

Chapter One

Ivan clenched his front paws over the edge of the tunnel. He peered into the whiteness of its depths and searched for an image of Sarah. His heart poured out to her. He searched every swirl of the cloudiness for her face, her hair, her body, even a glimpse of her hand, but saw only the opalescence. A whimper escaped from his nostrils as he paced around the tunnel's opening. He whined, then sat down, swallowed, and decided to think.

Only moments ago, after he and Sarah had been in the car crash and she'd arrived in Dog Heaven with him, Boy, the Collie leader of Dog Heaven, told Sarah that Ivan would be his student in preparation for becoming a hero in his last lifetime on Earth. He'd told her that all humans can feel their dogs' continued love for them, even after the dog has died. They simply have to be open to it. He told her that the love never goes away. Ivan recalled Boy's explaining to Sarah that it wasn't her time to remain in Heaven, that she would be going back to Earth, but it *was* time for Ivan to remain here to enter training to become a hero.

"A hero? Me?" he'd wanted to ask. "Why me? I'm happy just being Sarah's companion. Why do I need to become a hero? And just what do you mean by 'hero' anyway?" *But*, he thought to himself, *I didn't ask, did I? And now Sarah's gone, and I don't want to be here.* "Sarah!" he called down into the tunnel.

If only I'd pretended to be sick this morning, we wouldn't have gone down that icy highway to Denver for the herding competition. I could have faked a limp, and we would have stayed home. But no, I had to awaken her at 4:00 AM and lick her face till she got up. "Ohhhhhh," he moaned. "It's all my fault."

"It's not your fault at all, Ivan," said Boy. Ivan jumped. He'd forgotten that Boy was still here. "She'll be in a hospital for a couple weeks. When she goes home, her relatives will have put your bowls, toys, and leashes away."

Ivan felt small next to the handsome Collie, whose golden aura emanated for yards around him, actually encompassing Ivan himself. "But I could have prevented our going down to Denver this morning."

"This was meant to be," said Boy. "It's all part of the plan."

"Well, I think the plan stinks!" said Ivan.

"I understand how you feel, but you'll change your mind in time. As for the guilt you're feeling, herding dogs do that. I used to do it."

"What do you mean?"

"Herding dogs have guilt complexes. Terriers can't help but be feisty. Retrievers are overly-forgiving. It's part of our growth process."

"Huh?" asked Ivan.

“Come with me. I want you to meet some new arrivals.” He walked away, and Ivan followed.

Boy stopped, turned to Ivan, and said, “You needed to learn guilt. You hadn’t experienced it before. You’ll recall more and more of your past lives as time goes on. You weren’t a herding breed until this last life when you chose to be an Australian Shepherd. As I recall, you were a Labrador Retriever the time before, and, hmmm” He reflected a few moments. “Weren’t you a Golden Retriever before that? And a Curly-Coated Retriever before that? A bit heavy in the retriever area. Do you recall?”

In a flash, Ivan viewed, as if on a movie screen, all the kinds of dogs he’d ever been. It was as if they marched right past him in a parade. He saw himself as a guard dog for a Pharaoh in Egypt, a large working dog in the mountains of Tibet, a companion dog for an American Indian family, a sledding dog in Siberia, a short-lived dog bred for meat in China, a Labrador-mix all covered with skin sores in a biology laboratory, then as another mixed-breed who spent his entire life tied by a rope in his family’s back yard, and as a series of retrievers—Chesapeake Bay, Labrador, Golden, Flat-Coated, Nova Scotia Duck Tolling, and Curly-Coated.

“The memories will become clearer with time,” Boy said. “Now, we’ll gather the next four or five arrivals. It’s been determined that you will be a group leader this time. I’ll facilitate the discussion to begin with. Then you’ll take over.”

I’ll take over? Ivan wondered. Why me? Boy had already begun trotting back to the tunnel opening. Guess I better hurry and follow him. I’ll lead the group? I don’t know how to lead a group.

He looked around as he trotted after Boy. *This feels oddly familiar, this place, he thought. Feels like I’ve been here before, but how could that be? I’ve always lived with Sarah. Well, look at that—three more dogs. They look as bewildered as I feel.*

One was a glamorous, black Standard Poodle in a perfect show clip. A forlorn-looking, small, very thin, tri-colored dog of mixed terrier-spaniel heritage sat shivering, his long ears tucked in close to his head. A few feet from him, a huge, white, thick-coated dog surveyed the scenes around her.

Soon, a brindle-colored American Staffordshire Terrier and an anxious-looking Lhasa Apso emerged from the tunnel’s entrance. They peered around, unsure of where they were. Within moments, however, their faces softened.

Ivan stepped up to Boy. “Where are their owners?” he asked.

“Yours was an unusual occurrence,” Boy explained. “Dogs seldom die along with their owners as Sarah almost did with you. It does happen on

occasion, usually in car crashes like yours.”

“Oh,” said Ivan. *That makes sense*, he thought, trying to imagine what other circumstances would end the lives of both dog and owner at the same time. Hurricanes, bombings, tornadoes, and airplane crashes were all that came to mind, all unlikely events.

Boy approached the five dogs sitting around the tunnel. When they spotted him, reverent expressions came over their faces. Boy wagged his tail mildly in greeting. “Welcome,” he said. “Welcome home.” They wagged their tails in response. “Come with me,” Boy said and walked toward an area between some woods and a lake. He found a clear, grassy spot and turned to face the group. Ivan stood at his side and listened, knowing he would soon be called upon to lead the discussion.

“I am Anubis, although most everyone calls me Boy,” he said. “We’ve met before. Your memories of me may return shortly. This is Ivan, who will take over after I’ve spoken a bit longer. First, introduce yourselves and tell us what job you just left, the primary humans in your life, the name they gave you, and how you died.” He turned to the small, thin, tri-colored dog with the long ears.

Shivering so that his teeth chattered, the little dog asked, “M-m-m-m-me? You want me to go f-f-f-first?”

Boy nodded. “Please. You’ll feel calmer very soon. You know that you’re home now, don’t you?”

The small dog peered around the area. Through his chattering teeth, he said, “W-w-well, I guess s-s-so. Th-th-th-that would be nice. I’m so c-c-cold.”

“Why are you cold? What situation did you leave on Earth?”

“G-G-G-Greenland. An animal shelter. No heat. Before that with Helga, my mistress. She died. Her relatives didn’t want me. Ohhhhh, Helga. I miss her so much. She loved me. She let me sleep with her, gave me bacon and warm milk . . .” His voice choked up, and he could no longer talk. He shut his eyes and sobbed softly.

“What did she name you?” Boy asked.

“M-M-Murphy,” said the little dog.

“Did you like the name? Did it suit you—the you inside?”

Murphy thought for a moment. “My Helga chose it. It must be a good name.” He glanced up at Boy, who looked down on him kindly as a grandfather would upon a young grandson. This appeared to warm Murphy. His shivering subsided somewhat, and he went on with his story. “My j-job was to be a c-companion to Helga. She spent most of her time in a wheel chair. Her heart wasn’t good. She didn’t want to live in G-Greenland, but

she had nowhere else to-to-to go. I listened to her when she felt like talking to someone, b-barked at the mailman, and bumped her with my n-nose when someone knocked at the door. She had lost her h-hearing.” He nodded at Boy to signal that he was done.

“And your death. What happened?”

Murphy shivered for a moment, glanced around at his warm, heavenly surroundings, and sighed. “I died of exposure to the c-cold. And dehydration. No matter how th-thick or thin our coats were, we had to l-live outside at the shelter. Greenland must be the c-coldest place on Earth. The water was always f-frozen except first thing in the m-morning when they gave it to us. The dogs with thick coats seemed okay. I was c-c-cold all the time and only got colder. Today I just drifted away.”

“Thank you, Murphy. You were very brave.” Boy looked at the American Staffordshire Terrier, nodded at him, and said, “You’re next.”

The hefty dog puffed up his shoulders, and in a voice that resembled a growl, he said, “My name—it be Stealth.” He stopped there. Ivan thought perhaps Stealth acted tough but was really quite shy because he stared at the ground, and it was clear he had nothing more to say.

Boy, with gentleness, urged him, “And your job. Would you tell us what your job was?”

Stealth glanced at Boy, then stared at the ground again. “Nah, nah. Nah, I really ain’t up to it,” he said.

“Okay,” said Boy. “Maybe you’ll feel like it later. Would you like to tell us who your humans were?”

Stealth shook his head “no.”

“How you died?”

Stealth looked to the side, then mumbled, “I was shot with a gun.” Immediately after saying these words, he grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut. Ivan felt adrenaline zing through his stomach. He realized he could feel Stealth’s pain, even though he didn’t know the details of the shooting, and was relieved when Boy moved on to the Poodle.

Ivan was eager to know whether the Poodle was male or female. With the fancy hair-do and puffy topknot, he couldn’t tell. “Are you ready?” Boy asked.

The Poodle nodded, lifted his head, and spoke in a clear, mannerly voice. “My name is Beauregard. I was a show champion and took Best of Breed ninety-seven times and Best In Show twenty-three times. I sired many champion puppies. I was loved by all.” He aimed his nose into the air.

“Your job?” asked Boy.

“My job? Well, my job My job” He paused, then went on.

“My job was to be the perfect show specimen of a Standard Poodle and to mate with champion bitches in order to pass along my splendid genes. Yes, that was my job.” He nodded with finality.

“Your humans?”

“Ah, my word. There were so many. My co-owners, my handler, my groomer, my photographer, my exercise trainer, my kennel boy, my financial backer. All of them were my people.”

“And your death.”

Beaugard’s teeth chattered momentarily. He took a deep breath. “They discovered a tumor on my leg. They removed my leg, but the cancer eventually spread to my lungs and my liver. My owners tried everything, but I became so weak I couldn’t stand up. Just this morning, one of the vets came to our house. Steven, my favorite owner—with tears streaming down his face—held me and petted me, and the vet gave me an injection. Now I’m here.” He cleared his throat and swallowed hard.

Boy said, “Thank you,” and turned to the large white dog. “And you, Madam?”

“I’m Jolly,” she said sweetly and giggled. Her body was in perpetual motion. The wiggling either sped up or slowed down but never ceased altogether. “I was a lovable family pet. My mother was half Samoyed and half Golden Retriever, and my father was half Newfoundland and half Great Pyrenees. My job was to watch the four children—Jane, Jack, Joseph, and Jennifer. And their parents, John and Julie. I died at age twelve when my heart gave out.” She looked at Boy for approval. He smiled at her and said, “Thank you.”

To the Lhasa Apso, who sat with his flowing brown and white coat hanging neatly around him, Boy asked, “And you? Would you like to share your story?”

The Lhasa Apso cleared his throat and began in a clipped, elegant style of speech. “My name is Carl. I was the canine companion of two psychoanalysts—Jungian analysts, to be precise. They named me after Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist. My humans were Dora and Siegfried. We lived a quiet, sophisticated life in a superb condo near Central Park. My job was to greet analysands, to sit by their sides if they wanted me, and occasionally to cuddle into their laps if their emotional state needed calming. In addition, I served Dora and Siegfried by performing a variety of stunts they taught me through the use of positive reinforcement conditioning techniques. I also listened when they needed someone to talk to. I transitioned here to the other side when a loose mongrel in the park snatched me by the throat. Siegfried and Dora rushed me to the veterinarian, but it

was too late. I'd lost too much blood."

Ivan was impressed with Carl's English and thought the little dog should be holding a book and wearing spectacles and a mortarboard.

"Thank you," said Boy. "And now Ivan."

Ivan jumped. He didn't expect to be called upon to share his story. *I thought I was the leader, not a participant like the others.*

Boy saw that Ivan was flustered. Gently, he said, "Ivan, recall that you just arrived, too. I'm sure they'd like to hear about your life."

Ivan pulled his thoughts together. *Gosh, I've been so busy listening to the others' stories, I haven't formulated my own.* Quickly, he thought of Sarah, how she'd named him, and all the services he'd performed for her. "Hi," he said and glanced at each of the other dogs nervously. "My name is Ivan. My human was Sarah. It was just the two of us. She taught high school literature and named me after one of the brothers in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Russian novel. I was a conformation show dog and competed in obedience, agility, and herding trials. My main job was to love Sarah and be her companion. She and I died in a car accident . . . except she didn't die for good. She's gone back to Earth." Ivan saw that the others listened intently to him.

"Very good," said Boy, speaking slowly and deliberately. "Now then, Murphy, Stealth, Beauregard, Jolly, Carl, and Ivan, you will be working together to sort through the events of this most recent life. You will help each other understand what each of you has learned and then figure out what you *still* need to learn in order to become what we call 'whole.' Once you become a 'whole dog,' you will step into the next level of existence, the place where I now exist and where you will all one day arrive. It is the Plane of Xolotl. Once you reach it, you will no longer need to go back to Earth. Your role, as is mine, will be to guide others along their paths of evolution. Ivan has been chosen as your leader, because he may have only one more incarnation on Earth. He will then arrive at the Plane of Xolotl, providing he fulfills his last mission. He can tell you more about that as he sees fit."

What? thought Ivan. My last mission? What is that? To become a hero? I don't want to be a hero. This is all too much.

"I suggest, Ivan, that you all agree upon a place to go by yourselves—to talk—somewhere that's away from the others." He scanned the entire area around them. "As you can see, you have many options. You may choose a field, a woods, the mountains, a desert, the snow fields, the ponds, or an indoor setting—whatever you all agree upon." He looked at Ivan and added, "It is important that you all agree. Otherwise, one or two of you may feel too uncomfortable to concentrate. I trust you can handle this." He gave Ivan an

encouraging nod and began to turn away but stopped.

He took Ivan aside and said, “One thing more, Ivan. It’s possible—common, actually—to take one’s energy back to Earth for a short time now and then. New arrivals often feel the need to check in with their humans to make sure they’re okay. This helps us feel better about leaving. Make sure they understand that they cannot re-enter their bodies. Only their essence—their energy—may travel back to Earth. Their humans will not be able to see them, but some humans can feel our presence—in its bare, energy form. Warn them that most humans, when they feel their dog’s presence, believe their minds are playing tricks on them. But it’s real. Their dog’s energy is, in fact, near them.” Boy nodded and walked away. Ivan watched him, in his golden aura, float back toward the tunnel opening where two new dogs sat with puzzled expressions.

Ivan turned to his group. “Well,” he said with a little tremor in his voice. “Where would we like to go?” A couple of the dogs glanced here and there, but no one spoke. They looked at Ivan. Ivan looked into each set of eyes and saw in them a reverence he didn’t feel he deserved. “Well, how many of you would like to sit by that pond over there?” He glanced over his shoulder at a pond where retrievers fetched tennis balls that angels threw for them.

“Will they splash us?” asked Beauregard the Poodle.

“Looks kind of cold to me,” said Murphy as a shiver rippled through his small, thin body.

“I like it,” Jolly said, her large, white body swaying from side to side.

“Mmm,” Stealth said, not committing one way or the other as he clenched his powerful jaws.

Carl said nothing but listened with interest, much as a psychologist would, to the others.

Ivan felt his chest tighten. He realized there was potential for conflict, and Boy had clearly said they must all agree. He looked to his left at a small meadow near a woods where the sun shone on the grass. It looked warm and dry but was still outside. *I have no desire to be indoors*, he thought. “I see a nice spot over there,” and nodded his head toward it. “It’s sunny and warm and appears to be dry.” He started to walk in that direction, and the five dogs followed.

I love the warmth of the sun and the feel of this cushy grass under my feet. He took a deep breath and felt his lungs expand with satisfaction. When he arrived at the exact spot, he turned and watched his group members form a semi-circle in front of him.

Stealth looked uneasy, as he crouched low in the grass, hunched up his

shoulders, and glanced above and around himself. Carl tried to keep his long coat from touching the grass and took high steps through it. It was taller than his hocks. Beauregard's long, black snout sniffed at the grass with suspicion. Jolly padded right through it, glanced around, and wagged her fluffy, white tail. And Murphy lifted his face to the sun, basking in its warmth.

"This is lovely," he said, and Jolly nodded.

"The grass is a bit tall," said Carl.

"Just what's in the grass?" asked Beauregard. "Ticks and fleas? I can't say I approve."

Stealth said nothing, but Ivan saw that his quick glances indicated fear of the wide-open space. Ivan's heart sank. *Well, where can we go?* he wondered. He began to feel some anger at Boy. *How is a newcomer like me supposed to know my way around here?*

"Well, I can see this won't work," he said.

"I like it a lot," said Jolly. "Why can't we stay here?"

"Me too. I love it," said Murphy. "The sun feels wonderful." Ivan saw his body relax under his scant black, tan, and white fur.

"Well, I'd like to find something else," said Beauregard. "I don't know that I can sit down here. The grass will get caught in my nice, clean coat."

Carl just frowned, and Stealth's sleek brindle-coated body had lain down and crouched as low as it could, trying to hide in the grass.

Ivan wanted to say, "Geez, you guys. This is the great outdoors. Dogs are supposed to enjoy this," but he didn't.

"How about over there in one of the living rooms?" Carl asked. "I see they're not all occupied by the Italian Greyhounds." He stretched himself up onto his toes. "In fact, there's one in particular that has leather sofas, fine Oriental rugs, and a charming fire in the fireplace." They all looked at the room that Carl pointed at with his nose.

"The fire looks wonderful," said Murphy.

"It looks clean, very tastefully-appointed," said Beauregard, stretched tall in a perfect show pose.

"Cozy," said Jolly with a happy lilt in her voice and a smile on her pure white face.

I love the out-of-doors, the clean air, the breezes in the trees, and the birds singing, thought Ivan. "Stealth? What do you think?"

Stealth lifted his head and studied the room. He nodded as he looked into Ivan's eyes. "Yes. Safe. Warm. Mm. I likes it."

Ivan sighed. *I can't imagine being cooped up indoors for hours, days, weeks—I don't know how long. I have no idea how to accomplish what Boy wants. I wish I could just be a member of a group and not a leader. This is*

no fun. He thought, then, of Sarah and how she had made every situation pleasurable for him, whether it was showing in Conformation with lots of treats or going for a walk in the woods or learning a new trick on a rainy Saturday. He felt a whimper welling up inside. *Maybe I should call Boy to take over,* he thought. Yet, when he thought about Boy's speech to Sarah during her brief visit here, Boy had explained that he was from a higher order of canines and said, "Ivan is almost there. He'll be my student this time." This higher order of canines' role was to save a human life or to serve them in some heroic way. *Well, that's fine, but why the necessity of getting five dogs to agree on a place to have a discussion?*

"It looks very nice," said Jolly.

"Yes, it does," said Carl. They all trotted into the room and sniffed the couches, the chair, and the thick oval rug in front of the fireplace. Beauregard leaped onto a plush sofa and settled his elegant, black body into a regal pose; Murphy, with only slight shivers rippling under his thin, multi-colored coat and long-ish spaniel ears, chose the oval rug; Stealth leaned his muscular, brindle shoulders against the side of a leather arm chair; Carl, with his flowing brown and white locks, jumped onto the leather arm chair; and Jolly, her white coat flashing with joy, hopped onto the other sofa.

Ivan stepped in front of the fireplace and opened his mouth to begin the session at the same time that Stealth slid down against the side of the chair and closed his eyes. Beauregard fell asleep instantly as did Murphy, Jolly, and Carl. Ivan thought, *Well, that's just great. This is not an easy job.* He marched in a small circle and pouted, then realized that he, too, felt sleepy. Murphy had taken up such a small part of the oval rug, Ivan lay down next to him and drifted off as well.

After they had snoozed awhile, the stirrings of one awakened the others until they all stood and stretched at the same time. Ivan, as he awakened, realized with alarm that he was still in charge. Feeling his knees tremble a bit, he asked, "Would any of you like to go outside? I think we can find any number of activities out there. There are fields to run in, ponds to swim in, . . ." His throat tightened with guilt at avoiding a discussion.

"Where's the snow?" asked Jolly. "I would love to roll in some deep snow."

"I like it here," said Beauregard.

"Me too," said Stealth.

"Maybe a civilized walk in a park?" asked Carl.

"I'd like to sunbathe," said Murphy. "Is there a sunny beach?"

"Well, . . . um . . .," Ivan stammered. "Maybe. I don't know for sure. Let's go look." He stepped from the luxurious living room out onto the

grass. Murphy, Jolly, and Carl followed, sniffed the air, and gazed about them. “Oh, look, Jolly,” said Ivan. “There’s the snow—over there.” He pointed with his snout in the direction of a shallow valley filled with deep snow and white-peaked mountains behind it. Although it was a fair distance, they could see a variety of Saint Bernards, Newfoundlands, Siberian Huskies, Malamutes, and Great Pyrenees strolling through chest-deep powder. Many of them plunged into small drifts and rolled around on their backs.

“Oh boy!” exclaimed Jolly. “May I go join those dogs?” Her whole body wagged.

“Of course,” said Ivan. “But come back in about a half hour, okay?” *We’ll have a discussion when she gets back*, he thought.

“Okay!” she said and trotted away.

Soon, Carl spotted a lovely park where a variety of well-groomed, purebred and mixed-breed dogs strolled along paths and played under large shade trees. A paved path encircled a serene lake in the middle of the park. He headed in that direction. “I’ll be back in a half hour, too,” he assured Ivan as his flowing form trotted away.

Murphy headed for a sunny beach where gentle waves rolled leisurely onto sand dotted with multi-colored beach towels. Various short-haired dogs lay upon the towels, basking in the warmth. As Murphy ran at a fast trot, Ivan called to him, “Don’t forget to come back in a half hour!” Murphy turned briefly and nodded his head. Ivan watched him until he couldn’t distinguish him from the others. He sighed hard to release the tightness in his core. “Whew,” he said to himself. “This is hard work.”

He glanced back at their living room to see Stealth’s brown, muscular body and Beauregard’s curly-black-coated one stretched out in front of the fire, so he looked around for a field of grazing cows or sheep. He didn’t see any at first, then finally located one behind their living room. He longed to stretch his legs, so he cantered across a lawn toward the field. Once there, he galloped as fast as he could, circling small groups of cows and sheep that grazed undisturbed by Ivan and several others—a Belgian Tervuren, a Cardigan Welsh Corgi, and a Border Collie. Flying through the field at full speed, he made twists and turns, quick stops, and about faces, then took off again, scooted around in small circles, and fell into a relaxed lope around the field. He breathed hard and felt his blood course through his body. He felt so alive. He remembered feeling this good when he hiked with Sarah in the mountains, when she had let him run off-leash along the forest trails.

Sarah. He slowed to a trot, then a walk. He stopped altogether, still panting, and lay down in the grass. His heart ached as he fell into a deep

melancholy. He thought of her and imagined her sitting at her computer without him by her side. He felt very drawn to her and wished with all his might that he could join her for a few minutes. His sadness nearly overwhelmed him, when he remembered what Boy had said about going back to Earth. He could hear Boy's words in his head: "It is possible—common, actually—to take one's energy back to Earth for a short time now and then"

Ivan lifted his head, ready to make the journey but wondered how to activate this. Boy hadn't instructed him in the mechanics. Instinctively, though, Ivan relaxed and imagined he was at Sarah's side. He smelled her and heard the "ticka ticka ticka" of the computer keys. He lay under her desk, touching her ankle, and felt her warmth. He looked up at her face and realized he was actually there. He sat up and leaned against her leg. She was concentrating on her computer screen and unconsciously reached to pet him. She looked down with a dreamy expression on her face, then pulled her hand back with a start. Her expression changed to fright. She glared at her leg, then lifted her eyes to gaze out the window. When she looked back down at him, she smiled and whispered, "Ivan? Is that you? Are you here?"

He burned with love for her, wiggled all over, leaped up, and licked her face, but she didn't seem to feel it. She didn't even touch her face to wipe the wetness away. Instead she looked down where he was but didn't make eye contact with him. "Oh, Ivan, I can feel you. You are here, aren't you?" Ivan put his front paws on her lap and snuggled into her belly, but she didn't stroke him, didn't seem to know where he was exactly. She looked around herself, searching.

Then he saw them—the cast on her other leg and one on her arm and the bandages on her face and neck. *Wow*, he thought. *She was very badly hurt. My poor Sarah.* He realized he'd lost all sense of time and didn't know how long it had been since they'd been in the car crash. It couldn't have been just this morning like it felt, or she wouldn't be home from the hospital. *Weeks, maybe. It feels like I died only a couple hours ago.*

"Oh, Ivan," Sarah said. "I miss you so much. You were the best dog in the world. Are you going to come back to me one day—as a new puppy? Huh? Are you? I'm counting on that." She grimaced with pain. "Oh boy, I'm not doing so well." She turned her chair a little but had to pick up the casted leg with her hands in order to move it.

Ivan thought he would go crazy. *How can she live without me? This is not fair. She needs me!* Just then the doorbell rang, and Sarah's mother and father came in with bags of food, a hot pizza, and some soda. Ivan sat back and watched while they fussed over Sarah, put away the groceries, and helped her up onto her crutches so she could walk into the other room. Sarah

seemed to have forgotten Ivan. She sat at the dining table with her parents, and he heard her, as if in a long, misty tunnel, say, “The strangest thing happened. I thought I felt Ivan here with me . . . ,” and Ivan found himself back in the field with the other herding dogs.

“Wait!” he said to himself. “I’m not done.”

The Belgian Tervuren came trotting past. “Ahhhhh, you’ve just been visiting your human, haven’t you? Don’t worry. You can go back again—many times. At least for awhile.” He kept trotting, then sped into a gallop. Ivan shook his head.

Oh my gosh. The group. How long have I been gone? He raced back through the field, across the lawn, and into the living room.

He expected to see Beauregard and Stealth still asleep and no one else there. Instead, the room was a commotion of wagging tails. Jolly took up the most space with her large body and feminine voice. “And everyone was home—Jane, Jack, Joseph, and Jennifer—the kids—and John and Julie too. John and Julie knew I was there. I heard them whisper to each other that it felt like I was. I was so happy!”

Beauregard, despite his attempt to be cool and collected, jabbered uncontrollably. “Steven could tell I was there, too! And Sheldon, Bruce, and Sally! I was so excited to see them. We were at Westminster”

Even Carl had lost his reserved demeanor and jumped up and down. “Dora and Siegfried were at home alone, and I know Dora could feel my presence. Oh boy! Oh boy! I can’t wait to go back!”

Murphy sat with a wistful expression on his face. He listed to one side as though he were still leaning against his beloved Helga. “Helga is so peaceful. She’s up here with us, and I’ll get to spend more time with her. She can walk now and hear, too. She glows with happiness. She hugged me and held me on her lap. We love each other so much.”

Stealth, on the other hand, looked disturbed and wasn’t talking. Ivan wondered if he’d also gone back to visit his human. *Maybe he didn’t. Maybe that’s why he’s so quiet.*

Ivan stepped into the living room. “Sounds like we all had a similar experience. Boy told me we could do this, but I was waiting till later to tell you about it.”

“I was rolling in the snow over there,” said Jolly, “and started thinking about being with the kids in the yard after a big snow storm. And then all of a sudden, I was there with them.”

“The same thing happened to me,” said Murphy. “I was lying in the sun and thinking about Helga, wondering if she’s warmer now, too. And before I knew it, I was in her lap.”

“Me too,” said Carl. “Daydreaming turned into the real thing.”

“Yes! Yes!” said Beauregard. “I was back at ringside with all my people.”

“I had the same experience,” said Ivan. “I spent some time with Sarah. She actually tried to pet me. She’s a mess from the accident—has a cast on her leg and one on her arm and bandages on her head.”

They all looked at Stealth. Carl asked, “Stealth, did you go back to Earth, too?”

“Yes sir, I did. I did.” He looked at the ground, however, and wouldn’t say more.

“Well, was it fun?” asked Jolly, wiggling. “Did you get to be with your favorite humans?”

Ivan cringed as Stealth just said, “Yes, ma’am, I did,” but he wouldn’t look at her.

“Well, tell us about it, Stealth,” Jolly insisted. “We told you what happened to us.”

“I’d just ‘soon keep it private, missy,” he huffed.

Jolly’s wiggling slowed, and she looked at Ivan. “How often do we get to do that?” she asked.

“W—w—well, I’m not sure. More. I don’t know how many times. Maybe until we don’t need to anymore.”

“I’ll always want to go back. Every day,” Jolly said.

Ivan said, “Boy, when he told me about this, said ‘now and then.’ He said going back will help us feel better about leaving.”

“That makes sense,” said Carl.

Stealth turned his eyes to look up at Ivan but kept his head down. Ivan sensed that Stealth didn’t want to go back again.

“I didn’t want to leave in the first place,” said Beauregard. “I liked my life, and I want to go back as often as I can.”

“But Beauregard, your body wasn’t there, just your essence—your energy—your spirit,” Ivan said as kindly as he could. “I didn’t want to leave, either.”

“I did,” said Murphy. “I was miserable without Helga. And so cold. I was glad to die.”

Jolly said, “Well, I sure didn’t want to die. I wanted to stay with my family forever. And now I want to go back as many times as I can. I’ll never feel good about leaving. Never.” She stopped wiggling and sat with a pout on her face.

A heavy silence enveloped the group. No one spoke, and Ivan began to tense again. Boy had said that visits back to Earth would help them feel

better about leaving, but Ivan saw that no one but Murphy seemed anything but frustrated. *So, what purpose did this serve?* Without thinking, he asked, “So, what good did going back do? Why are we able to do it?”

They all sat back on their haunches and looked at Ivan.

Murphy didn't hesitate. “It was good because I got to be with Helga. Because we're both in a better place.”

For a moment, Ivan was annoyed with Murphy's answer. It was easy for him, because Helga had also died. Ivan wanted to hear from the others. He tried to meet the eyes of each, but they either looked down at the floor or up into the air, thinking. No one was coming up with a response, and Ivan felt the awkward silence descend upon them again. “You know,” he said, “I think we've had a very long day, and maybe we should all go home and go to bed.”

“Home?” asked Beaugard indignantly. “Where's home?”

Ivan winced at his own foolishness. He looked outside at all the play and work areas. Then he glanced around their living room. “I guess this room is our home for now.” With sleepy expressions, they all nodded. No one said a word but found their previous sleeping spots, curled up, and dozed off. Ivan's last thought before slumber was that, most likely, none of them would be able to understand how going back to Earth would help them until they'd done it a few more times. This thought resonated as truth, and he felt content knowing how he would begin tomorrow's discussion.