

Chapter One

“Rose?” Dad’s voice came over the intercom as I put the finishing touches on the latest issue of the Internet Newsletter.

“Hi, Dad. What’s up?” I replied as I hit the ‘Enter’ key and put the last picture of Machu Picchu in place.

“Come on down to the kitchen, we’re having a family conference.”

“Okay. Be down in a minute,” I said, switching the computer off.

I looked at Sam, who had been sitting patiently next to me while I worked. “I hope they haven’t been reading my e-mails to Dimitri again!”

Sam cocked his head and whined at my worried tone.

“Come on, Sam. Let’s see what kind of trouble we’re in now.”

The big black Newfie, known as Samson the Great at the dog shows, followed me out of the upstairs bedroom. I know he was thinking *he* hadn’t done anything wrong!

The two weeks since we had been home from Peru had been quiet. I had caught up on my schoolwork and worked on the newsletter.

I also caught up on a lot of e-mail. There were lots of messages from readers to answer. People seemed to like my

stories and the newsletter was growing. I was drawing a lot of traffic and letters. I wrote a lot of responses to fans.

I also kept in touch with my new friends, especially Dimitri.

Life had gotten a little more normal since our return from Peru. My parents had settled into their new role of private contractors to the Agency, and I felt a little less like a prisoner in my own house.

Still, Richard accompanied me almost everywhere, and I was still monitored on the Net. But the cameras in our house had become invisible and I had grown accustomed to being watched.

As we rounded the corner into the kitchen, I wondered again what this was about. I hadn't broken anything, or gotten into any trouble I knew of, but there were Richard, Mom, and Dad sitting at the table.

I sat down in the one open chair, Sam at my side.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Well, Rose, we've been talking..." Mom started out.

"I knew it!" I said, defensively. "You *are* going to send me to a convent!"

"What?" Dad asked, "A convent? Relax, Rose."

Mom started to laugh. "Yes, Rose, relax! We've been talking, and we feel life has settled down enough for us to do some things away from the house. The Westminster Dog Show is coming up, and I have entered Sam. The Agency has asked your father to supervise the security."

"Wow! The Westminster Dog Show! Can I go, too?" I asked.

Mom and Dad both winced.

“Well, honey,” Dad, said, “we thought you might like some time away for yourself. Your cousin Abigail has asked if you would come and visit for a week.”

I sat with mixed emotions. Dad never called me ‘honey’ unless they were going to try to convince me to do something I wouldn’t like. Still, a trip by myself sounded pretty good. Maybe I could finally regain my parents’ trust. But Sam was my best friend! How could I not be there for the biggest event in his life? Why didn’t they want me there?

“What’s the catch?” I asked, warily.

“The catch is that your Aunt Rebecca has offered to paint your portrait. Your Mom and I would like her to do this while you are still the age you are. It is the only week she can do it.”

Oh, great! My dreams of independence were melting before my eyes. What fun could I have sitting for a portrait? And, my cousin Abigail was two years younger than me! I didn’t want to end up baby-sitting a ten-year old!

“What about Richard? Will he be going too?”

“The Agency has called me in for a refresher course. I’ll take you to the airport, and see that you get on the plane safely. Then I’ll report to school.”

“So, why can’t I go to the dog show?” I asked.

“Well, there are some security issues – and the Agency thinks you might be at risk at Westminster. They feel it’s better if we are not all in the same place at once. Sam has a shot at winning this one, and your Mom wants me there. We know it’s a tough deal, but maybe you can volunteer for Sam’s sake.”

“*Sheesh!* Guilt trip, major! I suppose I have to wear a dress, too,” I pouted.

“We don’t want you to feel your being punished, Rose. I really would love to have Rebecca paint your portrait. She

is very talented and hard to get. Matt has promised to look after you and has guaranteed you'd have a good time. Abigail is so lonesome!"

Matt was Dad's brother. He was a captain in the Coast Guard. He was very nice, and I did not get to see them often because they lived in Alaska. Abby was always sending me e-mails and wishing I could come and visit. She liked to take pictures and had just gotten a digital camera. She was a pretty good photographer for a ten-year old. She envied my adventures and my newsletter.

"After all, every star reporter needs a photographer!" she had said in one of her letters.

I sighed. If I had to get some independence this way, then I would leverage it.

"Okay, but I have a few conditions of my own," I said matter-of-factly.

"Conditions?" Dad said cautiously.

"Yes. First, I get a raise in my allowance. Second, I don't wear a dress – if you want to capture me now then do it as I usually am. Third, I want unsupervised time while I'm gone, and when I get back home."

Sam whined at that one. His tail thumped the floor.

"Hmm," Mom said. "Why the raise in your allowance?"

"I'm saving for something special."

"What?" Dad asked.

"I can't tell you," I replied.

"If you can't tell us, how can we trust you?"

"If I have to tell you, you don't trust me."

"Okay, we'll negotiate that later. As for the dress, that's non-negotiable. Years from now you'll be glad you didn't do it in jeans," Mom explained.

“On your third demand, I’m sure we can give you some more privacy, but only as afforded to any twelve-year-old girl. We know you are not average, but the world doesn’t.”

Two out of three wasn’t bad. I decided to go for the raise and reluctantly wear the dress.

“Do I get the raise?” I asked.

“Yes,” Dad nodded, “but we’ll talk about the amount later. A lot has to do with what it’s for.”

“Okay, so when am I leaving?” I asked.

Richard looked at me and shook his head.

“Smooth operator,” he whispered.

“Friday morning. We’ll all be back here two weeks from Monday,” Dad answered matter-of-factly.

“Two weeks? I thought you just said Rebecca only has a week?” I asked, surprised.

“Well, Matt said he would take you and Abby to Sea World the second week. “*Sheesh!* Why didn’t you say that in the first place?”

“Well, we wanted to give you the chance to hit us for the raise. We know you’re saving for a trip to see Dimitri,” Dad smiled.

“And here I thought you didn’t trust me.”

“Oh, Rose, honey, we trust you. You have to learn to trust us,” Mom said as she stood up from the table, arms outstretched.

Tears on my cheeks, I ran to give my parents a hug.

Sheesh! Two weeks away? I was sure going to miss them!

Saying goodbye to Sam was the hardest part. Seemed like I was always leaving these days. Tears ran down my cheeks as I hugged him.

“This time we both get to travel, Sam. Just not together,” I told him as he whined a little.

Sam was no stranger to travel. Entering dog shows was my mother’s hobby, and Sam always had to leave a week ahead with his trainer. This time he would be leaving two weeks early.

“You can do it, Sam! I know you can! Best of Show!” I said, standing up and drying my tears. I always told him ‘Best of Show’ when he left.

The Agency sent a special car to take us to the airport. As we pulled out in the black limo, I looked at the house through the darkened windows of the car. It seemed strange that no one would be here at all.

Richard set Zip to guard the house and turn the lights on and off according to our usual routine. The mail was re-routed and no one would know we were gone. The phone calls were automatically forwarded by Zip, and could not be traced to our present whereabouts.

“Good luck in school, Richard!” I said as we split up at the airport. He used to drive me to school, now I felt like I was escorting him to the bus stop.

This time my COM link was my cell phone. Tied into Zip, it contained a tracking device and quickly connects to Mom, Dad, Richard, and Aunt Susan. It also had a distress call button to Zip. Best of all, it was also a picture phone!

“Now, I expect regular calls so I can see how Sam is doing at the show.” I told my parents as I hugged them goodbye.

“Don’t worry,” Mom said. “We’ll stay in touch!”

“Be careful out there, Rose,” Dad said as I hugged him.

“Don’t worry, Dad. It’s just a visit. How much trouble can I get in with my cousin? Besides, I’ll be sitting for a portrait!”

“That’s exactly what worries me,” Dad teased.

I was anxious to show my parents they could trust me. After all, I was a world traveler!

“Now, if you can’t reach us, call your Aunt Susan. She and Steven are moving into their new house in Connecticut,” Mom reminded me.

“*Sheesh!* Let’s go already! Sam and Annie will be out there before we even get on our planes!” I said.

Annie was Sam’s trainer and handler. Mom was way too busy with her company to do it all.

So, we were finally ready to leave. Dad got a green light on his phone. As far as we could tell, we were not being watched.