

A Chilling Tail

Could it Happen to Me?

by Denney Herr

Had anyone told me that I would experience an almost tragic loss of two of my black Labrador retrievers, I would have thought them crazy. However, unforeseen things happen in our lives that we cannot predict; nor control.

Traditionally, the Herr family has spent every Spring Break in Idyllwild. But this past spring, we broke our annual tradition and made plans for a week of snow skiing and family fun.

Careful planning went into the vacation which included our destination, vacation rental home, which extended family members to invite, meals, and choosing which two of my four black Labrador Retrievers to take along. Since my Toyota Sienna cannot accommodate 4 dogs, one daughter and husband who for some reason or another was not thrilled at the possibility of riding up inside the Yakima roof container, I chose Bravo, 9 years, and Rocket, 4 years, to come along on our Spring Break adventure.

For the first three days, it snowed and snowed. The roads were tough to navigate. Trevi and Jim skied with Grandpa and Uncle Eric, and I stayed behind with the dogs throwing snowballs for them to fetch. On the fourth day of our 7 day vacation, the weather turned to

and off we went in search of great doggie moments and photography opportunities.

The dogs and I ended up on a dead end road that is gated for closure during the harsh winter months. Both sides of the road had a handful of cars remaining



that I guessed belonged to cross country skiers who had not returned from their day of trekking. Taking a mental note of the time of day...3:00 pm..., I parked my car and jumped out with two very excited dogs in tow. Bravo and Rocket were very content with chasing each other and rolling in the powdery snow, keeping close by and responding to my recalls. I soaked in the perfect day with my dogs and clicked away. What could be better than this serene experience, right? I was in absolute heaven until...

beautiful sunshine and the roads cleared up. Feeling a bit caged up, I grabbed two leashes, the boys and my camera

As the boys ran full speed across the pristine snow covered field, my yells for them quickly changed to screams and pleas. Typically,



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these two particular dogs will come when I call them, but not this time. Frantically I realize they were not going to return and were too far off, out of earshot. Tracking them through my camera viewfinder on telephoto, I watched them disappear farther and farther away. Awaiting them was a heavily tree lined forest, dark and spooky as the day wore on. Would my worst fear come true? Would my dogs disappear into the forest not to be seen again?

It is amazing how quickly the mind will mentally process a game plan. Running with snow boots on in a foot of snow is not my idea of a good time. Neither is losing my dogs, so I quickly learned that if I was going to keep good time in catching up with Bravo and Rocket, I would need to shed my jacket, so I could run with more ease. Stopping to do so, I took another look through the viewfinder and saw what “could” possibly be Bravo and Rocket. But they weren't moving. Why? Panic and instinct set in, and I redirected my direction a little to the left. Fatigue began to set in and take a toll on me. The high elevation was causing me to experience a shortness of breath. Not wanting to, but needing to, I stopped to catch my breath, took another look through the camera viewfinder, and spotted the two unmoving black blobs. As I focused the camera viewfinder in on them, I saw a situation that I had not anticipated. Knowing now what I was up against, I ditched the camera to increase my run-

ning speed and took off after them. To my horror and a short distance from the dark and spooky forest, my two beloved boys were struggling to stay alive in a frozen pond! Running at top speed as fast as I could, strategizing a plan to save my boys and screaming HELP HELP...my dogs are drowning...HELP HELP, it seemed like forever before I reached the pond. Motivated by intense adrenaline and pure determination, I made it to the ponds thin icy edge. Please note: This situation puts “You're Skating On Thin Ice” into it's true intended meaning!

The dogs were stressed and struggling in the frozen pond. Bravo was wedged between two chunks of ice and Rocket was struggling to stay above the water line. My eyes locked on Rocket's eyes as he pleaded for help. It wasn't an option for me to venture out onto the thin ice which would surely break under my body weight. With what seemed like forever and fearing that no one was hearing my continued screams for help, I ran towards the forest in search of HELP and a stick or a branch, just anything that would allow me to get a hold of the dog's collars and reel them in. Praying that the handful of remaining cars, back on the road, belonged to cross country skiers, who had not yet returned to their cars, I continued to scream for help. As if in a dream, out of the heavily tree lined forest, came a man on cross country skis. He yelled to me that he had skied off course in response to my screams. I pleaded with

him to help me and with no hope in his voice, the cross country skier told me he would call the search and rescue team, but that dogs drown in that pond every week, and it was very slim that they would survive. Slim that my dogs would survive? Was he serious? As the man released one of his two pole wrist straps, freeing up his hand to make the call on his cell, I reached over and grabbed the pole, turned to make the foot depth of snow journey, back to the pond, to save my dogs.

Reaching the pond, with the man chasing behind, I bellied out onto the thin ice and edged my way up to the pond's edge. Bravo is hyperactive in nature, so he posed the most difficult challenge for me to loop the basket end of the pole through his collar. Reeling him in, I looked over to Rocket as he disappeared under the water. Yelling to the man to pull Bravo up and out of the pond, I turned my focus to Rocket and belly crawled further out to where I had seen Rocket go under. I poked the pole into the water multiple times before I hit what felt like a body. Like a cork popping on a bottle of Champagne, Rocket popped to the surface in a lifeless form. His eyes indicated that he had given up and had no more strength to fight, so with my remaining energy, I attempted to loop the basket end of the pole through his collar. That is when the ice below me broke, sending me into the freezing water. My mind quickly began to fade and with whatever I had, I managed to loop the basket end of the pole

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under; not through, Rocket's collar. It was then that the man yelled for me to grab for his extended second pole and he reeled us in.

Exhausted with Rocket and Bravo now safe, I was flooded with relief and emotions I have yet to get a grasp on. Wet and cold, crying all the way back to my car with each one of my hands firmly grasping each dog's collar, I couldn't get out of there quick enough. I reached my car, loaded the dogs and another man approached me and told me he knew why the dogs had run off. Still in a state of shock and not processing his words very clearly, I do remember him telling me that he believed that my dogs chased flying Ducks that landed in the frozen pond. When the dogs jumped in, the Ducks took flight, leaving the dogs stranded. Makes sense to me. Afterall, Labrador Retrievers are well known as being bird dogs. Still, had he actually seen what had happened and if so, why didn't he come to my frantic pleas for help? Does it matter now? No. But I will always wonder.

Life is a journey that takes each and every one of us on very different paths. Valuable lessons are taught throughout life and hopefully we learn from these lessons. I certainly have learned a lot from my Spring Break 2008 adventure. One, keep the dogs on a leash no matter how much fun they are having and, two...don't deviate from vacations in Idyllwild!

Footnote: Bravo and Rocket recovered quite well after a period of depression. Rocket continues to lock me in his gazes, but now it is with a mutual understanding of the bond that he and I share as a result of our experience.

