks Ed, calling her is a great idea. Jim, let Stella know TG has a thin line of communication established with Erik and he is alive and not in any pain – at least he’s not letting TG know if he is. TG may have triggered his memory of meeting her and it is possible there is enough joy in that memory that it is covering up his current pain, if any.”

“What an incredible dog! I’ll tell her right away.”

Skip added, “Erik’s trail is about twenty-two hours old right now so it will definitely be a while before we see him.”

“I will tell her that, too.”

“Any word on the location of the Jones family?”

Ed replied, “I am tracking their vehicle with our Sat. They are moving down towards Carson City. I’ve got them arriving at 1505.”

Jim asked, “How can you tell from a satellite which car they are in?”

“Sorry, classified, Sheriff. But would you like to know how long it has been since their vehicle went through a car wash? Or how much gas is in their tank? Or which person is sitting in which seat?”

“Don’t get too cocky, Ed. The sheriff is on our side.”

“You guys amaze me.”

TG had her nose to the ground and was moving quickly through the July grass on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada’s. With no livestock other than chickens on the ranch, the grass grew profusely. The prevailing westerly winds gathered moisture from the Pacific Ocean. As the winds rose to climb over the mountains, they were driven higher and higher. Cooling as they rose, they no longer had the ability to hold onto their moisture. Frequent rains on the western slopes of the mountains fed the many rivers in the area. The grasses were over TG’s head (she was only 22 inches at the shoulder.) However, the soil, now being mostly rock, did not support a dense growth. Therefore, there was not enough grass to slow her down.

After another thirty minutes, Skip called her in for another drink from his water supply. By using their own water, there was no chance TG would pick up a toxin from the streams. There was too much at stake for her to get sick. He also had to encourage her to relieve herself as she was so focused on the trail that she would not take timeout for herself. She moved about 100 feet perpendicular to Erik’s trail as she had been taught by her forensics instructor. She did this so the scent from her elimination would not

contaminate the active trail.

“Good girl, TG. I’m going to have a half of a power bar, do you want any of your snacks?”

She turned her head towards the trail and flashed him a “No – let’s get going.”

“OK, track-track.” TG put an extra bounce into her first couple of steps in recognition of the old command Skip had not used since she had first been in search and rescue training. That was before Skip realized she did not need any dog-type commands. A movement, a thought, or an ordinary human type sentence was all she needed.

Border Collies were originally bred to be able to think on their own and complete tasks assigned to them by their handlers. During refinements in their breeding, many of these dogs were thought to be able to understand the human language. TG’s genes, although unknown because she had been a “stray”, were obviously near the peak of perfection. Her communication skills worked in both directions; she could both receive and send messages. On a human scale she easily had an I.Q. well above 180. Skip remembered the first time he had taken her to a search and rescue training session. She knew that they were looking for something, but she did not know the meaning of the word cadaver, so she did not know what they were looking for. Before they reached the site where a straw dummy soaked with human blood had been hoisted high into a tall tree, she had already found a shot gun shell and a dog license that had been lost just moments before by one of the other dogs in their class. She caught on to SAR work very quickly and since they had run out of new “tricks” and other new things to do together they both decided this was the direction that they wanted their lives to go in.

Skip was lucky enough to have been able to retire very comfortably in his early 40’s and let someone else manage his wealth of assets. Several of his seven children and twelve grandchildren decided to join up when he began to need a team to work with TG. He was fortunate to be able to support them as much as they supported the team. Their abilities and past experiences were incredible assets. He beamed whenever he thought about the remarkable jobs they had successfully completed as a family team. He was so proud of them all.

TG’s bark brought his focus back to this current job. “What is it TG?” She had stopped, pointed her nose at something in the grass and backed a few feet off the trail – just as her forensics instructor had taught her. Skip approached the spot carefully and saw a scrap of paper on the ground. He set out a numbered electronic marker and photographed the spot using the TGPad’s camera before he picked up the paper and put it into an evidence bag. The electronic marker could be monitored from their satellite.

Jim asked what it was.

“Jim, find out from Stella if Erik had a power bar with him. TG just found a wrapper with his scent on it. And ask her how many he might have been carrying. That could be good news in keeping his nutrition up.”

Jim replied, “Roger.”

Ed broke in, “When I saw it, I called Stella about it. She looked in his supply and thinks he may have up to a half dozen with him. If he had planned on a long trip, maybe he took something else, too. She will look around.”

“Thanks, I will help her look. By your estimate, Ed, the Jones should be here in twenty minutes.”

“Eighteen and a half, Jim. There will be no other vehicles within three miles either way of them for the rest of the trip. It does not look like they were followed. I scanned their vehicle from the Sat and could not find any bugs. Just David’s iPod and he has it turned off. Have him keep it off until we get there tomorrow, Jim. Beth will put some extra protection into it to keep its location invisible to others.”

“Got it.”

“Good work, men! TG is back on the trail. I am encouraged Erik may be in good physical shape when we reach him. TG says we have narrowed the gap to twenty-one hours.”

“Grandpa, I cannot get a fix on Erik’s location. I’ve cranked the heat sensors on the Sat to full and no sign of him. You will be seeing a small herd of wild horses in twenty-three minutes and there are some other minor critters moving erratically well beyond that. I have even tried to track them to see if Erik’s presence is scattering them, but there is no pattern to their movements.”

“Thanks, I know you will keep trying. TG, there are horses ahead.”

TG replied, “I knew that before Ed did.”

“But you didn’t tell me first,” he said with a smile.

TG flashed back, “What’s the big deal about horses? You want me to catch one so you can ride it tomorrow?”

“No thanks. I’d rather ride a tame one at Rene’s ranch.” He tried to hold back his thoughts of calling her a smart aleck, so she wouldn’t pick up on it. Whether he was successful or not, she didn’t react to it.

The terrain had become more difficult to navigate quickly. The smoother rocky ground had given way to larger loose rocks as they closed the gap to the mountainous area up ahead.

Ed reported, “The family is five minutes out, Sheriff. Get them into the main house as quickly as possible. They can get to their house through the underground tunnel. I cannot see any unusual activity on the other Sats nearby so it doesn’t look like anyone is attempting to track them with one of

those Sats, but let's not take a chance. Let's keep them inside for a couple of days. The FBI has not uncovered any info on how the gang knew they were on the plane to Sacramento, so let's err on the side of caution for a while. There is so much joint intensity on this case, it is only a matter of a short time (I hope) before they can wrap this up."

"Agreed." Jim said, "We are ready. Ed, I've got two of our vehicles headed here after a thorough de-bugging."

"Thanks, I see them – 20.3 miles out, speed 85."

"Don't let the taxpayers know that. They are already on our case for using too much fuel."

"Skip, the family arrived and Jim is quickly moving them into the house."

"Good. And that'll keep Stella busy for a while, too."

Ahead, Skip could see on his TGPAD the ground was beginning to level out. It looked as if this had been an old work area where perhaps the mine cars came to the end of their track. The track was long gone, but some mining tools were discarded here. Perhaps this is where they loaded the gold ore into mule packs to be transported to the refinery. There had been an old mule trail that left this area and wound down the hill to the west.

"We are at the old railroad bridge now. TG says Erik paused here, but then went ahead cautiously. We should be able to close our gap with him even more as we cross the bridge. Wait, TG just found something." He approached the spot TG was pointing to and found some blood on a railroad tie. He put down another electronic marker and nailed it into place before photographing it. Then he dipped a special paper strip into a portion of the dried blood after putting a drop of distilled water on it. Next he stuck it into a slot on the side of his TGPAD.

"Ed, see if this matches Erik's blood."

"Perfectly – and it contains some epithelial cells from his forehead, too. Look back about 4-5 feet to locate where he may have tripped. That will also confirm TG's trail to be sure you're going in the right direction. Sorry TG, but we have got to confirm even our own findings."

"She knows that - - here it is. A spike had worked its way up and there is a rubbing from his sneaker on the leading edge of the spike where he tripped. I just put another marker down at the spike and here comes the photo. Jim, don't tell Stella about this. There was very little blood; just enough for only a small facial cut. He should be OK."

"Ten-4. Mildred has them all sitting down to eat. It really smells good out here."

Ed added, "I can pick that up way up here, too. She uses a lot of garlic

in her cooking.”

Incredulously Jim asked, “Up here? - - You aren’t in the satellite? - - No - - You mean up in Beecher or what?”

“Classified again, Jim, but we also have a highly sensitive and directional sniffer on the Sat.”

“Come on guys, we can talk about food when we finish the job. Jim, can you join us then at my daughter’s dude ranch for a couple of days?”

“Thanks, but I’ll have a pile of paper work on this case.”

Ed cautioned, “Just let me edit it before you submit it, please. We need to make sure there isn’t anything classified in there, OK?”

“Certainly.”

“OK, we are off the bridge and TG is heading for what looks like one of the old mines that Willard said was sealed off.” TG took them rapidly along the old railroad bed which was barely recognizable now. All that remained to suggest to the curious that it was an abandoned railroad bed was a flat, horizontal path about eight feet wide. After the iron rails had been stripped for scrap, the wooden ties had also been picked up for reuse. They could not be used for the new railroad that was coming across the country as they were not wide enough. The gauge or width between the rails was much narrower on the mine cars than on standard railroad cars therefore the ties were too short. The iron rails themselves for the mine railroad were also smaller – about half the width of standard rails.

TG paused at the sealed mine and checked out the area before telling Skip that Erik had stopped there for about three hours. “He sat on this rock,” she barked. Skip put a marker on it and fastened it with special quick drying cement before taking its photo. As soon as he had done that, she took them on their first real change of direction. They were now heading northeasterly down a steep rocky path. Checking the Sat topology again, the path would continue down to the river. But first they would be crossing the fault line he had seen on his screen from the airplane.

Willard had been watching their path on his TGPAD and told the rest, “They are at the old mine. I didn’t think Erik would go that far alone.”

David spoke up, “Can you see them on that thing? Let me look!” Willard showed him that his screen only had flashing dots showing where Skip and TG were. From there were two lines trailing all the way back to the ranch house. He also showed David how to zoom in on the terrain that they were traveling on. He could also see the boarded up mine entrance.

TG said Erik had moved very slowly down this path from the mine. They had gained a lot of time as TG said Erik was now only sixteen hours ahead. Skip repeated that for Ed and Jim to hear.

“Skip, that puts Erik there close to dark, last night. He may have

slowed down because it was getting harder to see. At your latitude and elevation the sun would set at 9:13 p.m. local. You are on an eastern slope of the foothills where it will get dark very rapidly and cool down rapidly as well. I am showing the overnight low as 62° Fahrenheit last night. Have TG look for a place where Erik may have slept for the night.”

“Thanks for the info, Ed; she is looking for it now.” TG responded to Ed’s suggestion by moving back and forth across the trail with her nose next to the ground.

“We are at the recent fault line. I have definitely got to come back to explore this later this week. That earthquake ten months ago was only a 5.0 but it went right through the side of this hill and dislodged a massive amount of rock. It looks like someone went through here with a bulldozer and carved out a side of the hill then just backed out and left a dead-end alley here. The debris is piled high around this spot. TG just said this is where Erik stayed overnight. After I mark it we will look it over for any more wrappers or clothing scrapes.”

TG covered each square inch of this U-shaped area with her nose, inhaling and processing all of the information the six by eight foot space could yield. She told Skip that Erik had handled a lot of the smaller rocks. Skip thought he was probably adding some to his pocket collection.

“We found two more bar wrappers and his handkerchief. It looks like he tried to wipe his hands off with it. Maybe wiping his hands is a routine he does before he goes to bed at home. Jim, you could confirm that with Stella, but I don’t know if it has any significance. These rocks certainly would not have made a comfortable bed for him. The smaller stones in his pockets would just add to his discomfort. He probably was very stiff and sore in the morning, at least I would be.

“We have started on down the hill to the river. TG says the scent is only three hours old now.”

“He must have waited for the sun to come up over the Sierra Nevada’s. Given the angle from your location to the top of the mountains, that would be 10:07 Pacific Daylight time this morning. That cuts thirteen hours off his lead on you. That confirms TG’s evaluation of the scent’s strength.”

Jim asked, “What would you do if your calculation did not match TG’s evaluation?”

Skip replied quickly, “We would have to find the reason that our theory was wrong. TG is never wrong!”

“You certainly put a lot of faith in her analyses.”

“You can’t argue with the Production Manager, if you want to keep your job.”

“That says a lot. What are your plans now that it is getting dark?”

“We keep going as long as the boss says we keep going. I have my headlamp on and I also have my knee lights on so I don’t stumble over anything. By having multiple lights from different directions, my depth perception at night is nearly as good as it is in the daylight.”

“Knee lights?”

“L.L.Bean sewed them into our clothing. They are powered by the energy I produce while walking. They never go dark as long as I have been walking during the previous thirty minutes. The full moon tonight is also a blessing. Are you staying up with us Jim, you know you don’t have to.”

“John will be taking over for me after you locate Erik, but I will be back early in the morning. Are you sure that is all right with you?”

“Absolutely. I trust John. Have you or Ed heard any chatter regarding the gang and what their future plans are?”

Ed replied, “I keep asking the FBI about that. They haven’t heard anything – at least nothing they are willing to reveal anyhow. They are following several theories about how the terrorist knew what flight the Jones family was on. I will fill you in if I get anything.

“By the way, H.O.P.E. says they have had a two year old male Blue Heeler in foster care for three months. He was picked up by a dog catcher in Cleveland and was scheduled to be put down. They rushed a team down there to get him as soon as they found out about him. The foster family reports he is wonderful with kids and other pets, but he needs a lot of room to run around. They only have a double-wide city lot with a fenced in yard. He picks up on any challenge they give him, so he appears to be very smart. He also has a sense of self when he looks at himself in a mirror and that is always a good sign. H.O.P.E. is having him taken to the Racine Batten Airfield at 9 a.m. tomorrow for us to pick him up. I told them that as usual we will pay the adoption fees and give them a sizeable donation as well. The dog’s name is Black Jack – at least until Erik gives him a new name.”

“Good work, Ed. Is everybody coming down with you, I hope?”

“Yep, the whole team is, I think. I can’t wait to get my butt in a saddle again. Dad said he hasn’t ridden since he worked at that USMC horse riding stable many years ago. That was long before I was born.”

“We will have a good time. Rene has a really nice set-up over there; seven cabins and a bunch of horses for any riding ability. OK, now we are down to the level of the American River. It looks like we are following a deer trail along the bank.”

“You are coming up on a junction where a feeder river joins the big one. They form an acute angle. Do you want directions to strike out through the woods to cut off time?”

“I saw that on my Pad and I am thinking about it. In this case I would

be turning 45 degrees to the left. But if Erik normally turns to the right when he encounters an obstacle, there is a fair chance he could still be at that junction. I could be wrong, but this time I think we will follow his scent trail. We should be there in an hour...”

“Forty-seven minutes.”

“... and my trigonometry says it would only save us an hour of time, if he went off in that direction. We will stay with the trail.”

The woods are fairly thick here and at times he could not see the river, but he could hear it. There are several white water rafting tour companies that operate in the area as the river can be quite wild here depending upon the season.

TG gave a soft whine.

“TG says Erik is very near here. Good thing we stayed on the trail.”

Ed interrupted excitedly, “Skip, I got him! He moved into a clearing so that I got him on the IR. He is standing at the side of the river, forty-two minutes ahead of you.”

“What is he doing? I pray he is not attempting to cross the river.”

“He is standing in one spot and his breathing is deep and regular. It looks like he could be singing.”

Jim added, “Stella told me he is a very good singer and he often stands outside and sings. I did not think that was important until now.”

“TG stopped to listen and got very excited. She must be able to hear him. I am amazed she can pick him out over the noise of the river.

“You can tell Stella that we should have him soon. And have Willard watch his TGPad. I will put a video of Erik on it when we catch up to him.”

“I have some deputies and the FBI has some agents around both houses so I can go into the house to be with Stella when you reach Erik. God Speed!”

TG was fairly flying now and it was difficult for Skip to keep up with her. His lighting system provided a decent depth of field view for him so he could travel in the dark almost as fast as he could in the daylight without getting smacked in the face with the many branches waiting to do just that – smack him in the face.

Droning like an automobile GPS speaker, Ed said, “Recalculating – your over the ground speed has nearly doubled and you will reach him in 16:46 minutes.” Then he returned to his normal tone. I turned on the video feed from your forehead camera and am recording. WHOA! Nice dodge on that big branch, Skip!”

“Thanks, that one could have put a serious dent in my head. It was hiding behind the smaller branches that I was pushing out of the way.”

“I turned on the spotlights on your shoulders and adjusted their aim and

color. Does that improve your depth of field?”

“Very nice. What did you do to the color?”

“Left side is richer in green and right went into a blue. I thought that might give you a better visual with the pine branches.”

Puffing, “Very nice. No more head bumps. I’ll have to remember those settings. Ed, give me a mark when we are a half mile out and I will tell TG to race ahead to Erik.”

“You want her to race ahead without you? You won’t get lost without her?”

“I have you, haven’t I? You can be my puppy,” he said teasingly.

“I am almost sixteen Grandpa; I am not a little puppy anymore.”

“So are you ready for your CGC medal?” Skip loved to tease him.

“I do not need a Canine Good Citizenship medal, either.”

Skip became more serious. “The way you have been working for the team and all the good you have accomplished for so many people, I may ask for a Presidential Citizen’s Medal for you the next time we get to D.C.”

“Better stop the day dreaming and focus on dodging those branches.”

“No, really! I have been thinking about that after the way you handled those mudslide rescues down in Santa Ana last December. That was brilliant and a lot of hard work at our Command Post!”

Ed thought about that for a while and was pleased Skip had brought it up again. Having to figure out what direction Skip and TG should approach the moving mountains of mud so they could get people out and not get buried themselves was perhaps the most difficult thing he had ever done for the team. He remembered feeling the terror even though he was not actually in the mud himself. He was forced to dismiss his feelings and intensely focus on his role in order to bring them out alive.

“Skip, you are at the three-quarters mile mark. You will have fewer trees from here to Erik. The ground rises fifty feet higher and for some topographic reasons the density of trees will continue to diminish.”

“The river is a lot quieter here, too. TG said she can definitely hear him. Is her video camera working? I couldn’t get it turned on while she was examining the rocks where Erik slept last night.”

“I should have mentioned that. You hit the wrong icon on your TGPad. If I had known what you wanted, I could have told you then. I’ve got it on now and I have set it to IR. She is moving so fast the image from her camera almost makes me dizzy.”

“OK, thanks! I am letting her go ahead now. TG, go get Erik and stay with him until I get there.”

“You sure didn’t have to tell her twice. Talk about dizzy now!”

“Ed, send the feed to Jim. I do not usually like to do that until we have

examined our target, but the information you have already gotten lets us know Erik is OK.” Jim could hear this so he knew what was coming his way.

“Jim, I am going to extract two frames per second from her video feed for you or you will all get motion sickness from watching it like I am. When she reaches Erik, she will be jumping around a lot in excitement, but I will put it back to standard feed when she calms down a bit.”

“Wonderful, thanks! We are all watching it with intense excitement over here.”

Stella asked, “When will we see Erik?”

Ed calculated, “TG is doing three-minute miles and she should reach Erik in 128 seconds.”

Stella was having difficulty comprehending all that was happening. She asked Jim excitedly, “How do they know all that?”

“Both TG and Skip are loaded with a lot of high tech electronics and Skip’s grandson, Ed who is back in Beecher, is constantly processing everything with eight different computers. He knows just what is happening at each moment.” Jim was proud that he could answer her as he was having almost as much of a problem understanding it all as she was.

“Can you change the color from that icky green to regular TV color so we can see Erik?”

Ed answered, “Stella, TG’s camera operates on infra red which means that it sees heat in the dark, but it does not see color as that would require actual light. We can use her camera at night and under collapsed buildings where there is no light and we can ‘see’ where she is going and if there are any people in front of her that need to be rescued. Right now TG is running way ahead of Skip, but when Skip catches up to them, he has a lot of lights built into his clothing. I will adjust those lights to simulate daylight – kind of like on a stage in a theatre where they can make daylight out of various lights of different colors. Then you will see Erik just how he actually looks. Remember he could be pretty dirty after all that time without a shower,” he cautioned her.

“OK, TG will be close enough for us to see Erik from her camera in 73, 72, 71, 70 seconds. He will be about 300 feet away, but if TG isn’t bouncing too much, I may be able to zoom in her camera so you can see him. If he says anything to TG, you will be able to hear him, too.”

Skip called to TG’s collar speaker, “TG. Fly steady and level. Try not to bounce too much. We are making a video with your camera.”

TG shot back, “Do you want me to fly like a glider or fast and bumpy like Scott does?”

Skip said out loud, “I don’t think I should repeat that to Scott.”

Scott had been monitoring the day’s activity. “Repeat what to me?”

“I asked TG to level out her run, but she wanted to fly ‘fast and bumpy like Scott does.”

There was laughter from every one of the TGPads.

“Tell her I will take her on a real bumpy ride if she likes that.”

Ed cautioned, “Focus people – Erik should be coming up on TG’s camera right about . . . now! There he is! Good job, TG! Good girl!”

TG barked several times and Erik turned around to see what the noise was. He had been looking out at the river and singing, but now he just stood there as his old friend TG was racing toward him. He recognized her instantly. He kneeled down and was nearly knocked over by a rushing and very happy dog. TG knew better than to knock Erik over, but Erik didn’t know that – and he didn’t care. His friend had found him!

Stella watched with tears streaming down her face. Ed slowed the feed to one frame every two seconds because of all the bouncing TG was doing. She knew she had done her job today and had done it well. And she was so happy to see Erik after many hours of anticipation.

Ed was also watching Skip’s progress. “Skip, I know you have to focus on the path ahead of you, but TG and Erik are having a grand celebration! I didn’t think Erik would be showing so much emotion. TG certainly lit his fire today. You will reach them in 2.3 minutes. Maybe you can already hear the commotion they are making.”

“It sounds like a wild party. The river is quiet here and I’m not snapping twigs underfoot anymore so I can hear TG’s barking. I love to hear her when she is happy and not working! Just playing like a dog should be able to do.”

“Erik just noticed your light coming toward him. I am switching TG’s camera to full video now – she has settled down a bit more.”

Shouting, “Erik, I am coming! This is Skip. TG and I will take you home!”

“There is recognition on his face, Skip. You are not scaring him so he won’t try to hide or run away.”

Still shouting, “Erik! We are so glad to see you. I will turn some of these lights toward my face so you can see it is really me.”

“That should be OK, Skip. It doesn’t look like there is anything for you to trip on, but take higher steps just in case those lights in your face temporarily blind you. Erik is headed toward you with his hands outstretched. I will turn up the brightness on your shoulder and hat lights so you will be able to see him.”

“TG Search and Rescue successfully made contact with its target at 2217 hours PDT on 18 July 2008.” Ed announced to the FBI and Sheriff. “Search phase complete. Rescue phase begins.”

Chapter 5

Rescue

After readjusting Skip's lights to simulate daylight, Ed asked, "Mom, how does he look? You can talk to Erik now."

"I have been crying so much it is hard to see him. Erik, honey, this is Mother. How are you?"

Skip showed Erik his TGPad. "Erik, she can see you and you can see her on this small TV screen. Just look here. See her? Go ahead and talk to her."

"Mom? Where are you? I can't find you."

"I am at the ranch house, honey. You went for a walk and you didn't come back so I asked TG and Skip to find you."

"I can't find you. I looked for you, but I can't find you." Then he started to cry.

Aside Stella said, "I have never seen him cry before. That is a good sign of improvement, right?" She said to nobody in particular.

"I can't find you. I looked for you, but I can't find you. I found TG. I found TG!" The pitch of his voice was climbing to where he began to sound happy.

Skip had been giving Erik a quick first responder medical exam. "He looks really good, Stella. He is dehydrated, but he will be fine in no time.

"Team, I am going to set up camp here for an overnight. Erik needs a good supper and a lot of fluids before we can head back. I am sure he will sleep very well with TG snuggled up next to him. After a hot breakfast, we will head back home at daybreak. Sorry Stella, but he needs nutrition and fluids before I could expect him to walk all the way home. I could put him in a sling and carry him, but that would likely scare him too much. It is kind of bumpy riding on a sling between two poles dragging along the ground. I would use that only for someone with, say, broken legs."

"Thank you, Skip. Can I watch him for a while longer?"

"Of course. I will set the camera on a tripod and you can watch and talk to him for the next hour or so – until he goes to bed."

While Erik sat with TG on his lap licking his face, Skip began setting up camp. TG flashed a message to Skip saying human kids like their faces licked. Erik was beginning to giggle. Stella loved every minute of it. She

told Willard and Mildred that maybe she should get a dog for Erik. Jim knew one was coming tomorrow, but he did not let on that he knew anything about it. It was Skip's surprise.

After giving Erik a couple of bottles of high-protein Ensure®, he started pulling things out of his backpack. First was a tube no larger than a Raid® aerosol can. He popped off one end-cap and shook out the contents. Out came a fluorescent yellow mass of material connected to the can in his hand by tubing. Then he twisted the end of the can. Immediately the material grew into a 4-man all weather tent. It had the International Red Cross symbol on the sides like TG's vest. The tent sprouted a Mylar-like antenna straight up in the air and it had a thick, quilted built-in air mattress. The material was puncture proof and it would make a very comfortable bed for each of them in spite of the rocks on the ground.

Erik was startled by the popping sound and the sudden appearance of the tent. He only said, "Same color as TG's coat."

Skip thought that was a good observation on his part. He also pulled out of his backpack a small fold-out cook stove with an optional heating device that could use either a gel-type fuel system or local vegetation fuel like twigs and pine cones. He opted for the gel and instantly had their supper heating.

TG already had a container of her favorite Purina Pro Plan® shredded beef and water available from the backpack tubing. She was almost too excited to eat, but Skip knew she would eat and drink when she wanted to.

Jim came on the air with, "Nice set up Skip. Where did you have that tent made?"

"I had Eureka!® make it for me. I just got it so this will be the first time we have used it. I just hope I can get it back into the tube tomorrow morning. It has a deflate/put-back setting on the canister so this should be interesting. They said the only precaution in all this is to not pack the tent next to the cookware when it is still hot. – I told them I think I could have figured that out."

"Now that you have Erik, if you guys are OK, I am going home for a late supper and some shut eye. John is here at my command post and he will keep me in the loop if anything comes up. I am glad you decided to wait until morning before bringing Erik back. He is a special case and he should definitely be well nourished and hydrated before you trek back. I confirmed it with a specialist at the UCLA Hospital before I agreed to the delay in bringing him back."

"He really is a strong kid. He has that Swede-built look like his father. Right now he is busy eating – and of course sharing with TG."

"Stella is watching it all. She keeps pointing out his different actions to

Mildred and Willard.

“Have a safe and restful night. I will be back before daybreak. Nite.”

Ed added, “Nite, Jim. The traffic out on the highway is lighter than normal tonight. Just watch out for the full moon crazy drivers!”

“Don’t I know. Every full moon, people do stupid things – sometimes REALLY stupid things.”

“If I see any headed your way, I will call you on your cellphone. Please leave your TGPad with John.”

“Yep, he has his hand out to get it from me already. Don’t you ever sleep, Ed? You are still a growing kid!”

“I will be up until Erik is sound asleep and Skip says it is OK for me to put my systems on ‘Wake Me On Need’ or WMON. It blanks the screens and cuts the volume until it determines that I need to see or hear something. It has a sensor that knows when I am awake, and then it backs up the real time to show me or let me hear the event. Then it speeds forward to catch up to real time. A snore from Skip or TG (they both snore big time) doesn’t affect WMON, but if an animal or intruder gets too close for example, it wakes me up. Beth designed and wrote the code for it. She wanted it called WOMAN for ‘Wake On Managed Alert Now’, but Skip has a four character limit on acronyms.”

“TG PAD is five.”

“Actually it is T-G-P-D, but good observation. Now go home, Sheriff. John, your pad will not sleep. You will be able to monitor all systems, just the same as I would if WMON was not in control.”

“That is comforting, thanks.”

“You can wake me up just by saying my name.”

“Hope I don’t need to.”

“I will let you know when I am about to execute WMON.”

Skip was listening to his grandson explain their systems with a big, proud smile on his face. Ed had become a real expert and was fully capable of running their Command Center. In that capacity even his own father had to take orders from him. That is a situation most teenagers would love! Skip wondered what would happen to their team when Ed started to be more interested in girls. Was he holding Ed back by keeping him at the team’s Command Center? No, Ed had gone out with girls before. But?

He decided to ask the rest of his grandchildren again if they had any interest in joining the team. Even if they were only interested in summer jobs, there was always room on the team for more members. If he and TG went out looking for other talented animals, they might be able to take on multiple searches and rescue jobs at one time. That could give him a break. Heck, he did not want a break. He loved his work and he loved working with

TG.

Yet, it WAS something to consider. Especially if someone in the family was just waiting to be asked to join. He had only asked them if they wanted to join. He had never told them what the jobs were that he wanted filled. Yes, maybe a different approach would work.

He would put more thought into this while they were at the dude ranch later. Right now he had to get Erik ready for tomorrow's walk home.

He had set up lights on tripods while their food was heating so they were both in the light and Erik did not have just the lights from Skip's clothing staring him in the face. Now Erik could see Skip, too. The lights could stay there all night, but he could dim them from inside the tent when Erik was ready for bed.

Erik ate his pot roast with cooked vegetables eagerly and drank several more Ensures. Skip checked him over again and could not find any places where Erik was sore. His hydration and oxygen levels were very good, too. He had improved quickly. Probably due to the great shape Willard had him in. Willard said he made sure Erik exercised every day – and it showed.

Skip tried to make small talk with Erik, but he was too interested in TG to even notice Skip. Stella was so pleased that he was enjoying TG's company, too.

"Erik, when you are ready, you and TG can go into the tent and find a comfortable place for the two of you to sleep together." Skip crawled into the tent behind them and put himself cross-ways, blocking the doorway and zipped the door closed. He also stuck a motion sensor onto Erik's hoodie so if Erik got up during the night, Skip would be woken up. "Say goodnight to your mother. She is right there on the screen waiting for you to go to bed."

"Goodnight Mom. TG found me and she is going to sleep with me now."

"Goodnight sweetheart. I will see you when you get here in the morning. Say your prayers."

Erik smiled and lifted TG's paw to wave to her, too. "OK Mom. TG says goodnight, too. I am going to thank God for TG."

She thought, "I wonder how many people across the country are thanking God for TG every day? No wonder her initials stand for 'Thank God.' She is a real blessing. And it is so amazing Skip understands her so well. That is another blessing!"

After Erik said his prayers, Skip used his TGPad to change the lighting. He angled the lights outward from the tent and even positioned a shading device so very little light shown down onto the tent. He figured correctly the full moon gave them enough light inside the tent for the night. With the lights repositioned, their sensors were also repositioned so Ed's computers would

detect the presence of any intruders. Skip tapped an icon on the pad to let Ed know he could execute WMON and also get some sleep as soon as Erik was asleep.

With a full stomach and his favorite dog snuggled next to him, sleep came quickly for Erik's stressed system.

Skip was not far behind. Having traveled two time zones, his day had been made even longer. Chasing TG for hours on end left his body tired, too.

Ed let the Chief Deputy Sheriff know he was executing WMON and then drifted off to sleep himself.

* * * * *

In an elaborate private room at the Golden Suites in Philadelphia, nobody was asleep. This was the Golden Boy's headquarters where Herr Klas Fredriksen was pacing back and forth grilling his right-hand man, Thor Thorsen. "Why did you trust that half-breed, Lars Johansen, to take care of the people that they are calling the Jones family?" he shouted. "He may have looked like a Swede, but his motherland blood was contaminated! He should not have been trusted."

"I thought if we had him blow up the family, we could get rid of him, too."

"Well he didn't, did he?"

"It really wasn't his fault. The reports said he had his hand on the handle to activate it when that blasted dog decked him."

"We still need to eliminate that family. The testimony they gave to the grand jury will finish all of us if they are able to testify in court. They were the only witnesses to your wiping out that rotten FBI snitch. That is another thing you screwed up! How did they manage to see you do it? Why weren't you following the plan?"

"We have been over that a hundred times. I followed the plan perfectly. It was just that, um, others had let them get too close to us." He was afraid to name Herr Fredriksen as the one who he felt had actually screwed it up.

"It was your fault. If someone came onto the scene, you were supposed to wait until they were far enough away before taking care of him."

"By then the snitch already knew he was being taken down and he could have gotten away, besides they were behind me and I was not alerted. I did not see them. Let's get beyond this, can we? We need to figure out a plan to get the family. That dog should go, too."

"What is the status on our plant in the FBI? Is she in any danger of being outed?"

Thor replied, "She said eight other office girls knew where each of the family members was when they were being moved around. All of them also knew where the witness protection location is that they have gone to and what their names were being changed to. She watched to see if any of the girls had just pieces of the information so the agents could identify which of them had leaked the information. But she compared notes with the others and they all had the same memos."

"Good. Fine Swedish blood in that lady. Too bad she had to dye her beautiful hair black to be there. You are the ordinance expert. How do you suggest eliminating all of them on that ranch?"

"The dog is there now so we should act quickly."

"The place is crawling with FBI and cops, we would never get past them."

"No, not if we went in on foot."

"It would take too long to tunnel in and besides they would hear us."

"So let's drop a bomb on them."

"Fool! Nellis Air Force Base is right there, any plane would be shot down before it could even get close! Launch a missile at them."

"We don't have any and we must act immediately. But our friend and fellow Swede, Stig Gustavsen, has an old B-17 that used to carry bombs. He often takes it across country to air shows or to rich people's parties. Nobody would suspect that he would actually be carrying a bomb."

"Call him! Let's both go with him if he can do it. I want to see that place go up in flames. I want to punch the release lever to burn them. Use a disposable cellphone from our collection box." They had a large supply of cellphones to be used once and discarded. A call from any of them could not be traced.

"Hey Stig, Thor here. Where is your B-17?"

"Right here in my yard. Why?"

"You have some big bombs in your warehouse, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"They still work?"

"I got some big napalm bombs that I saved in my warehouses. Some of them have been emptied and sold to collectors, but there are quite a few left that still work."

"Load up your biggest one into the B-17 and top off your fuel tanks. Herr Klas wants you to deliver it out west right away. Can you take two passengers? When can we take off?"

"Sounds important. I'll work out a flight plan for an 11 p.m. departure. What should I tell the FAA about our destination?"

"Find some small airfield outside of Sacramento and if you have to,

you can say you are delivering museum relics to a customer out there – make up an address.”

“They don’t need that much detail – just the name of the airport. I will calculate a place for refueling. The engines on the 17 are not very efficient anymore.”

“Make sure it is a remote location. We don’t want any big airport inspectors snooping around.”

“No problem. We can refuel at the municipal airport in Hay Springs, Nebraska. You have a twenty-five minute drive to get here. Can you be here by 10:30?”

“We are on our way.” After disconnecting the call and removing the battery pack, Thor trashed the phone.

“I will leave Bjorn in charge of our operation here.”

“He is a wimp.”

“But he can be trusted. Get the car.”

* * * * *

Skip yawned, “Ed, you up?”

“Amazing how you can go from a snore in one breath and be fully awake and talking in the next.”

“You sound bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning. Any activity anywhere last night?”

“No. I slept in this morning and only woke up when Dad said he was going out to prep the plane.”

“Be sure to thank H.O.P.E. for their help in speeding up the adoption process. Will the dog need any calming meds?”

“I asked and they are giving him something that works for them. My question is how do you know with these super active breeds when they are over excited and need to be calmed?”

“That’s easy – when they are walking on the ceiling of the plane!” Skip tried to stifle a laugh.

“You are good and awake yourself. H.O.P.E. suggested we use a crate so the dog doesn’t decide to jump on Dad’s lap while he is flying.”

“Good idea. Erik is stirring and TG is asking to go outside for her morning duties. I will be cooking our breakfast in a minute so we can pack up and head for his home pretty soon. “Ed, what does this river look like? Can we safely cross it at some point and take a diagonal path home? It would be nice to shorten Erik’s walk so he could get home sooner. Sorry, I should have done that research last night, but TG had me on a fast track yesterday and I was anxious to get some sleep.”

“You two were covering some serious ground in a short time on your search yesterday. OK, here are your options. On each of these I have reduced your forward speed to a reasonable level to accommodate Erik. (A) - walk back the way you came. ETA: 1730. Difficulty low. (B) - walk back the way you came, but rendezvous with us at the southern end of the railroad bridge at 0940. Then you can squeeze in with us or we can drop the ATV and you can give Erik a wild ride home. Either way your ETA is 1130. Difficulty – an easy hike. (C) - boat over the river where you are now and where the river is calm, and then take a diagonal route home. This will require some very active paddling to be sure you complete the crossing before you drift down to the dangerous white water rapids. If you make it, your ETA is 1500. Difficulty – moderate, plus you will have a lot of dense growth to go through.”

“There are too many unknowns in the river crossing. If it was just me and TG, I would take it. But I can not be sure about Erik’s cooperation or that he could help at all. I wish I knew more about him – autism is a strange thing to me. Let’s go with the ATV drop. I don’t want him to see his new dog until we get to his house so I don’t want to ride the plane back to his house.”

Erik came crawling out of the tent. “Who are you talking to? Where is TG?”

“I was talking on the radio to my team, Erik. They will be helping us get you home. And TG is over there looking for grasshoppers or something. How did you sleep last night?”

“I slept with TG. She is so warm and soft. I love her!”

Skip thought to himself that was a nice display of emotion. We certainly did not see that a couple of years ago at his birthday party.

“Can I keep her?”

“Would you like a dog of your own someday?”

“Yes – just like TG. She is your dog so I can’t have her can I?” He was showing a good level of understanding of the situation.

“I will help you to get a dog of your own when you get home Erik. I promise.”

“OK.” That was with less enthusiasm than Skip had expected.

Ed said, “Secret’s out I guess.”

“I decided to build to the climax. There will be plenty of other excitement when we get there. I was wondering if the added surprise would be too much for him.”

“I’m not the doc, but you could be right, I guess.”

“Neither you nor TG will ever give me any credit for thinking.”

“Not so. Go eat your breakfast. I am transferring to the mobile com desk in TG-1. Dad is ready to go and the family is all on board.”

“God Speed!”

Scott broke in, “Dad, we will let you know when we are ready to leave Racine with the dog. Then Ed can let you know when we will drop the ATV for you.”

“He already told me.”

“Sometimes I feel he thinks like TG does – their brains are way out ahead of ours.”

“Scary, but at least they are on our side. Have a good flight. Did you contact the Racine Police Department so they will know what is going on when their 911-board starts lighting up with calls of a strange light heading for Racine’s Batten Field? The skin of the plane will be reflecting right in their faces in the morning light.”

“Ed will give them a heads up before we get there. Maybe we should tone down on the fluorescent paint on our birds.”

“It is the only advertising we do, so I am all for leaving it as is.”

“No problem; I agree. See you in Calli.”

“Mobile Com Desk is active. Sheriff, do you copy?”

“I love to listen to your guys banter back and forth. Copy here, Ed, and we are looking forward to your arrival. No activity inside either house yet. They are all just plumb tuckered out. I will let you know so Stella can see Erik when she gets up.”

“Ed, be sure to save the video feed of Erik scarfing up his eggs, bacon and toast.”

“S.O.P. Always making copies, Grandpa.”

“A good boss always checks to be sure the standard operating procedures are being carried out. And, if not, why not? Sometimes, non-compliance can indicate a need to change the S.O.P.’s.”

“Was that another of your lectures from the university classes you used to teach?”

“Just take it for what it is worth.”

In Scott’s dry monotone voice that he reserved for official recorded announcements, “Lift off in TG-1 at 0828 CDT from Jack Pine Knob Airport, Beecher, Wisconsin; taking a vertical path to 1000 feet, then rotating engines for forward progress and gaining altitude to 20,000 feet before leveling off and heading for Batten Field, Racine, Wisconsin with ETA 0850 CDT.”

“Scott, aren’t you pushing it a bit? That is an average of 500 mph and you have a heavier load than usual.”

“I warmed it up more than usual this morning. It needs its nose blown out a bit. That’s what you used to say when you ran your cars down the freeway at max speed. I have the Mark 107 Pegasus engines in top shape and they will enjoy the extra effort – trust me.”

“You know what you are doing, I do trust you. I am just asking the question.”

“Can you hear them purring? We are passing 5000 feet already. I gotta pay attention to traffic – talk to you later.”

Skip had cooked another batch of eggs. “Here Erik, have some more eggs. Be sure to drink that chocolate drink up like you did last night. When you are done, we can pack up for our walk home. TG is done with her breakfast, too.” TG had been sitting attentively in front of Erik while he was finishing his breakfast.

“Take this tennis ball and throw it for TG. She will bring it back to you. Just don’t throw it out into the water. You guys can play ball while I pack up our camp.” TG was already bouncing up and down in anticipation of a good time with her favorite game. Erik got into the game quickly, throwing the ball again and again for TG. She anticipated Erik’s every move running to catch the ball usually before it hit the ground. Skip thought she was reading Erik’s thoughts very well. He must have been mentally picturing where he was going to throw it each time. Skip told himself he should report that to Stella as it could be important to his further development.

Picking up camp did not take very long. He thought Eureka! had done a superb design job on his tent. He was able to suck it back into its storage tube almost as fast as it went out. It stored in his back pack right next to the inflatable boat they would not be using on this job. When all of the lights were secure, he hoisted his backpack onto his shoulders. It did not feel any lighter this day than its 70 lbs when he took it out of the closet back home the day before. Smiling at their game of catch, he called TG to lead the way. He told Erik to follow TG and he brought up the rear. He gave TG a mental image of the bridge they had crossed and said “let’s go back to the bridge, TG.”

He asked, “Do you remember the bridge where you fell and banged your head, Erik?”

Erik winced at the memory of hitting his head and said, “Yeah that hurt. It was bleeding.”

“You can hold my hand when we go back over it so you won’t fall again. Okay?”

“Sure that will be OK. And TG can show us the way over it, too.”

“I see you already can tell how much help TG can be. If you had a dog, it could play ball with you and help you a lot, too.”

“I want a dog, but I don’t know if Mommy will let me have one.”

Stella had gotten up in time to watch Erik finish his breakfast and now was watching the video feed from Skip’s head camera. Right now all she could see of Erik was his back, but he did occasionally turn around to say

something to Skip so she got to see his face then. She was so happy he had been found safe and was headed home. When she heard him say he wanted a dog, she decided she would get a dog for Erik. She just did not know how she was going to afford it. She was not going to be getting any rental income from having the Jones family with her, because it would be going to Willard and Mildred. She wondered if Skip would have some ideas for her since he had brought up the subject with Erik. Surely he knew about her financial condition and he would not be putting her into a situation where she would have another expense she could not afford. Skip was still talking with Erik and she was surprised to hear him say, "I will talk to your Mom about you getting a dog. Maybe I can help you get one."

After hearing that, she knew she was right in her judgment of him.

Erik suddenly said, "There is a female Acorn Woodpecker."

"Where? I don't see it."

"It just flew into the Red Oak tree over there."

"We don't have Acorn Woodpeckers where I live in Wisconsin. What do they look like?"

"It is a medium size woodpecker with a black back and chest. Its head is black, white and red. The male has red from the nape to its white forehead. The rear of the crown of the female is red and its forehead is white, but there is black between the red and the white. They are called clown-faced and they are common in western oak forests. They live in extended family groups and all of them spend hours and hours storing thousands of acorns in carefully drilled holes in trees and telephone poles. A single tree could have 50,000 acorns in it. You don't see them in Wisconsin because they are mostly in California, Arizona, New Mexico and Oregon."

"Where did you learn all that about them?"

"I memorized the whole 'Birds of America' book my Dad gave to me. I like that book." He fell silent for a while. "I miss my Dad. We used to watch birds together."

"Doesn't your Uncle Willard watch birds with you now?"

"Yes, but he doesn't know what kind of bird he is watching."

"I bet you help him learn about the birds."

"Yes, he likes to know about them and I can help him."

"Good for you. Keep that up. Do you write down what birds you have seen and on what date?"

"No. I just know. I don't have to write it down."

"Erik, you could help the scientists that study birds, if you would let them know what birds you saw and when and where you saw them. You can record all your observations on the internet at eBird.org. Thousands of people from all over the world are doing that. Each month they count over a million

birds. All of this information is critical to understanding many things about birds including migration and whether certain bird species are becoming rarer and rarer. Did you see any birds while you were walking yesterday?”

“Yes, I saw a Turkey Vulture, three Red-tailed Hawks, three Anna’s Hummingbirds, a Rufous Hummingbird, an Acorn Woodpecker, a Downy Woodpecker, six Steller’s Jays, two Western Scrub-Jay’s, two Oak Titmouses, thirty Bushtits, a White-breasted Nuthatch.”

“Wow, that is a lot.”

“I’m not done. I was only taking a breath.”

“Sorry, keep going.”

“A Brown Creeper, an American Robin, two Spotted Towhees, two California Towhees, two Western Tanagers, nine Black-headed Grosbeaks, two Bullock’s Orioles, and three Lesser Goldfinches.”¹

“That is amazing. Nineteen different species and you can remember them all. The scientists that study birds are called ornithologists and they would call you a ‘citizen-Scientist’ if you recorded all of your observations on eBird.org. Does that sound like something you would like to do?”

“I like birds and I would like to help the ornithologists.”

“OK. After we get home, but before I have to leave with TG, I will get you started on eBird.org. Then you will also be able to see what birds other people in your county or state have seen and what time of year they have seen them. That will help you be especially on the lookout for the species you haven’t seen yet.”

“I like birds and that would help me learn more about them.”

Stella was amazed and was now watching with her aunt and uncle. “Willard, thank you so much for all you have done with Erik. I knew he liked to read his bird book, but I did not realize all he knew about the birds.”

“Oh yeah.” Willard answered. “He sure knows his birds and his trees, too. He is always telling me about each bird that we see. Some, I had never heard of before and I’ve lived here all my life.”

* * * * *

“Herr Klas, we are on final approach into Hay Springs. The refueling should be done quickly so we can get back into the air in less than an hour.”

“Good. I want to get this over with before anyone is able to figure out what we are doing.”

Nervously Thor asked, “No one will ask what we are carrying, will they?”

¹ This list is from an eBird.org checklist observed in El Dorado county California on July 5th, 2008

“No, but if they do, I will just say we are delivering an artifact to the Air Museum in Sacramento.”

Once on the ground they were told to taxi to a refueling pad near the airport’s fuel storage tanks. One of them was marked AVGAS for the older non-jet aircraft to use.

It seemed everyone from the small airport stopped working and went over to the old B-17 to look it over. It was the first one to ever land at this airport. An old-timer said he had worked on one in Japan after the Korean War. He was too nose-y for Klas’ comfort. The pilot told him it was better to let the guy look around than to arouse his suspicions. The old-timer walked towards the pilot with a frown on his face. The pilot whispered to Klas, “This doesn’t look good.”

“Hey, you got some oil dripping out of the bomb bay doors. It is too thick to be lubricant. I’d say you have a napalm bomb in there that is leaking. Don’t know why you have one in there, but if you get an engine fire, you could all go up in a big orange ball of fire. Want me to find the leak and patch it?”

Stig calmly said, “Ahh, no. We don’t have far to go before we unload it for a customer, but thanks.”

“How big is it? You got Homeland Security clearance to transport it?”

Klas’s eyes nearly popped out of his head.

“My customer doesn’t want me to discuss it. He said he had taken care of the clearance.”

“OK, well good luck with it.” Then the old-timer left and went back to the office where he had been working.

“Get back in the plane, Herr Klas. Let’s get out of here.”

Chapter 6

Fireball

Ed's voice came on their Pads with an urgent sound to it. "Skip, I just got a call from the FBI. They were alerted that an old B-17 Flying Fortress out of Philadelphia is carrying an unauthorized napalm bomb – supposedly to an air museum in Sacramento. There is only one in that area and they are expecting the bird, but they know nothing about the bomb. The museum said they got a call late last night that the bird was coming. The FBI also said the bird's pilot and crew appear to be Swedes. Its course will take it slightly north of you, but that could be so they do not appear to be heading directly for the ranch."

"Good Lord. How are they going to stop the plane?"

"Skip, this is Jim. The FBI just called me, too. The two agents that brought in the Jones family are with me at the command car."

Ed came back on, "I am listening in on the FBI's attempts to call the B-17. Its radio was working when it took off from Hay Springs, Nebraska after refueling, but now they are refusing to answer. They have been informed that need to land at Reno or they will be shot down. There is no response from the bird."

"Wait!" Scott interrupted, "Dad, they said they can't scramble a jet from Nellis Air Force Base 200 miles away and shoot him down before he drops the bomb on the ranch. We are close enough and I have their permission to take out the B-17 with our sidewinders. Ed is calculating the exact time to launch. One problem is the fallout and the risk of starting another major forest fire. The Big Sur fire started less than three weeks ago and it is plenty dry down there. California has already lost over 1400 square miles to over 2000 fires just since June 20th. Thirty-eight of them are still burning. We don't want to add to their problems. Dad, do not cross the bridge with Erik until we get this resolved. The river will at least give you a fire break if it comes to that."

Ed had finished his calculations. "Skip, the B-17 is on a route to pass to the south of Reno. They are on a westerly path across the North-South center of Lake Tahoe at 32,000 feet. We will drop him there so if his fireball hasn't burned out by the time he splashes, he won't start a major forest fire."

Let's hope we won't coat the lake with unburned napalm either. The California DNR isn't happy about our options, but they understand it is the only choice. Dad has pushed us up to eight miles behind the target. We have 8.2 minutes before launch so we will just hang right here behind them where they can't see us. The sidewinder's range extends out to 22 miles so we are already within range. The only response from the bomber after being told to land is that they have gone to max thrust in an effort to deliver their load before someone takes them down."

Skip alerted the Sheriff, "Jim, get everyone, including you into the tunnel between the houses immediately. Be sure to tell them Erik is with me and is not in any danger. We will hunker down in the rocks, where Erik spent the previous night, to stay shielded from any debris that might reach us. We are all 50-60 miles down stream of where anything is expected to fall."

"Ten-4 Skip. I have already sent my team to get everyone to the safety of the tunnel."

"Continue to communicate using the TGPad. It will work underground to 150 feet."

"Will do. Thanks."

"Ed, don't worry about us. We are four minutes from Erik's bed rock. Pun intended."

"I caught it. I will be a bit busy keeping Dad updated with any changes in the distance to target."

The rescue team soon arrived near the old sealed mine. "Erik, we are going to stop here for lunch and some drinks. Do you remember this place?"

"Yes, this is where I found these pretty rocks," he said as he took them out of his pockets.

"Holy Cow, Erik! These are gold – real gold! Where did you find them?"

Ed said, "Really?"

"Ed, he has four rocks the size of baseballs that appear to be nearly pure gold! Jim, don't tell the family yet, but this should put them on Easy Street."

Erik had gone over to one of the piles of rocks. "Skip, here are some more rocks over here. They are too big for me to carry."

"Erik found an entire vein here that looks like it was exposed during that earthquake ten months ago. I spotted the land shift on the satellite's topology map from the plane when we were coming here from Chicago. This whole area was heavily mined in the 1850's and it was considered dry. This is a new discovery. Willard and Mildred will be rich. Maybe they will give Erik a finder's fee?"

Ed reported, "Two minutes to launch. Air traffic in Reno has cleared

the area without alerting anyone.”

Scott asked, “Don’t anyone in our plane move; keep the dog quiet; we can’t miss; too much at stake. We are armed, locked on, and ready. Ed, I have switched the launch command to your Com.”

“Got it. All looking good. All of the watercraft on Lake Tahoe is at the North and South ends of the lake. Fortunately there is no one, not even a water skier near the target’s expected glide path. Beginning count down.” At the one half second mark, there was a slight audible click as two missiles were dropped from their hangers under the wings. Then there were two streaks of fire straight out in front of the plane. Each missile had its own target, the inboard engine on each wing of the big four-engine bomber far out in front of them. Scott pulled up and to the right to avoid entering the impending fireball. Then he increased their speed so they could watch and confirm the hit or miss.

Ed had split his screen to watch the scene from the modified nose cone of each missile. From out of their left side windows the family watched as the two engines exploded, followed momentarily by a massive fireball that enveloped the entire image of the plane. The fireball grew to huge proportions before it began to arc down towards the earth. Lake Tahoe was still a few miles away but the fireball’s path was perfectly targeted to land one mile west of the near shoreline. They watched and were relieved to see the fire was nearly burned out when it splashed into the lake at the designated coordinates. The last of the debris extended only 0.7 miles to the west of the splash position.

All of the 911 switchboards in the area came alive at once. People were upset that they were getting busy signals.

Ed was elated that he had predicted everything perfectly. “That was fun!”

Scott yelled back an angry, “Killing is NEVER fun. Just remember that!”

“Sorry, I was speaking from the technical point of view.”

“There is always another point of view, but yes, you did an incredible job with all the factors you had to take into account. I was proud you created a safe zone for any bystanders and you took the environment into account, too.”

Skip added, “Awesome job, guys. I watched from the satellite feed. You were spot on. Jim, everyone can come out of hiding.”

Ed was still monitoring the FBI. “We were lucky the Golden Boys were on a path across such a large body of water. The FBI reports the leader, Herr Klas Fredriksen, and his next in line, Thor Thorsen, were in the plane along with one pilot. Jim, is witness protection still needed? With the

defendant and his leader both gone, there won't be a trial – no defendants.”

“We will let the FBI decide that,” Jim answered. “The gang obviously knew where everyone was located so we may want to keep up our guard in case of any retaliation. It may play into the FBI's ability to locate their obvious internal leak, too. Just to confirm Skip. You, TG and Erik are all OK?”

“We had our lunch, we found gold and the bomb was eliminated along with the bad guys. How could we not be OK?,” he said enthusiastically. “Scott, can you drop the ATV on the other side of the bridge?”

“We are on our way to that precise dropping spot.”

Ed added, “Will be there in 8.3 minutes. Then we will descend vertically to 10 feet from the deck for the drop. We will roll the ATV down the ramp so you won't have to catch it while it is still bouncing.”

“Thanks, I don't like to be anywhere near it when it is bouncing all over the place when you don't use the ramp. TG likes to ride in it so she will be glad to see you. I think Erik will be glad to ride, too. He acts like his feet are getting sore. How long is the ride back for us, Ed?”

“You will have 40% of the remaining distance at 2/3 power and the rest at full speed, if an old man like you can handle that.”

“Watch it kid! I can drive at full speed. I just complain when you drive at full speed with me on the back and we are traveling along a 35% incline. I will never forget that one.”

“Yeah, you were crazy screaming that time. I'm older now.”

“Not that much older. So what is our ETA?”

“Between 1130 and 1230 plus or minus.”

He tried, but he couldn't stifle a laugh. “I will try not to disappoint you. By the way, we will be weighed down with some major rocks.”

“Just don't dump out the extra gas cans so you can fill them up with rocks. We can always go back for more rocks later.”

“I promise.”

After they had carried bags of rocks across the bridge in two trips, Skip pointed up to the sky over the mountains. “Erik, look up there. That is our airplane. They are going to drop off an ATV for us to ride home on. There is too much other stuff, in the plane. So they can't just land and pick us up. But we will be home to see your Mother and your Aunt and Uncle, too, very soon after that.” Of course, he did not want Erik to see his dog in the plane just yet.

“It is a very special plane. See how it lands by going straight down!”

“Kind of like a hummingbird.”

“But without flapping its wings.”

“A hummingbird flaps its wings eighty times a second.”

They both watched as Scott skillfully lowered the plane to within ten feet of the ground as the loading ramp was descending. Then they watched as the ATV was eased down the ramp with a rope. When the ATV was on the ground, it was released from the rope by a magnetic release catch – much like the one Skip used on TG’s collar in the airport. Then the plane went up vertically, regaining altitude while the ramp was being retracted. When high enough, Scott rotated the jets into ‘forward’ position and they roared away.

“Erik and TG, let’s load up our gear and the rocks for the trip home.” TG kept a watchful eye to be sure each bag of rocks was properly secured to the ATV. After Skip and Erik were buckled in, she jumped on Skip’s lap and climbed up to her seat in front of Skip where she was also buckled in. Skip had her seat and his gauges mounted so TG had a full view of the landscape and he could still see all of his gauges. He even had an indicator that would alert him if Erik’s hands got too close to the unbuckling mechanism. As a safety precaution, Skip also had it magnetically locked as he didn’t know Erik well enough to be sure he wouldn’t make such a wrong move.

As they bounced along, Erik complained. Not about the ride, but that they were making so much noise that the birds were flying away too far in front of them. He couldn’t get close enough to be able to identify any birds. He had earphones in his helmet so Skip just apologized to him saying he was in a hurry so Erik and his mother could see each other.

Scott was already setting the plane down south of the barn at the ranch amid cheers from the two families and the many law enforcement people that were there. He shut down the jets before he opened the doors. As everyone started out, Beth said she would stay behind with the new puppy. After the passenger doors were shut again, she let the pup out of his carrying cage. She was immediately thanked with lots of kisses all over her face. She thought he was certainly a forgiving and happy dog after all he had been through that day. She was sure Erik would love him, too.

Jim searched through the crowd for a teenager. Not finding him, he asked his TGPad, “Ed aren’t you here?”

“I am still at my Com desk in the plane, Jim. You can come in, just don’t let the dog out.”

“Are you busy or is it OK if I come in to shake your hand?”

“Come on in, Jim. I am just monitoring the FBI channels and watching Grandpa bounce along in his little scooter.”

“Watch it young man,” came the voice from the ATV.

Jim found the “open door” lever and cautiously opened it watching for the dog. An “open door” alarm went off on Scott’s belt so he turned to confirm what he had heard on his TGPad. The whole team was never without them. “You must be Ed; I’m Jim,” he said extending his hand.

Ed jumped up from his seat and approached Jim with his arms out stretched. Hugging Jim he said, "I am so glad to meet you. Our family is big on hugs. Hope I didn't embarrass or alarm you."

"I can't begin to tell you how impressed I am with your ability to handle so many data inputs. And don't tell me that the computers do it all, because we both know that isn't true. By the way, I like hugs, too. It just caught me by surprise. We are trained to avoid being grabbed by someone."

"Beth is the one that put all this together," he said sweeping his arm in the direction of his desk. "She is in the next compartment with Erik's new dog. You can open that door."

Opening the door, he was met by a happy dog that had been listening to him from the next room. "What a cute dog! A Blue Heeler – Erik will love him. "Hi, Beth. Sorry but dogs come first. I am so glad to meet you, too."

He was greeted with another hug. He expected this one. Greeting him with a strong smile and pleasant voice, "I am pleased to meet you, too. I must say you caught on to the TGPAD options a lot quicker than most others have done."

"My son thinks he is a computer geek and he has been tutoring me. Wait until I tell him, if I may, what you have done here."

"Can you bring him in here? We will be here for a couple of days before we go over to my sister's dude ranch. Ed and I can show him some stuff we have done. Did you know we even control one of the FBI's satellites?"

"That blew my mind when I found that out. Did you, er, steal it or do they know about it?"

Beth laughed. "No, Dad has worked with them for several years on sensitive cases and he convinced them we could be even more efficient in helping them – meaning both more accurate and faster – if they would turn one over to us. Dad said he thought the Director would have a stroke over that one. But he finally relented. And now he has said several times he is glad he let us have one. Of course that acknowledgement came after I showed them how to improve the control they have on all of theirs."

"You are amazing. The whole team is amazing."

"And yet we wouldn't even be a team if Dad hadn't found TG. Correct that – TG hadn't found Dad."

"I only heard a little about TG from Stella. Then the report of the airport incident came in. When she got here she worked independently around the ranch before they headed out to look for Erik! But the things I saw her do on the TGPAD camera and the messages Skip reported receiving from her were all just amazing."

"Yeah, she is pretty special. She is always in motion. You should see

her with a tennis ball. That is when she really moves. Dad can't keep up with her in the field and has to slow her down when they are working. She needs to burn off excess energy with a tennis ball."

Willard's leg must have been feeling better. Either that or he was stubbornly determined to see that big plane just beyond his barn. "What's that thing called?" he asked Scott.

"It is a V/STOL specially modified Harrier Jump Jet that can take-off vertically unless it has a full load, in which case it needs just a short runway. We got it from the UK's Royal Air Force. It started out as a FA2 Sea Harrier and was modified to a GR.9A when it was equipped with Mark 107 Pegasus engines. We sent it back to Boeing and had it stretched and modified to handle passengers and some cargo, such as an ATV. Ours carries four Sidewinder air to air missiles and two Harpoon air to surface missiles. We can travel at Mach 1.0, but we don't go that fast over the continental USA. It is always being upgraded with the latest equipment; in fact we just got it back late yesterday after the latest improvement."

"From Boeing?"

"No from J-T Electronics® in Crivitz, Wisconsin. They installed a few more of my sister, Beth's electronic inventions."

"What was that?"

"I could show you, but you would have to ask either Beth or my son, Ed, to explain what they do."

"Ed runs your Command Desk, does he? He sounds like a real wizard."

"Yeah, I am pretty proud of him. I hope he stays with us after he finishes college, but I am afraid a major electronics company could entice him away from the team."

"Not a chance, Dad. I am having too much fun here!"

"He is always listening in. But, he could still change his mind before he is twenty." By now they were at the door to the plane. Suddenly Scott remembered Willard did not know about the puppy. "Ah, Willard, I will show you the inside later if that is OK. I need to go back and talk to Stella about something first." He had no idea what that would be, but he couldn't let the cat out of the bag – or was it the dog out...?

"That is OK. My leg might be more up to climbing that ladder by tomorrow anyway."

Whew, thought Scott. That was close. He headed back to the house while Willard walked around and under the plane.

The ATV was moving at three-quarter speed over the first 40% of their

trip. Skip was intent on showing his grandson he could still safely handle an ATV over rough terrain. They both knew, of course, their specially balanced tires and suspension could handle nearly any terrain at full speed. He just didn't know if Erik's stomach could handle the bumps at that speed. Skip's jacket was waterproof, but he just didn't want to deliver Stella's son to her if he had vomited all over himself because of Skip's driving. Besides, Ed would never let him live that down.

They were approaching smoother terrain and Skip would be cranking up the power for the rest of the ride.

* * * * *

FBI agents had invaded the Golden Boy's hideout just as the last of the gang members had arrived to try to figure out what their future strategies would be. Each was arrested as being a party to an attempted murder of fourteen persons. They also confiscated everything at Stig Gustavsen's air museum.

A team of special agents had assembled at a remote location without letting anyone else know of their whereabouts or mission. They were determined to identify the leak that allowed the Golden Boys to learn about the travel plans and destination of the Jones family in their witness protection program. After much discussion and many information flow diagrams, they found a common link to be one of their respected secretaries. After returning to their offices, their prime suspect was asked to type a memo containing false information that the gang would want to know. She did not know it was false and not knowing the gang had been rounded up, she attempted to contact them. Another FBI plant had infiltrated the gang and was at their headquarters to meet her when she delivered the information. Neither had ever seen the other before so she had no misgivings about passing the memo to a tall rugged looking blonde haired guy that met her. She, too, was arrested.

Ed had all of this information nearly as quickly as did the FBI Director. "Skip, great news!"

"Let me slow down a bit first. OK, go."

Ed gave him the news and Jim, who was back at his own Command car, heard it from Ed at the same time.

Jim replied first. "Thanks, Ed. I don't think the agents here know about it yet, OK if I tell them?"

Skip answered, "Sure, go put a feather in your cap. It is cool when a Sheriff can get one up on information the FBI agents should already have.

Ed, have you updated my ETA yet?"

"I was going to act surprised when you got here in six minutes. You are making good time. Not as good as I could do, but good anyway."

Skip muttered something about taking away some of Ed's toys.

"Just doing my job."

Still muttering, "I guess finesse will come with age. Wonder if I will live that long."

This time Scott had to step in. "OK, you two. Remember we are a team."

Ed said, "Sorry."

After a long pause, Scott asked, "Dad?"

"Does the President have to say sorry, too?"

"It would be nice."

"K - - sorry, Ed."

"Love ya, Grandpa."

"Me, too."

Hearing the apologies, Scott added, "Drive safe, Dad. You have valuable cargo in front of you and behind you."

Ed chimed in, "Say you're sorry, Dad."

Beth in a very disgusted tone said, "Cut it out guys. Just hurry, I want to see Erik with the package I have here."

"Doing' my best Beth. You like him? I cut out Erik's headphones so you can tell me about the dog."

"He is adorable and is already learning things that he will do on command. He is very bright and loves people."

"Let me know when he herds you and won't let you out of the plane. I am turning Erik's headphones back on so don't reply to that."

"OK."

Stella and Mildred and the Jones family were also walking around the plane as were the officers that were officially off-duty, but remained on the property to observe the reunion and celebration that would occur when Erik got there. Mildred excused herself and left to prepare dinner for all who were there. She already had most of it started and she wanted it ready when Erik got there. Skip's wife went inside to help her.

"Jim, they are only five minutes away. You might want to get everyone ready for their arrival."

"Thanks will do." He used his bullhorn. "Let's all come over here by the house. Erik will be coming over North Hill on an ATV with TG and Skip in just a few minutes. Stella, be sure you are in front of everyone."

He didn't have to tell her a second time. All eyes were glued on the top

of the hill.

Ed busied himself converting all of his critical feeds to his TGPAD so he could be outside and away from his Com Desk when they arrived. He reported to Skip that he was doing so.

TG flashed to Skip that they were getting very close. Skip told Erik they were almost home. As they rose over the last hill, they could see the ranch buildings and the house begin to appear. First it was just the roofs, then the upper portions of their walls, then . . . Wow, look at all the people! Erik strained to see his mother who was out in front of everyone waving her arms in the air.

Skip rechecked to be sure his belt locking mechanism dash lights were operational so that Erik wouldn't be falling off before they got there.

TG flashed, "Better slow down, Dad."

He flashed back to her, "I am already beginning to slow down." Then added, "When you are in front of me like this, does that make you a front-seat driver?"

TG flashed, "Just don't make any mistakes."

Chapter 7

Home

They came to an abrupt stop safely out in front of everyone and Stella began running toward them with the others right behind her. Skip triggered all of their seat belt releases at the same time and TG jumped to the ground. Skip turned around to help Erik off. Since there were so many people coming toward them, he hit a little used switch that lowered a cage over all of the hot engine and exhaust parts of the four-wheeler so nobody would receive a nasty burn from bumping into them. He told Ed, "Mark the time the rescue phase was completed."

TG ran towards Stella, barked, and then led her to Erik, who was running toward his mother.

Stella called out, "TG! Thank God! You got Erik!"

TG raced back to Erik, but stayed off to the side while he was embraced by his mother. TG ran around and barked and barked, telling the world Erik was safe at home.

Skip accepted a hug from Stella and a few others, but his objective was to get to the plane and see the new dog. He flashed, "TG come see Erik's new dog in the plane. You are going to have to train him." She raced ahead to the plane getting there before Skip.

They opened the door and went in to greet Beth and to see the new dog. The two sniffed each other as dogs will do. The Australian Cattle Dog or Blue Heeler as they are also known was about three-quarters the height of TG. An Australian Cattle Dog can be called a Blue Heeler or a Red Heeler, depending on its coloration. This one had black hairs closely interspersed in its white coat producing a bluish color. Its face was similar to TG's with a black mask and tan eyebrows and a narrow white splash running from his black nose between his eyes and ending at his forehead. He had tan on his legs. He almost looked as if he had been in a brief snowstorm. His ears were more erect than TG's.

TG didn't waste any time in starting him on his lessons. She flashed him to sit, stand up and turn around, then to lie down and roll over. The pup went through each of these leaving Skip wondering what the pup was doing. It looked as if he was doing any number of random things to gain TG's approval. When Skip asked TG what was going on, she flashed that he was

going to be easy to train and they were getting along fine.

Next it was time to see the reaction from Erik and Stella. “Let’s go outside, guys. TG, does the pup need a leash?”

“No, I’ll watch him,” she flashed. “Let’s go.”

Skip opened the door and told TG to take the pup to Erik. They were down the steps together and across the yard in a flash.

Erik and his mother were still hugging when he saw his rescuer come running towards him barking . . . and what was that other dog with TG doing here? TG did her best to present Erik with an image of him throwing a tennis ball for the new dog and another of them both in his bed together. It must have worked, because Erik let out a whoop. “Mom, it is my own dog. TG brought me my very own dog!” He bent down and the new dog jumped into his arms.

Stella looked first at the two of them, then at TG, then at Skip who was running toward her. “What? How? Who? Where?”

“Hold on Stella, one at a time. If you approve, this is Erik’s new dog. My team brought him here from an animal rescue group back in Wisconsin. They even brought dog food with them for the pup.”

“Can I keep him, Mother?” came a pleading question.

“Of course, if it is all right with Willard.”

Skip winked at Willard and said, “Willard already knows about it and of course it is OK.” Skip was guessing that Willard would approve, but from what he already knew about him, he was not worried about his assumption.

“But the cost of raising a dog?”

Skip asked her to wait a minute while he talked to Willard. He motioned for Willard to go over to the ATV with him. Willard was moving on his bum leg fairly well by now. “Willard, I have some bags of rocks over here that I want you to look at. Erik found them over by the old sealed off mine.” Then he opened the first bag. He had to grab the old guy to keep him from falling down. Willard’s eyes were wide open – even in the bright sunlight, his jaw had dropped and both of his knees were shaking.”

“Erik found gold over there?”

“Yep. Lots and lots of it. Most of the rocks were too big for us to even try to pick up. The earthquake back in September last year apparently exposed a vein that had never been discovered until now. It is all on your property – just waiting to be hauled off to the refinery.”

“I can’t believe it. This whole area was gone over with a fine tooth comb over 100 years ago. It was declared dried up. All of these bags are the same?”

“Yep.”

“These are each worth hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars.

This is just incredible. Now we can afford the best teachers for Erik. Mildred and I always wanted to do something for him and now we can. Oh my gosh, Mildred! Does she know?"

"No, only my team and the Sheriff know about it. But the word will spread really fast once it gets out. It could trigger a repeat of the 1850's. So be extra careful you have security in place before you let anyone know about your find."

"Erik's find."

"But it is on your property."

"Let me take one of these baseball size nuggets to show Mildred."

"Be sure she isn't carrying anything hot when you show her," Skip called after him.

Willard selected a rock and hobbled off to the ranch house. He wasn't inside more than a few seconds when everyone heard her scream. The Sheriff went running inside to see what the commotion was all about. He came back out with a big smile on his face.

Skip went over to Stella and explained that Mildred and Willard had some really good news for her.

"Oh? I was afraid they were upset about the dog."

"No, quite the opposite. Go in and see what they are so excited about. I will be out here with Erik." He called over to Erik. "Hey Erik. What are you going to name your new dog?"

"Spy."

"Oh? Why Spy?"

"Well my Dad was a spy for the FBI and so I want my dog to be a spy, too."

"That is a really good name for a dog. It is nice and short, it has a nice distinctive tone to it, and he has a mysterious silvery touch to his coat. I think that is a really great name. Now, how would you like it if TG would train Spy so he becomes able to read your mind, just like TG reads mine?"

"That would be nice. Then I could do the things with Spy that you do with TG!"

"Sure, he could learn that much. He is a very smart dog. It might take a few more years of training before he gets as good as TG, but it is something that you can both do together. I enjoy training with TG. I have to learn what to tell her and how to tell it to her before we can do it together. Dogs do not really have to learn a lot of things. The key to everything with dogs is that we have to learn to communicate with them. I just know you and Spy will be a great team. He will always be at your side and you will learn a lot together.

"Let's go in and eat first. Your Aunt has fixed up a great meal for us. Now your first lesson with Spy is 'Do not feed him anything off your plate

while you are eating.’ You don’t want him begging for food from the table.”

People were beginning to move towards the house. Mildred had survived the shock of learning they had a lot of gold and her nurturing instincts had kicked in again. She was calling everyone in.

After dinner, Skip excused himself to go outside. He wanted to be sure TG had a good meal after smelling all that good food. Then he called Rene at her ranch.

“Hey cowgirl, how is it going?”

“This is a dude ranch Dad, not a cattle ranch. I’ve been following all the excitement today. We could see the fireball Scott made all the way down here at the south end of the lake. Remember when we watched the astronauts launch when we were fifty miles away in Orlando just before dawn that morning? It was kind of like that except they went straight up – chased by a fireball. Scott’s fireball looked more like a red falling star.”

“What have the news services said about it?”

“Every TV station in the area interrupted their programming. Everybody got excited, but nobody knew whether it was space debris or what. The FAA was not reporting any missing planes. The news reporters just talked and talked about it, but didn’t have anything to say. I am still watching them repeat and repeat the same thing over and over again. Oh, wait. Some guy caught it on his cellphone camera. It is very faint and very shaky, but the station enhanced it and is reporting now that a plane was shot down over the lake . . . and says a very bright colored plane was following it when it was shot down. There is no confirmation from any law enforcement agencies. Will you get in trouble for this, Dad?”

“No, besides Ed recorded the instructions we received from the FBI. So the FBI will probably request the images from the media and the guy with the cellphone. Then it will all go quiet. We have done this before – just never in such a public area. But we are OK and legal. That bomb the gang was planning to drop here would have caused an even greater commotion. It would have left a catastrophic impact on Erik. He probably would have never recovered from it.”

“I was watching him and TG on our Pad last night. He is so cute. Hey Dad, I was going to call you. I was wondering if I could trailer Gambler over to their ranch and see how Erik would react to riding him. Gam-gam is a Polish Arabian and he is very gentle with kids; he loves them. I researched it last night and found that some autistic kids make significant motor, mental, and vocal progress after a series of riding lessons. OK if I bring Gam over tomorrow?”

“That is an awesome idea. But what about Erik’s new dog, Spy? I

don't have any reports from H.O.P.E. on his comfort level with horses. Guess they don't have any horses in downtown Racine so they couldn't check him out."

"Dad, are you kidding? Australian Cattle Dogs were bred to work in close proximity with horses. Gambler has met several of them and loves them."

"That settles it, see you tomorrow then. Can we still all go to your ranch in a couple of days? I want TG to be comfortable with Spy's abilities before we leave here."

"We are all set for whenever you get here. My master chef, Julia, is planning on some special meals for everyone. She is very excited to meet you, too."

"Perfect. You plan as well as Ed does and he is incredible. It must be something in the genes."

Erik's family and the Jones' family were all still in the house getting acquainted. This was the first that Erik realized he would have another boy his age in the house next to his. At the same time David was beginning to see that this autistic boy he had heard about was not so strange after all. In fact he was downright interesting. Erik had lost his father and David's father saw it happen. In some way it made a permanent bond between them. It was a connection no one else could ever duplicate or want to. They probably would not talk about it, but they both knew this was an unbreakable bond that would last forever.

David was beginning to understand that Erik did not display his emotion like other people did. But that did not mean he didn't have any emotion. After all he did see Erik's pain of being lost last night on the TGPad. And he also saw Erik's joy when TG ran up to him. David liked Erik's new dog and he was looking forward to playing with both of them, going for hikes together, and just getting to know them both.

David missed his friends back in Philadelphia. The FBI had already moved him several times – once he had to live separated from his parents for a while. But this was supposed to be their last move, away from his friends and almost away from anybody special. At least that is what he had expected when they moved his family to a big ranch out in the middle of nowhere. David was in just these last few hours, beginning to realize this was not going to be so bad after all. He liked the ranch house they were living in. His room was huge in contrast to any other house he had ever lived in. He was already enjoying the chickens and the possibility of having other animals later in the year brought even more excitement to his life. And now he was already becoming friends with Erik – a boy his own age. And Erik's dog, Spy, too.

This might just turn out to be a good move after all.

Chapter 8

Lessons

Back in the house, Skip announced, “TG will be training Spy for a couple of days and I expect he will eventually be able to communicate with the boys nearly as well as you have seen TG communicate with me. We can get started if the boys and dogs will go outside with me now. Boys, you do not have to do anything special. We are going to let TG take over as the teacher. I will be there to interpret her instructions to you both. Ready? Let’s go.” He turned to go out then turned his head back to the family and said, “You are invited to watch if you would like.”

The boys followed him out eager to watch Spy learn. TG stood in front of Erik and barked at him. He was surprised and wondered what he had done wrong. “Erik,” Skip said, “she is complaining that you did not tell Spy to come out with you. With smart dogs like these you can say Come, Come-on, Let’s go, Outside, or anything like that. You do not have to say the same thing every time either. Just be sure to talk to Spy like you would to David.”

Erik surprised Skip with, “Spy, come with me and do what TG says.”

“Good Erik. Always keep up a conversation with Spy.”

TG told Spy to remember what Erik said and all Skip had said and to always respond to any of those words by following Erik.”

TG began the lessons by telling Skip what she wanted Spy to do with Erik. Skip relayed TG’s messages to Erik. Erik told them to Spy. And TG told Spy what to do when he got those messages from Erik. In this manner TG led Erik to communicate with Spy through a large number of commands, repeating each of them twice. Then they went through all of these commands with David and Spy.

Then she wanted Erik to pick any of the things they had learned and Erik should tell Spy what to do. But this time, she did not tell Spy anything. Skip knew this and both he and TG were very pleased with Spy’s ability to learn to interpret Erik’s commands so quickly. This, too, went very well with David and Spy.

TG kept pushing the boys to do more. TG told Skip to just let them say anything they wanted to Spy without using any of the commands they had learned. She wanted to see how well Spy could understand them. Skip told TG that first he wanted to teach both of the boys to send non-verbal images to

Spy.

“Erik and David, your lessons are going really really well. Spy is able to understand your words. Now let’s move to the next level where he is able to read your thoughts. This might be a little harder, but I know you can do it.”

They both said they were ready. The family had been in awe watching what was developing before their eyes. One of the deputies said it took him two eight-week sessions at their dog training club to get his dog to respond like Spy was already responding. Skip heard him and said their rapid progress today was because TG was the teacher of both the dog and the boys. In general dogs learn faster from dogs than they do from humans and the reason is dogs utilize mental signals and humans usually do not know how to do that. Now, he was going to teach the boys how.

Skip told the boys, “Now I want you to make believe that you are watching a movie. Spy is in your movie and he is running around just exactly the way he is right now. But try to think of what you are seeing as a movie in your thoughts. Work on that for a while. Now change your movie so that Spy is walking toward you and he sits in front of you. If you can concentrate very clearly on the movie that is going on in your mind, Spy will be able to ‘see’ it, too. Erik first. Get your movie picture in your mind very clearly with Spy walking toward you and sitting in front of you.”

Everyone gasped as Spy did exactly what Skip had told Erik to visualize.

“Perfect, Erik! You did it on the first try. That was awesome. Now praise Spy. Rub his ears and his tummy and let him know that he did that perfectly! Then ‘release’ him with ‘OK’.”

“Good boy, Spy. You are such a good boy. I love you! OK, boy.”

Stella said, “Oh Skip, it is working, it is working, you did it!”

“No, Erik and TG and Spy did it. We will work on this for a couple of days and get into as many different situations as TG and I can think of. Spy is really an exceptional dog! OK, David, now it is your turn.” David had been waiting. Before Skip finished his sentence, Spy went running to David and promptly sat in front of him. Then, he too, praised Spy – rubbing him down and he remembered to release Spy with an “OK.”

“Awesome job, guys. Erik did you notice David sent Spy a picture of Spy running toward him. When you think of a movie like this, you are sending Spy a picture – at least that is the way I describe it. So from now on you can both tell Spy what you want with your words and tell him with a picture, too. Both methods work equally well in your communication with Spy. But if you tell him using both methods at the same time, the two of you will get to a superior level of understanding each other even quicker. And,

the sending of pictures works no matter how far away Spy is. Here let me demonstrate with TG. TG, go run around to the other side of the barn and wait for a message.”

TG ran around the corner of the barn.

“David, I will let you decide. What do you want TG to do when I call her back? She could just sit in front of me, roll over when she gets here, jump into my arms, or anything else you can think of. Tell me very quietly so she doesn’t hear you. She just told me she is ready.”

David thought for a moment then requested just barely loud enough for the families to hear, “Have her run to you then jump into your arms and lick your face.”

“You are right. I didn’t have a shower this morning.” Everybody laughed, and then watched to see what TG would do. To make it more dramatic, Skip raised his arm while he was mentally sending TG images of what David wanted her to do. Then he dropped his arm to let everyone know he had finished sending the images to TG and she was on the return run. She came tearing around the corner of the barn at full speed, leaning into the turn and throwing dirt off the side like a water skier throws water in a tight turn. Skip did not want to raise his arms to catch her or the onlookers would think he was giving her hand signals to jump on him. Skip gauged her speed and tried to brace himself as she was not slowing down. TG hit him hard. Skip went over backwards and TG rode his chest on the way down. When the dust settled she was licking his face just as David had wanted. People didn’t know whether to laugh at the comical sight or run to see if he needed help.

“I guess she was as anxious to show off as I was,” he said after he had caught his breath.

Deputy John, who was still there said, “That is how TG took down the terrorist in the airport – except she hit him in his back. The guy didn’t have any warning that she was coming.”

Skip added, “And TG snarled at him when he was down instead of licking his bloody face.”

David said he was so sorry to have caused that.

“You only told me what she should do when she got here. You didn’t have anything to do with the force that she used.”

“Well, yes I did and I am sorry if she hurt you. I sent an image of her jumping on you hard.”

“TG did you get both messages? . . . You did, you show off, didn’t you? Next time first get me a mattress to land on.” Skip got up and rubbed his back.

Addressing the group, he said, “At least you should now believe that we can all – everyone can communicate with most dogs by sending them

mental images. I have successfully done this with nearly every adult dog I have ever met. They do not need to be one of the more intelligent breeds.”

Someone said, “I would like to try this with my dog at home, but.”

“If you want to do this at home with your dog, you can do it without TG’s help. Just start slowly by sending an image of something they have already done with you. If you want them to go for a walk with you, visualize putting on their collar or leash. Don’t say anything and don’t do anything – just visualize it until they respond correctly. Then praise them while you put on their collar or leash. After you become successful with sending a few images like this, your dog will begin sending you images of what they want from you. Be very sensitive to listening or watching for their images. Then let them know they have communicated successfully with you. If they asked you to do something that you can’t agree to, just tell them ‘No, not right now’, but be sure to let them know their message came through. It is important to be sensitive to their wishes if you want to develop your level of communication with them to a superior level. When you and your dog can communicate like this, you will feel like someone just awarded the two of you a blue ribbon. It is a wonderful feeling!”

Skip was satisfied he had taught not just the boys, but a few other people how to develop a communication with their dogs. That made him feel good. He grinned just thinking about it.

“I have a surprise for the boys. The rest of you need to hear it so you will know what is happening when a horse trailer gets pulled in here tomorrow.” People looked back and forth at each other. Skip had already proved himself to be full of surprises with finding Erik so quickly, TG’s abilities, the team’s electronics, shooting down a B-17, bringing in a load of gold, and teaching all of them how to communicate better with their own dogs. They listened to see what was going to happen with the horse trailer. “My daughter is bringing in her old gentle horse, Gambler, and will be giving the boys riding lessons tomorrow. Then if they like that and want to continue with the lessons after tomorrow, someone can drive them over to her dude ranch at Lake Tahoe two or three times a week for more riding lessons. These are all free of charge as her contribution to the boys’ enrichment. And Spy can go with them. It is going to be very important that Spy is included in everything that Erik does.

A war hoop went up from the boys along with shouts of “awesome”, “cool”, “way to go” from them and “amazing”, “wonderful”, “I can’t believe it”, etc. from the adults. Both of the boys thanked Skip and gave him big hugs.

He went over to Dorothy Jones and asked her to walk with him a short distance from where David was. “Would it be alright with you if I found a

compatible dog for David? Erik is going to need the constant companionship of Spy, but David is so good with a dog that he should have one, too.”

“He loved working with Spy today so we were going to ask you for your opinion and recommendations of what kind of dog we should get for him.”

“Great! I will work on that right away.” He walked over to Ed. “We need to get David a dog, too. Call H.O.P.E. and see what they would recommend. If the plane is ready Scott could either run back to Racine now or ask if H.O.P.E. has any local contacts where we can get a herding dog from around here. It should preferably be a spayed female Blue Heeler or Border Collie that does not look like either Spy or TG.”

“H.O.P.E. offered us Spy’s litter mate when we picked up Spy. She meets your description. I’ll call and see if the dog is still available and we can pick her up tonight. We could be back in the morning if Mark can meet us in Racine. Dad will have had too much stress today so I won’t let him pilot the full round trip. Mark could fly the plane back here from Racine.”

“Can Mark just pick up the dog in Racine with the chopper and then continue on to here tonight? He could refuel in Racine and again in Hay Springs, Nebraska. It would be nice if a team member thanked the old-timer there in person for us. We will have both of our planes here, but then we will have more room when we all return home.”

“That will be great. Mark had wanted to come, but backed out when he realized we would be full on the return trip. I’ll call H.O.P.E. right away.”

“OK, I will call Mark with a heads up.”

Before Skip was finished talking to Mark on the TGPad, Ed broke in, “When can you be in Racine, Mark? We have the dog. I have H.O.P.E. on the phone and I want to give them an ETA.” For Ed, ETA did not mean ‘estimated time of arrival’; it meant ‘exact time of arrival’!

“Tell them I will pick up the dog at 1800. I can play with the dog while the ground crew is topping off my tank. The flight time to the ranch is four hours and twelve minutes plus a half hour at Hay Springs to refuel and give the old-timer a TG SAR coffee mug.”

“Skip cut in, “Mark, give him one of our boxed ‘Thank You’ plaques, too.”

“Roger on the plaque, too. So I will be requesting clearance from Ed for landing at the ranch at 2052 hours PDT.”

“We will have one very eager and happy kid waiting for you and his new dog!”

“I love these humanitarian flights, Skip. Hey, any chance we can give the kids a chopper ride tomorrow?”

“Certainly, as long as we can get in our dog training classes too. Rene

is bringing her horse over to give the kids some riding lessons. We might have to wait on the air ride until she is on her way home with Gambler. I don't know how he would react to our bird taking off so close to him. You are not especially quiet, you know."

"I am rolling the Bell out of the hanger right now – see you soon."

"Thanks Mark. I am really glad you are going to be here with us. See you soon."

Skip went over to David with a grin on his face. "David, everyone could see today just how much you love dogs. Our team has another plane, a jet helicopter that will be here later tonight. The pilot, Mark, is bringing you something special - - your own dog!"

Dorothy could see the excitement building on David's face as Skip was talking. When Skip got to the word 'dog', he erupted with a "YES!" He was so happy that he started crying. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you. Is it a boy or girl? What kind of dog? Is it smart like Spy and TG? What does it look like? What is its name?"

"Whoa – slow down. It is Spy's sister. They were both rescued from a Humane Society Clinic in Ohio that already had too many dogs. My friends in Racine, Wisconsin run an animal rescue shelter called H.O.P.E. Safehouse. They sent some people to the clinic in Ohio and they brought back sixteen cats and seven dogs, two of them were Spy and his sister. In Racine they were put into foster care with families that would love them and evaluate them to see what kind of families they could fit into. Spy and your dog were given top scores for intelligence and suitability with kids. They stayed with the foster family longer than usual though, because before H.O.P.E. would approve of a family to adopt them, the family needed to have lots of land for the dogs to run in. H.O.P.E. was disappointed yesterday when I said I only wanted one of the dogs. But now they are just as happy as you are that Spy's sister is coming to live with you. In fact this is an even better living arrangement than if I had given Erik two dogs. Each one, now, will have its own owner and yet they can both grow up together. If you two boys aren't playing with them, they will be able to play with each other."

David was so excited he could not stand still.

"Let's see, you also asked about color and name. You can name her just like Erik named Spy. She looks like Spy, but she has red hairs where Spy's black hairs are. Because of that she is called a Red Heeler, but really they are both Australian Cattle Dogs. You should see her first before you give her a name. Or better yet, you can try this. When you see her, mentally ask her what her name is." David gave him a questioning glance. "Don't look so surprised. She had a name before she went to the clinic, but I don't know what it was. And the foster family gave her a name, and I don't know

what that is either. If you are as good at mentally communicating with a dog as I know you are, she will probably tell you what she wants to be called. But whether she tells you or not, it is your decision as to what her name will be. I am so proud of you, David; this is a day you will never forget!”

“Mom, she sounds really cute, too.”

Dorothy shook her head back and forth slowly. “This is a really wonderful new beginning for us. We have all been under such pressure since Erik’s father was killed. I wish we could forget all those horrible months. We hoped coming here would help relieve the pressure. Then when we got here, we heard what you and TG were doing to help.”

Skip interrupted, “I knew the moment you got onto the plane in Chicago that you were in the witness protection program because I recognized the two agents with you. Then when TG stopped the Sacramento terrorist, the pieces began to come together. The next day when the FBI identified the B-17 that was headed here, we were lucky to have our plane right behind them. The FBI gave my son a special code with authorization to shoot it down and our team ended your fears by eliminating all the bad guys involved.”

“How did the FBI know your plane was right there?”

“We have worked with them a lot and we let them constantly electronically monitor our whereabouts.”

“You have certainly changed everything for the better for us. We are so grateful!”

Turning to David, “You certainly have been good with Erik in just a short time. Where did you learn so much about autism or are you just an exceptionally kind person?”

“He is both, Skip. He knew about Erik, of course, so he has been reading everything he can about autism.”

“If I had known that, I would have asked you to join me and TG on our search. I had several questions along the way and you would have been extremely useful.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“I have a few other things to accomplish today along with loving up TG for all she has done. I will see you later when your dog gets here.”

“Can I tell Erik I am getting a dog, too?”

“Absolutely.”

David went running off to find Erik. He spotted Spy first so he knew right away where Erik was. “Erik, I am getting a dog, too. And you won’t believe this, but I am getting Spy’s sister! They grew up together.”

Erik was animated by the news. “Then we can both go for walks with our dogs! When will you get her?”

“All Skip said was it would be tonight and it would come on a

helicopter. This is going to be so cool. I hope TG will help me train my dog, too.”

Skip walked with Willard and the Sheriff over to where the ATV was parked. “Jim, what should we do with all these rocks to keep them safe? I would like to unload as soon as possible. We always strive to be ready for any new requests when they come in.”

“I checked with my sources and found Willard has several options. The most lucrative is to sell nuggets to tourists, but that could involve some processing – probably with hydrofluoric acid, which is nasty stuff. Another is to just store it somewhere safe and wait until the money is needed. The least lucrative is to send it to a refinery. There are other options, but most are a variation of these.”

Willard considered the options before he responded. “Apparently you knew about the gold before I did. Well, I don’t want to have any of that acid around the boys and we certainly don’t want a bunch of tourists here, so I am comfortable with the refinery.”

Skip explained he had told Jim and asked him to keep it quiet until some plans were in place. Besides that he did not think Willard would believe him without seeing the gold for himself.

Willard said, “Thank you for bringing so much gold back. You are right. If you had only brought one rock, I probably wouldn’t have believed you when you said there was a lot of gold out there.”

“But now you do?”

“I sure do.”

“Will you be able to get a mining company in here to get the rest? You will want to have someone in place before you send these rocks to the refinery or looters will wipe you out. I will put the bags into the barn so you can keep them out of sight until then. I need to drive the ATV down to the plane to gas up. We carry extra fuel onboard for the ATV. We can drop the bags off in the barn. Care for a ride back?”

“Thanks, my leg is beginning to complain again.”

Mike said, “I will just walk back to the squad, Skip. Thanks. I need the exercise.”

The ATV roared to life and Skip drove Willard back to his house. After Willard was helped off, Skip drove into the barn to unload before refueling. Scott was already inspecting the plane when he got there.

“Guess we lost a couple of things on that flight, Dad.”

“I see that – one from under each wing. How did they perform?”

“They went to their targets like following a wire. Ed’s timing was perfect. I am so darn proud of him.”

“He certainly is a tremendous asset. Does it bother you that he is in a command position over you?”

“Nah, he is very professional. We all have our jobs and we are all team members. Oh sure, we can see the teenager show up in him sometimes, but his command decisions are always right on the money.”

“I considered having you fly back to get the second dog, but he wouldn’t let you make the round trip in the pilot seat. He said you had too much stress today.”

Looking at his Dad, “He said that about me?”

“Does that bother you?”

Scott pursed his lips and thought for a moment. “I feel I could fly the round trip, but . . . strictly speaking the FAA wouldn’t want me making that return leg. So, like I said, he is very professional.”

“Sorry, but I had to ask. Some companies do not let family members work anywhere near each other, but nearly every employee here is a relative. Mark isn’t, but we consider him as part of the family. He has been a really close friend of yours for many years.”

“Yeah, we were best friends in the military and still are. You put together a great team, Dad. I love my job.”

“And you are excellent at it!”

“Thanks.”

“Can we gas up the ATV when you are done with your inspection?”

“Yep. Will do. I will take care of it. Looks like it needs a bath, too.”

“There are hoses on the side of the barn and in back of the chicken coop.” Skip went to spend some time with his wife, Mae. After asking her about the flight and denying TG had hurt him when he was knocked down, they made sleeping arrangements for their crew. Mark would be needing a bunk, too.

It was nearing supper time and Mildred was calling everyone in. Skip fed TG before the three of them went inside. Mildred had prepared enough food for a small army. She was a great cook.

Afterwards, TG took two tennis balls to Skip. He laughed at the sight of her with them both in her mouth. She told him that one was for Spy. They had not been playing very long before Spy and the boys came outside, too. TG pushed the ball they were not using over to Erik. Soon there were balls flying in several directions with Spy and TG happily running back and forth. David watched with glee and anticipation knowing in a few hours, he would have his own dog to play with.

The dogs never tire of playing with tennis balls although Erik was not throwing Spy’s ball as far as he was when they started out - - he was getting tired.

Ed had been getting supplies out of the Harrier and he was putting bright lights out onto the ground. It was almost an hour before it would be getting dark, but they were bright even in the daylight. He outlined a big square with the lights. Then he spray painted a large bright blue fluorescent “X” right in the middle. The dust made a small cloud as the spray hit the ground. David knew he was marking a landing zone for the chopper that was bringing his dog to him. This was the first time that he noticed Ed looked to be almost the same age as he was – maybe a year older – maybe not. He was surprised because Ed had such an important job with the search and rescue team. He even gave orders to the Sheriff. Maybe tomorrow he would ask Ed how he was picked for that job.

He heard a buzz coming from Ed’s TGPad and noticed the screen was flashing. Ed was getting a call from someone.

“Go, Mark.”

“TG-2 inbound to ranch. Request permission to land.”

“It is only 2051, you are early. Landing zone marked and ready. Your closest obstacle is the northwest corner of the barn. Everything else is all flat, no trees, no wires. And you won’t be close enough to blow the feathers off the chickens.”

“Anybody down there looking for a really wonderful dog?”

David heard that and wanted to yell, “YES,” but he tried to be as business-like as Ed was.

“David is right here with me, Mark. You will be surprised with his dog handling ability. He has already successfully communicated with TG and Spy.”

“He will be awesome with this little girl. I have been communicating with her during the flight. She is good!”

“I have you in sight. Wind is calm for touch down.”

The sound of the helicopter blades beating the air brought the family out onto the porch to watch it land. David was allowed to be as close to the landing pad as Ed and watched eagerly for the moment when the door would open after the blades stopped and the dust settled. Then it happened. Mark opened the door and out jumped a red dog. David was already sending her a message to come to him, but he knelt down and put out his arms to reinforce the message. “Come here, Pepper.” The new dog made a bee-line for him and they greeted each other like long lost friends.

Later Skip asked him, “I thought you were going to ask her what her name was?”

David said he did that before the chopper landed. Mark seemed a bit surprised and added that Pepper was the name the foster family had given her.

They named her Red Pepper, because it looked like she had been coated with red pepper. But they only called her Pepper.

“Fantastic David, good job! You two are well on your way to bonding if you can communicate like that with her already. Play with her for a little while then see if you can get her calmed down for the night. Show her where her food and water dishes are in your house and especially where your bed is. She is pretty fired up after seeing that Spy is here, too. But if you take her inside, she will calm down. Good night, I will see two dogs and two boys in the morning for some more TG lessons.”

“Good night, Skip. Thank you again. She is perfect!”

Inside Dorothy said to both Dale and David. “I don’t even want to think about how much that cost. Having a dog flown in from across the country must have cost them a fortune.”

Dale added, “And they won’t take any money for it. I talked to Skip and they just take delight in doing this sort of thing for people.”

Morning came and the two mothers both found their boys in their beds – each curled up with a dog. At the same time, but in different houses, each said, “Isn’t that cute!”

After breakfast, both boys ran outside with their dogs. Skip was already outside playing ball with TG. “Good morning guys. Are you ready for some lessons from TG? Let’s start off by giving your dogs a release. Tell them OK and give them a pat to let them know you are not giving them any commands. TG wants you to just walk around and do what ever you want to do. She will be telling your dogs what they should be doing.”

Spy and Pepper wanted to play with each other and go off for a run. TG was busy with them. Sometimes she gave verbal barks to one or the other. If they strayed too far from the boys, TG ran and hit them with her shoulder to spin them around towards the boys again. They could play, but they had to stay near the boys or TG would correct them.

Others were coming out of the houses to watch. Skip had to explain to the first few, but they took pride in being able to explain TG’s actions to others as they came out. Even after the pups were playing and not getting any corrections from TG, everyone was being brought up to date with how the lessons were progressing.

TG told Skip to have the boys go in separate directions. Skip relayed that to the boys and added that TG would be watching to make sure their dogs would stay with them.

It was almost comical to watch the pups. They stopped playing when the boys walked away from them. They looked back and forth between the two boys then separated and trotted off with their new friends. TG said to

Skip, "That went well!"

"Yes it did. Are you ready to have Spy herd Erik back when he gets too far away?"

TG responded that first the boys should walk together, away from the central area by the barn before Erik walks away without David. She wanted Spy to know the difference and that Erik didn't need to be herded if he was with David or some other person.

Skip called the boys back from their separate directions and told them to walk out towards North Hill. After they got out a ways, they should turn around and come back. They started out and the two dogs were delighted to be going on a walk with their friends. TG followed about twenty feet behind them watching carefully. Everything went just exactly as it should.

When they got back, Skip told Erik that he should walk toward the hill with Spy, but without David or Pepper. He warned Erik that Spy was going to "protect" him from getting lost. He was not sure just how Spy was going to react to a command from TG to herd Erik back home, so he said Spy might just walk in front of him and then stop and block him from going any farther or bark at him or he might hit Erik in the leg with his shoulder, or, and he hoped this wouldn't happen, but Spy might nip at his pants leg. He just wanted Erik to not suddenly think his dog didn't like him anymore; Spy was just doing his job. He emphasized Spy was going to protect him and will make sure he does not get too far away and get lost again.

When he felt Erik fully understood that Spy was going to take charge, he let Erik walk toward the hill with Spy.

Everyone held their breath knowing that this was a crucial turning point in Erik's life. Spy would be his protector and best friend, if this worked. At 500 feet, TG flashed to Skip that she was going to tell Spy to turn Erik around now. Skip said to everyone, "Here we go. Pray that this works."

Spy was happily trotting off with his friend, sniffing this and that, looking over to Erik and giving him that special doggy smile. Then he got the message from his instructor, TG. His Australian Cattle Dog genes kicked in immediately. He barked one shrill bark that Erik had not heard from him before. Then Spy rubbed along one of Erik's legs and put pressure on it so when Erik lifted his leg to take a step, it was pushed across in front of him. Erik had to turn; he couldn't help it. Spy was turning him gently around.

Skip heard nearly everyone gasp in unison. "He did it. Spy did it. Erik turned around. Who'd have thought?"

Stella was crying with joy. "Thank God!"

Skip said to himself, "Yep and that's her name."

To the Reader

Thank you for reading my first fiction book. I hope you have enjoyed reading it at much as I enjoyed writing it. Did you laugh where I laughed? Did you cry where I cried? Let me know.

It is common to find mistakes in books. It does not matter whether they are school texts, non-fiction, or fiction. The careful reader will frequently find mistakes. I have left four known mistakes in this book. Perhaps I should call them “errors” as they are not mistakes if I intended to leave them in here. Let me know what you think they are. You will not get a prize, but you may be the first to find them all and if you are, I will acknowledge you in a future book as a sharp reader. Please note that I took some liberties with the geography of El Dorado County California and moved some of its features where they do not belong – these are not included in my list of errors. Also, I do not have as many children nor grandchildren as mentioned in the book – that is not in my list of errors, either. If you search hard enough, you may discover some that I did not know existed (errors, not relatives.) Let me know.

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