

Chapter One

As a newborn puppy, Ivan felt he consisted of only a nose and a mouth. His eyes were not yet open; nor were his ears. His nose sniffed the scent of his mother's milk, and his mouth pulled him toward it. He bumped this way and that, opening wide to latch onto whatever faucet he could find. He had five siblings, and there were eight milk stations, enough for everyone. After each meal, his mother flipped him over and lapped at his belly with her tongue, which caused his bladder to release and his bowels to empty. The sensations provided marvelous relief. Human hands picked him up, snuggled him to their faces, and he sniffed their odors.

Although his body was brand new, his spirit was ancient. He could still recall leaving his beloved guardian angel, Surri the meerkat, and the other spirit guides in Dog Heaven. They had waved good-bye to him, the swirling, blue light backlighting their various animal images. Surri's meerkat form had radiated beams of gold, white, and purple.

As Ivan's spirit entered his newborn body, he was aware of his intent, in this next life, to become a rescue dog of such magnitude that he would end his series of Earth-bound lifetimes and take a leadership position in Dog Heaven. He was fully conscious, even as he gasped to rid his tiny air passages of amniotic fluid, that this would be his most exceptional lifetime of all, the one that would allow him to remain in his non-physical state for eternity.

His heart felt huge with the knowledge that Sarah would once again be his owner, the focus of his existence. He fought to hang onto this Heavenly mind-set while looking toward this physical re-birth, perhaps his thousandth over the course of millennia. He knew he would re-acquaint himself with the group of dog spirits he'd recently left in Dog Heaven. He chuckled to himself as he recalled the foibles of trying to be their leader, how he had been so uncomfortable in that role, had tried to run away from it, and, after his two narrow escapes from the evil Garmr, had matured into the position.

Just moments ago he had struggled to retain all the knowledge he'd gained in Heaven. He had clenched his newborn puppy jaw in the effort, but the images of Surri and his other guides and the awareness of the deep discussions that had taken place in

Heaven began to fade. He tried to force his tiny mind to retain a snapshot of Surri, but a sort of curtain drew closed, and his focus became one of physical survival.

On the tenth day, light entered the slits of his separating eyelids, and faint sounds traveled through the thicknesses of his ears. His legs grew stronger for propelling him toward his mother whenever she entered the whelping box, and everyone scrambled to find the warm, sweet milk.

By the time he reached four weeks of age, he wrestled with the other pups and played tug of war with old rags. He watched Alex and Maria bustle around the kitchen, remove soiled newspapers from the whelping box, and replace them with sheets of clean ones.

One day Ivan and his siblings were brought outdoors to explore the brown grass of winter, the aroma of frozen soil, trees and bushes without leaves, and the sights and sounds of neighbors. Many of them, who smelled nice and made pleasant cooing sounds, picked Ivan up and stroked his head, which felt delicious.

He felt stronger each day and loved looking around as his eyesight sharpened. He noticed the appearance of each of his littermates, a palette of red, white, brown, and black. Ivan himself had three white legs and one brown, his ears hung half way to the ground, and his body was longer than the others', although he stood just as tall. The contrast between his undeveloped mind and his profoundly developed soul made every perception twice as fascinating. He appreciated the filterless first impressions of the world with more reverence, awe, and joy than any of the other pups possibly could.

Sounds became more intense, some of them pleasant and some piercingly uncomfortable like ambulance sirens, which made all the puppies howl. One day, when the pups were about eight weeks of age, they were doing their best to harmonize with a siren traveling down a nearby street. Maria interrupted them when she called, "Puppies! Puppy, puppy, puppy!" They ran like mad for their meals, but this time there was no meal, only a tall, blond woman and a shorter, rugged-looking man.

The three humans stood on the other side of the fence and looked at the puppies for a long time, pointing at one, then another, and filling the air with tension. The blond woman, Sarah, entered the yard and kneeled down. She called, "Puppies, puppies."

Ivan felt a tickle in his belly at the sound of her voice and ran to her. A strong yearning made him want to touch her, go home with her, and be her special dog. When she picked him up and cuddled him in her arms, his body felt as though he were a magnet and she were made of iron. She sat down on the grass and held him close, the cells of their bodies seeming to melt together.

He was startled when she set him side and picked up another pup, so he launched his body back into her lap and licked her lips. She laughed, wiped the wetness off, and pushed him away with her elbow. She held the other puppy out in front of her so she could see its face. Ivan cried out as he leaped back into her lap, but she once again nudged him away. When she set the other puppy down and picked up each of the others, he thought he would go crazy.

After she'd been through the whole litter, she snatched him up, and, without a trace of doubt, said to Maria, "This is the one."

He snuggled into her, soaked in her scent, and felt his soul connect with hers. Then Sarah said, "But I want to do some testing first—to see if he'll be suitable for search and rescue work."

Maria nodded as Sarah explained some of the tests. They walked a couple blocks to a park, since the tests had to be done in a place unfamiliar to the puppy. Sarah retrieved a canvas tote from her car, which she handed to the man, whose name was Ben, and Maria carried Ivan.

For the first test, Sarah took Ivan from Maria and flipped him onto his back. She placed one hand on his chest so that he couldn't get up. Alarmed, he struggled for a few seconds, but as soon as he realized Sarah was looking down at him and into his eyes, he calmed. They stayed this way for a while until Ben, who'd been looking at his watch, said, "Time."

Sarah released Ivan, placed her face down next to him, and he licked her cheek and ear. "Excellent!" she said. "You're very forgiving, aren't you?"

She performed various other temperament and ability tests such as walking away from him, and he couldn't run fast enough to keep up with her heels; throwing down a set of metal pot lids to test his fear of noises; dragging a meat-laden beef bone along the

ground to test his eagerness to track scent; tapping a rolled towel along the ground to see if he would grab it; and having Ben, a total stranger, kneel down and call Ivan to him.

“That’s it,” she said to Maria. “He passed with flying colors. I couldn’t ask for more.”

Back inside Maria’s house, Maria presented a piece of paper to Sarah and said, “Here’s a contract that states you agree to return him to me if you ever find you can’t keep him.”

How ridiculous, thought Ivan. *She would never return me.*

The humans’ voices faded away when Ivan found a tasty area on Sarah’s cheek and licked it. *She tastes like heaven.* He snuggled his nose into her hair and drifted into a sweet sleep. He had a faint awareness of a car door opening, Sarah struggling to fasten her seat belt under the arm that held him, odors of leather, vinyl, and exhaust fumes, and his weight pressing into her as the car whisked him away to his new home. Despite these pleasant feelings, something deep within promised drama, danger, and a series of challenges he couldn’t even imagine.

As Sarah introduced him to his new house, he found the odors and surroundings strange. He looked for his littermates. When she set him down in the back yard, he saw that this place was huge and empty. There were no other puppies, no dogs at all, and he began to shiver. The sky was too big. The trees looked foreign. His chest swelled, his head tilted back, and a mournful sound poured from his throat. He looked over one shoulder, then the other, hoping to see a littermate, but none was there. He howled again to summon help. In an instant, Sarah scooped him up and held him close.

“Ahhhh,” he breathed. *Sarah. I’d forgotten about you.*

“Oh, sweetheart,” she cooed. “Do you miss your brothers and sisters?”

How does she know? he wondered.

“That’s to be expected. Let’s go into the house. I have something special for you. Need to go potty first?” She set him down and waited with an expectant expression. He didn’t know if he had to go or not. He just wanted to be back in her arms, so he jumped up on the fronts of her legs and cried.

“Okay. Maybe after you eat.” She carried him into the house and set him down on the kitchen floor near Ben, who sat at the dining table reading a newspaper. He liked

Ben's odor, a combination of masculinity and sweetness, and jumped up against his blue jeans. Ben's strong hands grasped him under his chest and held him out, close to his face. Ivan swiped his tongue across both lenses of his glasses.

"Oh, blah. Puppy spit." Ben set Ivan on his lap while he cleaned his glasses with a white handkerchief. "Thanks a lot, squirt," he laughed and put them back on. He held Ivan up, farther away from his face, and Ivan lashed out his tongue, trying to re-do the deed. "You're a strange-looking fellow," he said and cradled Ivan in his arms while Sarah prepared puppy food and set it on the floor.

After he ate, he thought, *Things are good here*. He felt more relaxed, became aware of his full bladder, squatted, and released it.

"No!" shouted Sarah as she snatched him up and ran outside. She set him down on the grass. "Now go pee," she said. Her yell had caused him to stop urinating, but his bladder still ached. She took some steps around the yard, pausing for him to follow, and he felt the familiarity of the grass as a place to relieve himself.

When he was four months old, Sarah took him to a huge room filled with other young dogs and their owners. "This is puppy class," she told him.

She heeled him around the room in a big circle—a sort of conveyor belt of humans paired with their puppies—and a lady with short, curly, grey hair stood in the middle with a microphone and gave them all instructions to sit, heel, stay, and come when called. Afterwards, several people said, "So this is your new pup. Decided not to get a purebred this time, huh? Just what is his heritage? Those ears and that long body—."

Sarah's response was always the same, "He's my Ivan come back. Ivan was the one who chose not to be purebred this time. This is Ivan Two."

Her friends chuckled, patted him on the head, and said, "I hope he grows into those ears."

Gosh, thought Ivan, *are my ears that much longer than everyone else's?* He looked around the room at all the different dogs' ears, and it was true—when he looked sideways, he could see his own hanging alongside his face.

"All the better to hear with!" Sarah responded with cheer.

* * *

One warm, Saturday morning later that Spring, as Ivan dozed under a maple tree, a soft whine awakened him. At the fence stood a tall dog with glossy black fur and a long, pretty face. Ivan dashed to the fence and touched noses with the elegant-looking fellow, and his innards warmed.

In dog language, the black dog said, “Hi. I’ve been wanting to meet you, but you’re never out here alone. We can’t let them know we talk to one another, you know? How soon before Sarah comes back out?”

Ivan looked toward his house, figured Sarah was inside for a while because she’d taken him for a walk earlier, and said, “Probably a few hours. Why?”

“Well, I’ve just been dying to talk with you. Have you seen the others? We all want to meet you.”

“Really?” asked Ivan. “Why is that?”

“Because the whole neighborhood has been talking about you—how funny you look and all.”

Stung, Ivan backed up a few steps. “Funny? What do you mean by ‘funny’?”

“Well, for starters, your ears,” said the black dog.

“What’s wrong with my ears?”

“They’re too long,” he replied.

“Too long for what?” Ivan asked.

“Well. . . too long for the rest of you. But, you have the coat of a Border Collie—sort of. Except it’s more the color an Australian Shepherd might have—all reddish and mottled like that. But, your body is too long, although you’re kind of shaped like a Labrador, with a Labrador’s tail. Maybe you’re part Basset Hound. That’s what you look like. Like all those breeds mixed up.”

“Well, I’m sorry if my appearance offends you,” said Ivan. “I think I’ll go back to my nap.” He turned and walked back toward the maple tree.

“No, wait!” called the black dog. “Hey, I’m sorry.” His voice had a warm ring to it. “Really. I just want to get to know you. Please come back.” Ivan watched the dog’s tail wag so hard it made his snout swing from side to side. “Please. Come back and talk with me. I didn’t mean to insult you. Really.”

Ivan found his dark, sweet eyes irresistible. “Okay,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Bacchus. What’s yours?”

“Ivan.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Bacchus. “Again, I’m sorry. It’s just that nearly everyone in the neighborhood is purebred, so you’re sort of an anomaly. But, we also hear that you’re being trained to be a search and rescue dog. None of us gets to do *that*. That’s very special.”

“What do you do?” Ivan asked. “And what kind of dog are you?”

“I’m a Flat-Coated Retriever, and my people field train me. And they show me in conformation classes now and then. I finished my championship a while back, so now I compete for Best of Breed.”

“What’s that? What’s field training? What’s conformation?” Ivan asked.

Bacchus proceeded to tell Ivan all about his world, and Ivan found it fascinating. He felt envious, too, because Bacchus told Ivan that he couldn’t do any of these things because he wasn’t purebred.

“Tell me about the neighbor dogs,” Ivan asked.

“Well,” said Bacchus, “on that side of you is Montelle. Actually, he’s a mix, too—German Shepherd and something else, but he looks like a regular dog.”

“What does he do?”

“His owner, Samantha, is a runner on her college track team. She rents the apartment in the basement, and Montelle’s job is to go jogging with her, to protect her.”

Who else?” Ivan asked, looking at the other two yards.

“On the other side of you is Juneau. She’s a Samoyed and lives with Jane and Joel. They have one child, Jackie. Juneau’s very nice—motherly, very protective of her family. You should say ‘hi’ next time she’s out, although they’re usually with her. She doesn’t like being separated from her people.”

“I see,” said Ivan.

“Next to me over here is Sandals the Papillon. He’s a show dog. He’s very wise. I like him.”

“Thanks. How do you know so much about each other?”

“We talk when we can, when our people aren’t around. It’s been so hot this Spring, we haven’t been out much. But it seems to be cooling off. We had a decent winter—fairly warm and dry—so our owners left us out here in the yards. We got to talk about our families and what we’re each doing. You were out here sometimes but never looked our way.”

Ivan thought for a moment. “I don’t know what I’m doing with my life,” he said and felt that inner tug that promised difficult challenges.

“Well, you’re so young. You’ve barely begun your training.”

“I’m nearly finished with puppy class,” Ivan replied.

“Yes, but if you’re going to be a search and rescue dog, your life will have great meaning,” Bacchus explained.

“Great meaning? How? Why?”

“You’ll be helping people—saving lives. Hunting down criminals.”

“Really?” Ivan asked, the dread in his gut growing stronger.

“I think so.”

Ivan felt a little shaky. Somewhere deep in his chest resonated both the pride and the fear of knowing what this lifetime, his last one on Earth, was destined to become. “I wish I could ask Sarah about this.”

“Yeah, isn’t it a pity that we can’t talk to them the way we talk to each another?”

“Baaaaacchus!” a voice called. “Come on! Here, boy! Bacchus!”

“Gotta go,” said Bacchus and raced toward his house.

Helping people? Saving lives? Hunting down criminals? Ivan felt sick to his stomach. How could he, a mere pup, be expected to do all that? He wanted to go into the house. He glanced into the yards of the neighboring dogs, but no one else was out. He felt afraid—vulnerable—small. He trotted through the plastic flap of his doggie door into the garage and sat at the door that led into the house. He knew he wasn’t supposed to scratch at it, so he barked quietly, but no one appeared. He barked louder until the door flew open, and there stood Ben.

“What’s the matter, Two?” Ben usually called him “Two” and sometimes “Two-fer,” which Ivan liked.

“Wanna come in, Two?”

Ivan bounced in place. Ben tapped his thigh and stood aside for Ivan to bolt into the house where he headed straight for his crate. Sarah always left its door open, and Ivan scrambled in and curled up against the back wall. *Ahhh*, he thought. *This feels safer.*

“Sarah!” Ben called up the stairs. “Two wanted to come in. He seems afraid of something.” Sarah’s footsteps clapped down the stairs and through the hall toward them.

She leaned her head into the crate. “What’s wrong, Ivan?” She turned to Ben. “Is it thundering?”

“No. It’s sunny out. Besides, he’s not afraid of thunder.”

“I know. But sometimes they develop a fear.” She tilted her head. “What’s the matter, honey boy? Did something frighten you?”

Words flooded to Ivan’s mouth, but no more than a small “Rar-rar” came out. That’s just the way it was, his attempt to talk. He looked into her eyes, wiggled his body, but stayed where he was. She crouched down, reached her arm inside, and rubbed his ear. “You okay?” He wiggled again but stayed glued to the back wall. She withdrew her arm and said to Ben, “I don’t know. Leave him be. I think he wants to be left alone.”

“Okay,” Ben said. “Kinda weird.”

“It must have been something in the yard. Maybe one of the neighbor dogs. He hasn’t seen much of them. I heard Karen call Bacchus a while ago. Maybe he scared Ivan.”

“That big goof? Alright,” said Ben and went back to whatever he’d been doing, and Sarah trotted back upstairs.

Some hours later when Ivan emerged into the brightness of his yard, he scanned the yards, hoping to see one of the other dogs. A door slammed, and he jerked his head toward it to see the Samoyed. She was outside alone but had her nose pressed against the door to the house. Ivan heard a voice through the screen say, “Go on, Juneau. It’s a lovely day.”

Juneau whined and remained at the door, so Ivan hurried to her fence line. “Hey!” he whispered to her. “I’m Ivan. Come talk to me, please.”

Juneau glanced at Ivan then returned her attention to the door. She poked it with her chin and barked twice. No one responded, so she looked back at Ivan. She ambled in his

direction. He thought her face looked pleasant. “Hi,” he said. Her pure white form walked up to him, and she touched her black nose leather to his through the chain link fence.

“Not too loud,” she cautioned. “Can’t let them hear us.”

Ivan nodded. “Sorry,” he whispered. “Are you Juneau?”

“Yes. You’re Ivan. The whole neighborhood’s been talking about you.”

“That’s what I hear,” said Ivan. “Because I’m funny-looking, right?”

“Nonsense. You’re cute as can be. No, it’s because you’re going to be trained by Sarah, and she’s the best.”

“And you seem very nice,” said Ivan.

She smiled. “Actually, I am.” She winked at him. “It’s what I do—I’m nice. I have a lovely life looking after my family. I wouldn’t want to fetch ducks out of icy lakes or run through fields like Bacchus does. And I have no desire to be heroic like you, unless it’s for my family. I’d do anything for them, especially little Jackie. Have you seen him—little boy about three? Precious. Just precious.”

“Yes,” said Ivan. “I think I’ve seen him in your yard with his mother.” He added, “You have a pretty coat.”

“Oh, thank you. They brush me every day. It *is* a lovely shade of white, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. Say, I’d like to meet the other dogs. Bacchus told me about Montelle and Sandals. Do you know them?”

“I don’t know Montelle very well, because your yard is between his and mine. I do know Sandals, though. There are problems in his house.”

“Problems? Like what?” Ivan asked.

“Oh, I don’t know if I should tell. Actually, all the families have problems.”

“There aren’t any problems in my house,” Ivan assured her.

“Well, not yet, Ivan. Just wait.”

“I can’t imagine,” he whispered.

“All humans . . . all families have problems,” she continued. “Some are easier to live with than others.”

“Sarah and Ben don’t have any problems.”

“Not yet,” Juneau repeated. “Give them time. Are there any children on the way?”

“Oh. No. No.”

“Ivan!” Sarah called from the gate. “Want to go for a ride?”

“You better go,” whispered Juneau. “Don’t let her see us talking.” Ivan nodded at her and trotted toward Sarah.