

The Retraining of Sadie

“Can somebody take the ice bucket out to the patio?” Payson asked, looking over his shoulder to see if anybody was listening. Payson was at the kitchen sink, refilling the ice trays with water. He saw John looking at something on the refrigerator door. “John, you got the ice bucket?” he asked, wondering how long John had been standing there.

John quickly put his cell phone back in his pocket and said, “Sure, I’ll do it,” turning his attention away from the refrigerator. From the corner of his eye, Payson caught something going into his neighbor’s pocket, then watched him take the ice bucket to the patio table, and give Payson’s Border Collie, Sadie, a pat on the head.

Payson walked with one of the filled trays to the French door refrigerator and noticed his work schedule for the next two months was fastened to the door with magnets. Payson’s wife sometimes placed the schedule in a place where she could easily find it when it came time to schedule things for their growing family.

Soon after moving to a suburb north of the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, Payson and Lynette Isbell met the couple across the street, John and Rose Bartillini. The Bartillinis were a few years older, had no children, two dogs, and, like the Isbells, were not Texas natives. They also had several recreational vehicles that kept them busy on weekends, including a boat moored at Lewisville Lake. John and Payson had loaded up their three dogs and spent time fishing and boating at the lake on occasions when their time off work coincided. John worked at the DFW Airport as an operations manager, a position he had held for the past ten years. Rose Bartillini worked remotely from home for a tech company.

Payson Isbell worked for the TSA as a canine handler and trainer, specializing in training dogs to detect drugs. He was stationed at DFW Airport after working for the TSA at Los Angeles Airport for several years.

“I understand you are going on vacation,” Rose Bartillini said as the two couples gathered near the gas grill, watching Payson cook hamburgers.

“Leaving next week to visit my parents in Los Angeles,” Lynette replied. “The kids have not seen their grandparents since last Christmas, so it is time to get them out there. My sister will be joining us. It should be fun.”

“What about Sadie? Will she join you?” John asked.

“I’m working on that,” Payson said. “She has never been in a kennel since she went through the TSA Canine Academy. I talked with another canine handler at DFW about taking Sadie into his home for ten days, but we are not sure Sadie is ready for that. We may fly her to LAX with us and find a hotel that will accommodate a dog,” he explained.

“We would be glad to watch her while you are gone,” John said, glancing at his wife.

“Sure, one more dog is not a problem. She will fit in with our two,” Rose added, gesturing to the three dogs playing in the backyard.

“We couldn’t ask you to do that,” Payson protested.

“You didn’t ask,” John said. “We offered. She gets along with our dogs, and we will be glad to have her camp out with us,” he insisted. After further discussion, it was agreed that Sadie would stay at the Bartillini home while her family went on vacation.

The following week, Payson walked Sadie across the street to the neighbor’s home and was greeted at the front gate by the two Bartillini dogs. The Bartillini home had a large, chain-link-fenced front yard with a gate at the walkway. John came out of the house and took Sadie’s leash, and Payson set down a bag of Sadie’s dog food on the porch. John took Sadie off the leash, and the three dogs started sniffing around the yard as the two men talked. Payson shook hands with John, thanking him again for taking care of Sadie.

Later that day, as the Isbell family drove away, the kids waved at the Bartillini home, knowing that Sadie was probably unaware of their departure.

Ten days later, the Isbell family arrived back home late at night. After parking the SUV in the garage, Payson and Lynette decided it was best to go to bed without unpacking and bring Sadie home the next day. Lynette put the children to bed, and Payson brought their luggage into the front room before retiring.

At about three in the morning, Lynette shook her sleeping husband and alerted him that she had heard a noise in the backyard. Payson sat up, put on his slippers, found the key in the nightstand, and quickly walked to a wall safe by the bedroom door. He inserted the key, opened the gun safe, and pulled out a pistol. As he loaded the magazine in the pistol, there was the sound of glass breaking. Payson walked down the hall to make sure their children were asleep. He went to the kitchen, turned on the lights, held the pistol in a shooting stance, and pointed in the direction of the noise. Payson saw movement on the patio as someone was running away from the house. He ran across the kitchen to the sliding back door, turned on the exterior lights with one hand, and kept the gun pointed to where he last saw movement. The person was gone. Lynette came into the kitchen and pointed out a broken flowerpot on the patio. Payson called 911.

The next morning, Payson noticed the Bartillinis’ garage door was open and the three dogs were playing in the front yard. He went across the street and, after a reunion with Sadie, told the Bartillinis about the attempted burglary earlier that morning. He speculated that somebody must have been watching their house while the family was away, and assumed there was nobody home last night. The Bartillinis were understandably concerned and asked if there was anything they could do to help. John said he would let others in the neighborhood know that a prowler had been in the area.

John assured Payson that Sadie was a perfect guest, and all agreed that if Sadie had been home last night, the prowler would have been run off at the first sound of a disturbance. Payson thanked the Bartillinis again and took Sadie home. As he was leaving, Payson noticed a new red F250 Ford Limited Edition pickup in their garage.

Two days later, Payson met with the police officer who had initially responded to the 911 call. Payson found videos on their home security system the day after the attempted burglary and was there to show the officer what was stored on one of the cameras.

“What is he doing with your dog?” the officer asked as he watched the video on Payson’s iPad.

“I think he is retraining my dog,” Payson explained.

The motion-activated security system consisted of a video camera in the backyard and one in front of the house. Payson reviewed digital images on both cameras, hoping to catch the prowler or prowlers. The motion sensor light on the patio was broken, so the images at night were unhelpful. The front camera images did not show anything related to the night prowler, but there were many hours of daylight video that were of interest. Besides the video of passing cars, there was video of John Bartillini in the front yard of his house with Sadie wearing a vest similar to what she wore when working for the TSA. Payson explained that he had reviewed the videos, starting the day his family left for vacation, and he could see John working with Sadie for about an hour each day. John’s dogs were left in the house as he put Sadie through an exercise in the front yard. The Bartillinis’ dogs were free to play in the yard other times during the day, but not when John was working with Sadie.

“Does your dog need retraining?” the officer asked.

“No, she is the best detection dog I’ve ever seen,” Payson replied. “She learns quickly, is easy to work with, and any law enforcement agency in America would be grateful to have her on their team. I can see from this video that my neighbor has experience training canines, but what he is doing to Sadie is training her not to do her job under certain exceptions.”

“Here is an example,” Payson said as he forwarded the video to the sixth day of training. “I assume he is using a drug, probably cocaine, for Sadie to detect the drug based on smell. He leaves a package by the open garage door. Now he brings Sadie out, wearing a vest, and he walks her around the front yard, out the gate, down the street to his driveway and vehicles, much as we do at an airport or other facility,” Payson explained as the video continued.

“When she smells the drug, her training is to sit down at the first place she makes a detection,” Payson explained. Sadie finds the package by the garage door and sits.

“Now watch as he does something different before the next exercise begins,” Payson said as the video continued. “Mr. Bartillini dusts something on his shoes and then takes her to the location of the drugs. Now watch what she does after six days of retraining.” They watch as Sadie stands and looks up at John, who gives her a treat as a reward for ignoring what her nose detects.

“They do this daily, sometimes more than once per day. He dusts his shoes and then continues the session after having her smell his feet,” Payson observed. “I don’t know what he is using, but I suspect it is a foot powder like people use to control athlete’s foot.”

“Did he tell you he was doing this while you were on vacation?”

“No. I only saw it because of the attempted burglary, which caused me to look at the digital images stored on my security cameras,” Payson said. “We only know what he was doing outside with my dog. I wouldn’t be surprised if he were doing the same exercises inside his home, which would be a familiar routine to the dog.”

The officer looked at Payson and asked, “Why is he doing this and not telling you? He is your friend, correct?”

“I don’t know the answer,” Payson admitted. “All I know is he created a hole in our performance. Sadie is a valuable TSA asset, and I don’t appreciate what he has done to her. I don’t even know if a crime is involved.”

“If he is using a drug to retrain the dog, he is in unlawful possession, but even with this video, we don’t have probable cause to get a warrant,” the officer said. “I think something else is involved here. Have you told TSA about this?”

“I will do that next, starting with the Canine Training Academy since it appears Sadie has been compromised. We just don’t know why,” Payson said.

“First, I would like to contact DFW security,” the officer advised.

“Mr. Bartillini works at DFW, won’t that be a problem?” asked Payson.

“Not with the person I have in mind. She is a former Secret Service Officer and works on things TSA may not even know is going on at the airport,” he said. “I’ll give her your cell phone number. Do nothing with those videos until you hear from her.”

That afternoon, Payson and Sadie were working a swing shift at DFW when his cell phone vibrated as he was walking down a line of passengers at security. He stopped to look at the caller ID and saw the word “Security” on the screen. He gave a command for Sadie to sit and answered the call.

“Mr. Isbell, this is Agent Pryor here at DFW. I would like you to come to my office,” a woman’s voice said more like a command than a request. Without waiting, Agent Pryor

added, "Please bring your iPad. We will be in the conference room at Terminal D, second floor. And bring Sadie," she added.

Payson and Sadie made their way through crowded terminals and up an elevator to the conference room. He was greeted by a receptionist who saw his name on the TSA uniform and directed him to the conference room. As he entered, three people stood and introduced themselves. Payson was surprised to see the CEO, Paul Iriarte, whom he recognized from photos and a one-time meeting during a security briefing several months ago. Mr. Iriarte stepped forward, shook hands with Payson, and said hello to Sadie without touching her. He introduced Payson to Elaine Martinez, General Counsel, and Agent Yolanda Pryor, Security Manager. Mr. Iriarte invited Payson to take a seat at the table.

"Mr. Isbell, thank you for meeting with us on short notice. We are meeting with you after clearing this process with TSA in Washington," Agent Pryor explained. Payson started to ask why TSA Washington was involved, but decided it was more important to listen.

The CEO asked Payson to open his iPad and provided him with instructions on how to establish a secure Bluetooth connection to a TV screen on the wall. Payson displayed the same video he had shown to the police officer that morning and explained what he observed from a detection canine handler's viewpoint.

At the conclusion, Agent Pryor said, "Officer Isbell, we have had John Bartillini on our radar for some time. Everything we are telling you is in confidence, and the only person outside this office who is aware of this matter is the TSA Deputy Director. Mr. Bartillini is under investigation for his involvement in illegal drug traffic going through DFW, and I need to ask you some questions."

"Do I need a lawyer?" Payson asked, not knowing what else to say.

The General Counsel, Ms. Martinez, said, "You are not under investigation, we have trust in you, and all we ask is your cooperation. Of course, you can confer with your lawyer, but this is not about anything you have done."

"Sadie might need a lawyer," CEO Iriarte said with a grin, elevating the mood in the room.

The three people explained to Payson that Bartillini was using his position in DFW Operations to facilitate a flow of drugs from Mexico and Central America into the United States. His detailed knowledge of how people and commerce flow through DFW created cover to avoid detection. The investigation had not been completed, and they believed Bartillini had recruited other DFW employees to clear a better path for drugs to get through or around security.

"As you know, a lot of money is involved," Agent Pryor concluded.

"I guess that explains the new pickup in his garage," said Payson.

“And his condo in Miami and sailboat in Honolulu,” replied Agent Pryor.

“What is my role in this?” Payson asked.

“We think Bartillini is counting on Sadie to be working with you at a particular time on a specific day when a passenger will arrive with a certain brand of foot powder on his or her shoes, which will cause Sadie to ignore the smell of drugs. In fact, that may already have happened. What we don’t know is how Bartillini is getting inside information on your work schedule from TSA,” Agent Pryor explained.

“I know how,” Payson said. “I saw him looking at my schedule just before we went on vacation. My wife posted it on our refrigerator, and we had the Bartillinis over for a BBQ. At the time, I thought he used his cell phone to take a picture of the schedule,” he said.

“How many weeks were on your schedule?”

“It was a 60-day schedule starting just before vacation. So, we have about four more weeks,” Payson replied.

“Can you retrain Sadie in the next week? Can she be taught to ignore the foot powder?” Mr. Iriarte asked.

“Sure, but dogs have very sensitive noses, and I have no idea what product he was dusting on his feet when he retrained her.”

“We know,” said Agent Pryor. “A couple of days ago, we obtained a search warrant for his locker in the changing room and found three cans of foot powder. We left everything as we found it, so he does not know of our search.”

“Sadie was first in her class, smarter than any dog the instructors ever worked with. I could teach her to tie your shoes,” Payson responded. “Yes, she can be trained to go back to her original detection protocol, assuming I can find the same brand of foot powder.”

“Can you do that in less than a week?” Agent Prior asked.

“Sure, but I can’t do it while she is working.”

“We have that covered. You will keep your schedule, but instead of going to work, you will take Sadie to a canine training facility operated by the Dallas Police Department. When Sadie is retrained, you will go back to your schedule here at the airport,” Agent Prior instructed. “We have reason to believe a mule carrying drugs from Mexico will arrive here next week, and we want Sadie there to do her thing.”

The following week, a retrained Sadie and her handler were back at work on a Monday afternoon. Payson received a text message from “Security,” saying that John Bartillini had today resigned his position at DFW and that passengers and crew on an airplane arriving at Terminal A from Mexico should be greeted by Officer Sadie.

Payson took Sadie to the gate and waited for the plane to arrive. As the passengers disembarked, Sadie walked down the jetway smelling people and carry-on luggage. Payson was starting to think the retraining may have failed just as a male flight attendant stepped from the plane, and Sadie sat down.