



Paws to Read

By Pat Holland

As they entered the Memphis school library, the big white dog looked as happy as his owner. The dog's tail began a metronome wag when he saw three of his furry friends already in their down stay position. Or maybe he was wagging because he spotted a little boy clutching a book and nervously waiting to start his Paws-to-Read session.

The portly dog owner looked a lot like Santa Claus. He smiled as he spoke to the skinny little boy. "Hello again, I remember you from one of our reading sessions last fall at your old school. My name is Al Harrison and this is my dog Polar Bear---Bear for short. We love reading. Where've you been? We've missed reading with you."

"My name is Tad. My new daddy made me sign up this spring."

The boy had a new scar, a reddened, jagged scar that ran from his hairline down past his drooping eyelid to his upper lip. *I bet that's a dog bite*, Al thought.

He remembered the boy from their last reading session. He was a happy, confident child then. But the boy's new teacher said the eight-year-old had low self-esteem and had developed a stutter whenever he read aloud. Tad was a transfer and way behind the others in his class. She hoped reading to a dog like Bear would give him more confidence.

Al put Bear into a down stay, right next to a big pillow. That pillow wasn't for the dog, it was for the child. Al patted the pillow and asked the boy to sit down. "You know how much Bear likes books. He'll listen while you read aloud."

Tad dutifully read the first pages to the dog, slowly pausing when he stuttered or stumbled over unfamiliar words. Then as he read page after page his stuttering stopped. At the end of the chapter, he closed his book and reached over to pet Bear. Tad said he needed to talk to Bear and to Mr. Harrison.

"Just before Christmas, my mom's boyfriend came to live with us. I'm supposed to call him daddy, but they aren't married. He has a big dog that doesn't like me." Tad described the day the dog bit him. "I walked home after school. When I opened the front gate and the dog ran up to me. I was just going to pet him. But when I looked at him he started growling and knocked me over. Then he bit me. I had 22 stitches, right here" he said as he pointed to his face.

Some gently probing questions from Al followed. He learned that the boyfriend Tad called "daddy" was up against an ultimatum from Tad's mom. The man could not bring his dog back into her home until Tad would OK it.

At the end of the reading period, Al told the boy, "Bear and I enjoyed listening to you today. I hope you'll come back for the Paws-to-Read session next week." He went on, "It's a beautiful spring day. After I leave here, I'm going run a few errands then I'll take Bear to the

Memphis Dog Park . We'll be there for a while. After school, see if you can get your new daddy to walk over to the park with you. I'd like to talk to him."

The big sign at the gate read "Dog Park." It was a special place, with several grassy acres safely enclosed in a boundary fence. It was a haven for dog owners and heaven for dogs.

As Al brought Bear in through the park gate, he ran into Tad and his "Daddy." The tattooed man held Tad's hand and a leash attached to the big Rottweiler pup standing next to Tad. Al realized the boy had persuaded his new daddy to come to the park, but Al had not expected "Daddy" to bring along his dog.

The boy looked scared. His face was marred by the jagged scar and Al knew there were inner scars to go with Tad's visible one. It looked like Tad was afraid of both the man and his dog. Al shamelessly eavesdropped on their conversation.

"Here you go Tad, you just need to get used to being around dogs. Enjoy yourself. Go play with them" the man said. Then he gave Tad a shove, "We're going to stay here for an hour or so to get you used to dogs. Go on, we're not leaving until you pet a dog."

Al let Bear off leash and started walking in the direction of his favorite bench. But Bear stood stock still, because the little boy had backed into him.

The old man turned around and smiled at the boy. He winked as he said, "Hello again, remember me? My name is Al Harrison and this is my dog Polar Bear---Bear for short. You read a book to him in the school library today. I'm sure he'd like you to pet him and he won't hurt you."

Tad looked up. "My daddy pushed me into your dog. I'm sorry."

“The kid says he’s afraid of dogs. He needs to get over it” the man said as he stuck out his hand for a shake. “My name is Butch Goodwin. Tad has just been telling me about reading to Bear. He told me Bear was as big as a sofa.”

“Well now,” the old man said. “Bear likes Tad and I think Tad likes Bear. I’m going over there to sit on that bench. Why don’t you both walk over there with me?” Goodwin and the boy readily complied and trailed along after the old man, but Tad kept his distance from his daddy’s dog.

“I’m not afraid of every dog. I like your dog” Tad said. “It’s just other dogs, like the one that bit me.” He pointed to the young, muscular black and tan dog Butch had just let off its leash.

If I didn’t already have grey hair deciding whether or not to put my oar into this mess would make me go grey, Al thought.

Al settled down on the bench. “Now Tad, watch what Bear does for the next few minutes. First Bear needs to find a tree to relieve himself. Then he’ll play with his dog friends. When he gets tired he’ll come back over here to his people friends.”

That day, the warm air and flowering signs of spring brought many families to the Dog Park. As soon as they walked into the park, most of the people took their dogs off their leashes. Some of the dogs immediately took off, running in joyous circles. Some male dogs, like Bear, marched after other males marking several trees. Some dogs sniffed at other dogs in a friendly way.

Al told Tad, “Bear might bring some of his friends back with him so let’s talk about what to do if a dog you don’t know walks up to you. If the dog is with its owner, always ask if you can

pet it before you go any closer. The owner should know whether or not the dog is friendly.” Al glanced at the boy’s new daddy, who looked a bit worried.

“Dogs can’t speak so they say hello by using their noses to sniff. Sit still. Just keep looking at me, don’t bend over and stare into the face any dogs you don’t know. That may seem threatening to them” Al told Tad.

“Dogs first check you out by sniffing you. The dog that just sniffed Bear is another Paw-to-Read dog. I know him. He’s very friendly. He’s probably going to sniff you next and he might give you a kiss! Ah, yes. You’ve just had a doggie kiss. Tad, that quick smooch was the dog’s way of giving you the OK, a doggie way of getting to know you better.”

Now if I can figure out how to get a few minutes alone with Tad’s stepdad to get to know him better, I might be able to help them both, Al thought.

“Tad, I’m going to put Bear’s leash back on, so you can practice walking together. He’s trained to heel. So whenever you say heel he’ll walk beside you on your left side. Hold the leash and step out as you say heel.”

After Tad and Bear walked away, Al turned to Tad’s new daddy. “We need to talk. I think you’re pushing Tad too hard to overcome his fear of your dog. He wants you to like him, but it can’t be easy for him to get over a dog bite that left him with that big scar running down his face.” he said. “I think the biggest mistake you can make after a child becomes afraid of dogs is to discount his fear and assume he can forgive and forget what happened. You should let the child set the pace, let him say when he’s ready to go closer to your dog.”

“I’ve a problem right now. I love Tad’s mom and I love that kid, but I love Fang, too. My pup never attacked anybody before. Now Tad’s mom won’t let my dog back in the house until

the kid overcomes his fear. My brother is keeping my dog chained up in his backyard. That's no way to treat a dog. It's not a good place for Fang."

"I agree with you about chaining up the dog Mr. Goodwin. Now I want you to tell me the truth. Did you train that dog to attack strangers?"

"When I lived at my brother's place we depended on his old dog to protect the stuff we had in the yard and the stuff we kept in the house. I never taught Fang anything, but as a puppy he might have learned to bark and lunge at strangers after watching how the old dog treated people who came into the yard."

"Keeping your young dog at your brother's place doesn't sound like a really good solution, but pushing Tad so hard isn't good either. Have you noticed his stutter has come back?"

"What can I do?" Tad's stepdad asked.

"I have a friend who trains big dogs" said Al. "She could evaluate your dog's behavior to see if it will ever be suitable as a family pet. She can also give it some obedience training. If she thinks the dog can be socialized and trained, then I might be willing to foster your dog to get it unchained, out of your brother's yard, and trained. Let me call the trainer right now." Al said as he pulled out his cell phone.

By the time Tad and Bear came back, Butch had talked to the trainer and agreed to bring Fang to her for training.

After the young dog passed its socialization and training tests, Al gave it a home. He'd set up play dates at the dog park so Tad and his Daddy could see how much progress Fang had made. Besides, that beautiful park was Al's favorite place.

One day when Tad saw Mr. Harrison at the dog park, he said he had decided to rename Fang. As his fears diminished and his scars faded, Tad had gradually made friends with Butch's dog. "I don't like the name Fang. It reminds me that he has big teeth" Tad said. "I'm going to call him Prince from now on."

"That's a really good name. Besides, he's turning into a really good dog" Al said.

"I want to change your name too. Can I call you granddad?" Tad asked.

"I'd be honored and happy to have you call me granddad. Thank you Tad." Al realized his devotion to his big dog Bear and to the boy from the reading program had given him a new grandson---and another dog to love.

That summer, Al signed up the newly-named Prince for obedience classes at the dog park. Al decided to sign up Bear too. Sure, Bear had already had plenty of obedience training, but the old man just wanted to spend some more time with his newly-adopted grandson.

During the first obedience class Tad worked with Bear, while Butch worked with Prince. Then, as Tad gained more confidence, he began working with Prince who was maturing into a reliable, controllable, and best of all, trustworthy dog.

The following summer, Al Harrison attended an unusual wedding---one with dogs in the wedding party. Butch had invited Al and the dogs to his wedding. As the organist played the Wedding March, Tad, the Best Man, proudly walked up the aisle with Prince heeling at his side. Then Granddad Al and Bear escorted the bride up the aisle. After the bride and groom exchanged their vows and kissed, the Goodwins pulled their son Tad and his new Granddad Al into their arms for a group hug. The family---and their dogs---came back down the aisle together.

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