

Dragon in the Family

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Chapter One

People say you can find the most unusual objects in the universe by travelling the back roads of the American Southwest after dark. Conventions of UFOs in the sky or on the ground, lost cities of gold, and strange, weird beings roaming the earth and sky have all been reported by people driving alone on a crystal clear desert night.

Skeptics claim that all you'll see are pre-flattened coyotes, the occasional rattler, and enough sand and sagebrush to numb your mind. They are also the ones who say the only people seeing these lights and other things are the ones who've been drinking when they should have been sleeping and definitely shouldn't have been driving.

Homer Standish didn't know squat about UFO aliens, "heck, for all I know, them politicians in Washington are all from another planet, the darn fool way they act," he would say, always followed by spitting on the ground. And Homer sure would have liked to find a city of gold, he said, more'n once.

One thing he says he knows for a fact is there are some strange and wonderful creatures out there: He had one roaming his ranch a few years back.

Homer and his wife Emma and were somewhere east of Flagstaff, Arizona on their way back to their spread west of Santa Fe, New Mexico from a Christmas vacation trip to that city where the real weirdness is, Los Angeles, he told us.

"We was driving along when we seen this strange animal dash in front of our headlights. I slammed on the brakes to try and avoid it, but I think I dinged one of its legs," Homer said.

He explained the critter looked kind of like a cross between a coyote and an armadillo: it was long and somewhat low to the ground, kind of graceful like, but armored. When it first passed in front of their headlights, Homer had this momentary glimpse of something about the size of your average pit bull, maybe a little shorter, with scales.

"What set this sucker apart from the other desert dwellers, though, were its tail, like what you'd expect to see on a lizard, and a long, sinewy neck with a small triangular head, about the size and shape of that on a big cat, a really big cat," Homer explained.

If that wasn't strange enough, though, you ain't heard nuthin, Homer would say. What was really weird, were its wings. When extended, they probably weren't any longer than two or three feet each, and they sure didn't look like they could help this here thing fly. "From the way it was acting that one weird night, I'd bet they worked just the wings on a roadrunner: they gave just enough lift to help it over some bushes when going after prey."

Homer said that after they hit it, they pulled over right away. They pulled out a flashlight and walked back to it, shining the light on the darkest and funniest looking creature Homer said he ever did see, 'cept the time he saw a Senyator.

"The creature just turned its head on that long neck to look at its suddenly limp right rear leg, then stared up at us with these big, soulful eyes, and Emma, well she was done."

Emma, well she's a sucker for any stray that comes her way. Healthy or injured, Emma'll treat stray dogs, cats, horses or what have you like they was her own young'un'.

"What have we here?," she asked as she got closer. "You sure don't look like no coyote I ever seen."

All she could see was a dark lump under the stars until Homer got close enough to shine my flashlight. When I hit it with the beam, it seemed startled and ready to run away, but then just kept looking at them.

Homer said, "I'd swear the thing was telling me, 'You hit me. Now it's your turn to make me right,' but it didn't make a sound."

As Emma got closer, she stuck her hand out, like you would to a strange dog so they can smell you. The animal just looked at her like it was saying, "OK. You're here. Now what are you going to do?"

"Homer, go get some of them rags out of the trailer, but don't disturb Princess none, and we'll make a little bed for this poor little thing," Emma told him. So being the dutiful husband Homer is, he went to the unoccupied half of their horse trailer. He was careful not to disturb the family's prize pet, Princess, who's one sorry-looking excuse for a horse if there ever was one, that old geezer would say. However, Homer admitted Princess and Emma work well as a team at gymkhanas, which was why they had gone to L.A. in the first place.

Emma rummaged around in the back of the truck, being careful not to disturb their two kids, Brad and Nancy who were still sound asleep on the back seat. Getting into the bed of the truck, Emma managed to somehow come up with a big cardboard box.

"I swear I ain't never seen that box before in my life, but that's Emma: when she needs something, it's always there, no matter if it never existed a moment before," Homer told me.

The lizard/coyote whatchamacallit, or as Emma called it, "a poor little dear," gave Homer a wary glance like it was ready to bolt when he scooped up an armload of rags then tried to be gentle as he scooped up the critter, too.

"When I straightened up to carry it back to the truck, I got the first of many surprises: for being as big as it was, it sure wasn't that heavy," Homer said. He has carried many a calf that weighed more'n it. It might have looked like a reject out of freak show, but it was as light as a bird.

And as it came close to my face, something else hit: the stink of its breath. Phew! A couple cases of rotten eggs would have smelled like French perfume compared to this old boy or girl. Homer and Emma hadn't a clue what it was. When its mouth was closed, it smelled no worse than any other animal, "and probably better'n me," Homer admitted but when it's mouth was open, you'd wish there was a gas mask handy.

Princess got a whiff as Homer got it closer to the trailer, and she was none to pleased, her owners said. She started prancing and dancing, but seemed to be more scared than anything else. "How something the size of a dog, and so much smaller than her, could make that horse so scared, I'll never know," Homer explained.

Somehow they got it loaded into the horse trailer, then headed on home with Emma and Homer, mostly Homer, taking turns behind the wheel. The kids were quiet until the sun woke them and Emma up not too long before they turned onto the dirt road that eventually ended at their ranch.

Homer put Princess in her stall and moved the new critter into an empty one a few stalls down, placing it gently on a pile of straw near where Homer had seen some mice. Thinking he (Homer said he had to call it something so he was beginning to think of this thing as more a "he" than a she or an "it" now) was about the right size to like mice, Homer figured the mice'd give him a quick source of nourishment. Then it was off to bed for some much needed sleep for a tired human.

Chapter Two

By the time Homer awoke later that afternoon, Emma and the kids were nowhere to be found, until he went into the barn, that is. All three of them were just standing or kneeling there, looking at their new pet in awe.

“Look at what Sparky did,” Brad said, pointing to what looked like the remains of a well-roasted mouse it was contentedly munching on. “He was just lying there when this mouse comes out of the straw, and without seeming to move a muscle, Sparky just fried it on the spot, then reached over and got it.”

Kids are known to exaggerate, so Homer was going to shrug it off as youthful exuberance, until that is, Emma stepped in.

“You know Homer, I’ve never seen anything like it. First, I went into my books (she works part-time with old Doc Tsosie and has built up quite a collection of books on veterinary medicine) and I couldn’t find anything that looked even close to Sparky. As far as these books go, he doesn’t exist. And second, I don’t know of any animal in the world that shoots a jet of flame out of its mouth and pre-cooks its prey.”

“Come on Emma, are you sure? I’ve never heard of one doing that, neither. And I’m sure this here thing’s got to be in one of your books. You just ain’t found it yet,” Homer replied.

Homer still thought both Brad and Emma were pulling his leg, about the time it (somehow “it” had become “Sparky” while he was sleeping) belched and a foot-long jet of blue-white flame came out of his mouth.

That threw Homer for a loop, ‘cause he’d never seen any animal do that neither. He had been to the San Diego Zoo where they got most animals known to Man, and maybe one or two known only to God now.

Now that Homer was finally fully awake, he noticed that Emma had put a splint on Sparky’s hurt leg, fixed up his straw, and stuck a bowl of water near him. Somewhere one of the kids had found a collar that used to belong to one of their old dogs before the coyotes turned it into a snack.

Homer heard a noise over his head, and saw one of the barn’s other critters, a cat, looking down at Sparky. Sparky was looking up at it like the kitty was gonna be lunch. “Don’t you even think about it,” Homer told Sparky. “These here cats are part of the family and they pay their way by keeping the mice under control. So far you ain’t done squat to justify yore measly excuse for existence.”

Homer didn’t know how, but Sparky gave him the tiniest little nod of his head, acting like he understood what had just been said. At that point the cat had lost all interest for him and Sparky in the cat. Would Sparky and the cats be friends? Never. Would they respect Homer’s wishes? Maybe Sparky would but a cat? Come on. They only do what they want when they feel like. After all, they’re cats.

Homer still had the rest of the unpacking from their trip to that horse show near L.A. Emma had already hung her blue ribbon from the gymkhana on the trophy wall, along with the others, so it was time to sort out the kids’ clothes and our new purchases. Then it was time for Homer to hook the new one terabyte hard drive into his home network and get back to work.

Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention that Homer, who may sound and act like a hick, has a doctorate in advanced mathematics from MIT. He made his living as an Internet page designer and computer programmer.

“Since I can do my thing from anywhere on the planet, I’d rather do it where the sky is blue and there’s plenty of wide open space around me. Besides, living next to the Navajo reservation means I have some great neighbors and my kids learned a lot more in their small school than they would in some impartial big city ‘learning factory,’” Homer said.

The kids and Emma did their thing with Sparky and Homer did his with the computers and pretty soon, Homer forgot completely about the new critter.

As the days went by, the kids developed a regular routine: they’d go out in the field and round up a few mice, ‘cause none in the barn would get anywhere Sparky, then bring them in and let Sparky have his fun. Nancy, who’s all of six, said he’d sometimes herd the mice with jets of flame, directing them this way and that, before tiring of it and barbecuing them.

Instead of giving Sparky dog biscuits for treats (they tried but he wasn’t interested) they gave him chunks of charcoal, which he loved. He seemed to like the ones covered with lighter fuel best. The kids would throw one up in the air, Sparky would get back, take a running start, then jump up about four feet off the ground, set it on fire and catch it in his teeth. Then he’d gnaw on it like a dog with a bone.

The funny thing was, he never set the straw or barn on fire, and that barn was so old and dry, Homer was just really glad that it was a long way from the house. Princess, though, she got to be so spooked, Homer and Emma ended up letting her roam around the corral all the time. She didn’t want to have anything to do with the barn if Sparky was in it.

Homer said he would go outside sometimes, especially when things were rough, and just sit there and talk to Sparky and tell him my troubles. “I swear that old boy understood every word I said,” Homer said more’n once.

Another thing didn’t happen. Sparky became such a part of our everyday lives there the first few weeks, that Homer and Emma forgot to try and figure out what he was.

After about a month, Emma pronounced Sparky healed, so she and the kids let him have free reign of the barn. Homer was a little worried about the cats, since he remembered how he’d looked at one when he first arrived, but he and them got along fine: they ignored each other like the other didn’t exist.

“Then there was time a cougar came close to house chasing one of the cats. Sparky sent that mean old thing straight to Hell with the biggest blast of flame I ever did see. Of the course the cat was so scared its fur turned white from being jet black, but that’s no never mind,” Homer told me.

Chapter Three

Sparky had come into their lives at the end of the Christmas break, and when school resumed, the kids were so busy with their friends that they never said a word to anyone at school about Sparky. Sometimes they would say they'd gotten a new "dog," which the other kids pretty much ignored. Sure, they had their fanciful tales about a dog that spouts flame, but the teachers figured Brad and Nancy were just being kids and knowing Homer, telling tall tales.

Once school got out, the kids took to taking Sparky on walks with them, just like your everyday kids with their dog. They'd go out into the sagebrush and throw sticks that Sparky would usually just look at like the kids were stupid. "If you want to pick up that stick, be my guest," he'd seem to say.

Homer would go out with them on occasion too, and think nothing of it. Sparky, acting just like a regular dog, would chase birds. But unlike most dogs, he'd more often than not catch them. That's when Homer saw Sparky's wings in action. He couldn't fly, but his powerful hind legs made him quite a leaper, and those wings gave him just enough lift and just enough speed that he could catch the quail and chukar nearby.

There's also a bunch of empty arroyos near Homer's place, and after the infrequent storms the Navajo call "male rains," the short, intense downpours, there'd be puddles and even a stream in some of them. These rains also drew out the local wildlife, and some of it was unfriendly to Man.

Now Homer's kids knew what rattlesnakes and scorpions were and how to avoid them, but even the most observant child is still a child. Sparky endeared himself to Homer when he and the kids, with Sparky tagging along, went on a hike to one of the arroyos where they had found arrowheads. The kids and Homer failed to see a coiled up rattler under a low overhanging rock. Brad was within two feet of this snake, which had to be four feet of pure unbridled nastiness, but since the snake hadn't made a sound, Brad didn't know it was there.

Homer was playing with Nancy a few feet away when he saw Sparky, who was further away from Brad than Homer was, move faster than greased lightning.

"Sparky must have seen that snake start to strike or something, but I swear one second he was easily 40-50 feet from Brad and the next, all you could see was Sparky standing over a four-foot hunk of roasted meat on the ground," Homer said.

Sparky had knocked Brad away to get to the snake, which had gotten close enough to put some small holes in his shirt sleeve, and swatted that damn rattler out of the air. Brad, who was only five, was crying because he'd been knocked down, but other than a minor bruise, he was fine. If it hadn't been for Sparky, he could have been dead by the time a doc had reached him because we was so far from home.

Needless to say, our little family outing was over and done with. Homer reached over and scratched Sparky between his long, triangular ears, then rubbed his scaly belly, said "good boy," and picked up Brad and Nancy. After that they hightailed it on out of there and headed straight home with Sparky leading the way.

Instead of having a regular meal that night, the family had a little weenie roast in the yard to treat their new hero, Sparky. Emma managed to find some hot dogs for the kids, Homer rustled up a couple of steaks and a good bottle of Cabernet for the adults. Homer got a little fire going in the barbecue pit using mesquite and sage since they had so much

of it lying around. They also had a five-pound bag of charcoal, but it was off limits. That bag was reserved for Sparky and him alone.

Sparky and the kids soon developed a new game: Brad or Nancy would stick a hot dog on a stick then hold it out. Sparky would squint with one eye, like he was measuring it, then let loose a burst of flame and presto, instant cooked dog. He tasted some of the meat, but preferred to munch on his charcoal.

Later that night, after the kids were in bed, Emma and Homer had a heart-to-heart chat. They realized it was time to figure out just what in tarnation Sparky was. Since he had come into their lives, Sparky had grown, and more'n just a little bit. When they first found him, Sparky was about the size of a small dog. Now he was the size of a big dog, like a full grown Shepard, and seemed to be growing bigger every day.

Before he arrived, the cats used to be lean and mean from chasing mice all the time. Now they were fat and sassy because Homer and Emma had to start feeding them kibble. Sparky had cleaned out not only the barn, but the nearby fields, of mice and rats.

"With Sparky getting so big, I could see why Princess would consider him a threat; you would too if there was something bigger than you with rows of razor-sharp teeth and what seemed to be a devilish grin on his face who was even faster than a damn cat," Homer told me once.

Emma hadn't found any animals matching Sparky's description in her books, so Homer turned to the Internet. One guy from who knows where, who obviously thought Homer had been having a long chat with a bottle of bourbon, happened to be on-line when he posted his description.

"What you have here is the classical description of an animal that doesn't exist," he wrote. "There are stories passed down through the ages of these mysterious beasts flying through the sky," which Homer knew was ridiculous, because he knew Sparky couldn't fly. "They've been called by many names, but the most common one is dragon," the guy wrote.

He suggested Homer go to a book store and look at some fantasy novels. He told Homer to find one with a picture of a dragon on it and compare it to Homer's pet, which the way he was writing, lead Homer to believe he was certain it was imaginary.

The next day, Homer had to go into Santa Fe to pick up some family snapshots he had taken. And of course Sparky was in some of the shots, since he'd become part of the family.

As Homer was checking the prints out at the counter, the clerk looked over and says, "that's cool. It looks so life-like," pointing to Sparky. "I didn't know you could do that with a computer. It almost looks like he's taking a piece of charcoal from your kid's hand." Nancy had been giving him a treat at the time.

The clerk didn't believe Homer when he said Sparky was no computer trick, he was real. "Sure, right. I know you computer nerds. You swear everything you do is real," then shrugged his head and wandered off.

He was right in one respect: Homer had the computer gear and training to alter any photo so no matter how bizarre, it would look like the real thing. Proving a photo was real and unaltered, now that was a trick Homer had yet to master.

Homer grabbed his prints and went to a nearby used bookstore where he told a clerk, who was meditating behind the counter with her incense and crystals, what he was looking for. She took him to the fantasy section and within a few minutes, Homer'd

found book covers with animals which might have been Sparky's cousins. The dragons pictured there were bigger, nastier, with longer wings and looked like they weighed as much as a small tank—heck, a large tank—but they were close enough.

After paying for the books with covers looking the most like Sparky, Homer headed home.

“Emma, come here, please. I have something to show you,” he said when I got into the kitchen. They went out to the yard, called for Sparky and he came, just like your regular dog. We compared him to the covers of the books, which he looked at with a critical eye like he was saying, “You think that's me? You're not even close, buster.”

“Now that we know he's a dragon, what are we going to do?” Emma asked. Homer thought about it, and figured maybe they had better call a zoo and see what they had to say. After all, maybe they might know how to keep a dragon healthy.

Once Sparky had recovered from being hit, he seemed fine, though recently, Homer had seen a far-away look in his eyes like maybe he was missing something or someone, like maybe his mom and dad.

Homer got back on the Internet and started e-mailing zoos with questions about dragons. Most of them thought he was completely nuts and either didn't return his messages, or sent a “nasty-gram” saying something like their time was too valuable to waste on a fantasy like Homer's. He kept up his requests for about a week. He finally gave up when no one would believe him.

Emma and Homer had thought about calling the local newspapers, but after what happened with the zoos, became certain they'd get ridiculed by the press, too. Since they had no desire to move, the couple just kept their mouths shut.

When school started up again in the fall, the adults told their first and second-grade kids not to say a word about Sparky to any of their friends, a few of whom had visited the ranch since Sparky had arrived.

Looking back, Homer thought it was kind of strange, that no one except them had ever seen Sparky. Friends had been over for dinner several times but Sparky always seemed to be out hunting or playing, or doing something where the other adults never set eyes on him. Sure, other kids had seen Sparky, but did their parents listen? Hell no.

“Face it, would you believe it if your kids said their friends had a dragon as a pet? I didn't think so,” Homer said.

Fall turned into winter, and the snow began dropping its white coat on the ground. Sparky began to become harder and harder to find until one day, Homer chanced on a cave he'd found in that arroyo where they had encountered the rattler. I couldn't be sure, but he kind of looked sick.

Homer told Emma and they thought that maybe Sparky's time with them was at an end. Christmas vacation was right around the corner, and we wanted to make our annual L.A. trip, but Homer had gotten laid-off the web page design business, and finances were getting tough. He and Emma were really wondering if they could afford to keep the ranch, or if they'd have to sell it and move to some city so Homer could earn a living teaching school to high school students.

Going to L.A. was out, but a trip to Flagstaff was doable. It was just a matter of when to go.

Chapter Four

About that time, the Internet postings Homer had forgotten about finally got a positive response. Jack Guenther, a Ph.D. candidate in paleontology, left Homer a message and asked if he could come out and see Sparky. First they arranged to have Homer email Jack some recent photos of Sparky with the kids, who was now as big as a pony. Once Jack was convinced that the pictures were unaltered, he offered to drive out from San Diego and take a look.

Jack arrived at their home just before a blizzard blew in, so they were kept inside for two days before they managed to pay Sparky a visit in his new cave home. On the way, they saw some tracks, which Homer knew were Sparky's prints, but which fascinated Jack.

"I've never seen such fresh prints," he exclaimed when he saw the first ones. "These look like those of the dinosaurs I've been trying to find. They're a little odd, like something which might have evolved from a dinosaur, but they're not too far off."

They got to the cave and Homer went in only to find Sparky looking thin and weak. Frankly, he looked like he was about ready to die, but Homer sure wasn't going to say that to the kids or Emma. He told Jack to come in, which the scientist did.

When Jack saw Sparky, his eyes lit up like he'd just found a mine of pure gold. "I can't believe it," he exclaimed. "It's real. You've got a real, bonafide dinosaur for a pet," as he was jumping up and down with joy.

"Professor Burns will never believe this. I'll be the youngest full professor in the history of San Diego State," he shouted loud enough to make me wince.

Sparky gave him a critical eye, like he was saying, "who is this nut?"

Then Sparky did something Homer had never seen him do: when Jack pulled out a camera, Sparky took a step toward him and cleared his throat like he was about to French fry Jack. "Put the camera away, now," Homer yelled at him.

Homer knew Jack had mere seconds to comply before Sparky would incinerate the visitor, and possibly him, too.

"Come on, just one shot," Jack pleaded. As Sparky coiled his head like a snake getting ready to pounce, Homer screamed, "put the camera away before we both fry."

Jack reluctantly complied. Then Sparky looked at Homer as if to say, "what have I done to deserve this? It seemed to that he acted like I'd just tried to hurt him and I knew my visit was over," Homer said.

At that point, Homer knew what had to be done: Sparky had to go home.

Jack, who was furiously scribbling notes on his way to the house, kept pestering Homer with questions and demands to use the phone. He wanted to pull in a team of game wardens to tranquilize Sparky then take him to a zoo where he could be prodded, probed and analyzed.

"If looks could kill, the ones I gave Jack would have made me a mass murderer many times over," Homer explained.

Just after they got home, another storm came out of nowhere and knocked out the phone lines, keeping Jack from reaching his office and calling for help, despite Homer's pleas and demands to the contrary.

Emma and Homer had a conference, just the two of us, before dinner. They agreed: Sparky was missin his ma and pa. A decision was made so they decided to load Sparky into the horse trailer and take him home that night.

Neither Emma nor Homer drink regular like, and as a rule, they don't keep booze in the house. But keeping Sparky safe long enough to take him home meant some desperate measures. Homer rummaged around in the back of a cupboard and found a bottle of vodka, an open container of gin and some brandy. With some syrup, sugar, spices and fruit juice, Homer was able to whip up what appeared to be a sweet, non-alcoholic punch. He also made up a second batch of the same stuff, but without the booze.

Emma meanwhile gathered all of the prints with Sparky in them and used them to light a fire in the fireplace. The digital images were erased and the hard drive where they were stored was professionally wiped to the point even the Department of Defense or the Infernal Revenue Service would have a hard time finding anything.

A few minutes later, dining by candlelight because the power was also out, they poured Jack a big glass of punch and toasted his "discovery" of Sparky. He said "dinosaur," they said "dragon."

Emma had added some hot spices to Jack's food, so he was drinking glass after glass of the punch while the rest of the family sipped theirs. Shortly after dinner, Jack said he felt strangely tired and excused himself to bed.

The kids, who were in on the plan, got bundled up while Homer went to get Sparky. Meanwhile, Emma hooked up the trailer, though Princess gave her the look of, "your taking my trailer? Without me? How dare you."

Sparky, who seemed barely able to walk, and wasn't interested in a charcoal snack, gave Homer a dirty look when he entered his cave. His ears perked up, though, when Homer told him they were taking him home. He gingerly lifted himself off the floor of his cave, which he could now see with the aid of a lantern had the carcasses of some other animals beside mice. There were coyote skins, and even something that might have once been a mountain lion. There were also lumps of what Homer would swear was gold, but no one had ever found any gold within hundreds of miles of their home, at least not that he knew about.

Homer managed to coax Sparky home and into the truck. He, Emma and the kids were headed out of the driveway before Jack came running out of the house waving for them to stop. Emma ignored him, while Homer did something really rude: He gave Jack the finger.

"After all, he wanted to cut apart a member of my family, and I wasn't going to sit still for that," Homer explained.

In the side view mirror, Emma and Homer could see Jack trying to start his rental car. "He's not going to get very far," Emma turned to Homer and said. About that time, innocent little Nancy spoke up from the back seat and held something up. "Mommy, what's this?" she said, pointing to a distributor's rotor.

Feeling a lot better, Homer relaxed as Emma got them out to the highway before Homer took over on the wheel. She went back to the trailer to be with Sparky while they communicated using the kids' walkie-talkies.

Nothing happened for the first few hours, but as they got closer to where they thought they had found Sparky, Emma reported that his ears perked up, like he was hearing sounds which humans couldn't. He began acting impatient, pawing the floor of the trailer,

like an anxious horse. His claws were so sharp and strong, that he was doing some serious damage to the trailer's floor. "Emma was actually worried the trailer might not hold together long enough for them to reach where they'd found Sparky, 'cause we were just guessing," Homer said.

As they got closer still, Sparky began exhaling jets of flame out the back of the trailer. If any vehicle had seen it, they would have thought the trailer was on fire. Fortunately, they had the road to themselves and there wasn't a cop in sight.

They were still a ways from where Sparky had been found, they thought, when Emma called Homer over the walkie-talkie. "Stop the truck right now," she said. "Sparky is acting like he's going to break the trailer down if we don't let him out."

About all the two of them could later figure out was that Sparky had been a long way from home when they first found him. Homer pulled onto the shoulder and Emma, who had to push an anxious Sparky away, started to unlatch the door. As she was doing it, and Homer was making his way to the trailer with both kids at his heels, they all heard an unearthly screeching noise in the sky.

They looked up and just above the trees, saw two shapes which looked a lot like Sparky except for one key difference. He was the size of a horse: they were the size of an airplane and their flames were longer than the truck and trailer combined.

Homer's first thought was for the safety of his family. "How am I going to protect them?" he wondered. His second thought was that maybe these were Sparky's relations, like his ma and pa.

About that time, Emma managed to get the door unlatched and Sparky sprang out into the night. He took a few steps then launched himself into the sky, heading straight for the other two dragons. He was still kind of skipping along, but he was definitely getting more air under those wings than Homer had thought possible.

Both Brad and Nancy looked at Sparky's departing backside with tears in their eyes. "Goodbye Sparky," they each said. "We'll miss you." Then the kids walked to Emma and Homer and started crying.

Sparky met the other two dragons on a nearby ridge where all three were silhouetted by the stars and full moon. He heard the kids crying and came right back. He bent his head first to Brad, then to Nancy, for a hug, and using his flexible neck, wrapped it around them hugging them back.

Homer came up to him and scratched Sparky's head one last time before saying, "Go on. Get out of here. You deserve to be with your own kind. But remember, you can always come visit us whenever you want."

Sparky stared right at Homer, like he was trying to say something important, then he ran and jumped into the sky as he flew off to rejoin his folks.

"It might have been something like: thanks for taking care of me. I left something for you to show how much I care. Now let me go so I can be free. I promise I'll come back and visit," Homer said.

"We got back in the truck and made our way slowly and somberly homeward, like we'd just lost a good friend, which we had," Homer added.

When they arrived home the next morning, Jack was there, and so were several police cars. The front area by the house had more cop cars in it than the average action movie. Jack, who was furious, and maybe a little hungover, threatened to have Homer arrested for releasing an extinct species. The cops, though, were just hanging around. Homer

could tell by the looks they were giving each other, they were wondering who this nut case was.

After the top cop, whose name Homer never got, asked why they had taken Jack's rotor and why we'd disappeared in the middle of the night, Homer told him they didn't want Jack driving, not given how drunk he was.

As to the trip, it was private, family business. Homer said they gone to say goodbye to a dear friend, and they didn't want strangers hanging around. Since this cop was Navajo, and they really understand the importance of family, he shrugged it off and told his men to get back to work.

Jack meanwhile threatened to sue Homer for every last cent he would ever make unless he told him what had happened to Sparky. Figuring what the heck, Homer told him, sort of. Homer lied about the location of where they released Sparky, putting Jack off by at least a couple hundred miles.

Once Emma put the rotor back in Jack's car, they told him his stay with them was at an end and said, firmly, that it was time for him to go. "What about those photos you sent me?" Jack asked.

"Those? I faked them. If you look carefully, you can see the brushstrokes on the chest where the dragon was painted on the cover of a book that I copied." Those "brushstrokes" were scales, Homer didn't say.

Of course Jack knew better than to believe Homer, having seen Sparky with his own two eyes. Now that the evidence was called into question, and Homer said it was faked, he doubted that anyone else would ever believe a word of his story.

Chapter Five

This little tale should just end right here, as Homer and his family struggle with their finances while Sparky roams free and Jack goes away a frustrated man, but it doesn't.

A few days after Jack left, Homer went to Sparky's old cave to see if there was indeed anything in it besides old bones. What he found under the pile of skins Sparky had been resting on were dozens of nuggets bigger than his fist, and each almost pure gold. His research into dragon lore had said they like to have a horde of riches, especially gold, but until then, Homer had never believed it.

Homer didn't know if Sparky would be upset, but he knew Jack might be back, so he took the gold to a spot several miles away only he knew about and reburied it. Homer went back to Sparky's cave and took the animal skins and bones out into the countryside before scattering them. He also looked carefully for all of Sparky's tracks and altered or erased them.

When Jack did return a few weeks later, just as Homer had expected, there was nothing for him to find in the cave except the bones of some mice. Jack left like he had been before, a frustrated and bitter man.

What happened to Homer and his family? Well that gold took care of their financial problems, especially when it was mixed with some dirt and rocks. Homer took care to only "find" and sell one or two nuggets at a time and many miles apart. Emma knew the real story, but Homer told people he had found them while out prospecting in the back of beyond.

So did they ever see Sparky again, you might ask?. On some nights when the moon is full and the sky is clear, Homer and Emma can hear him off in the distance. Every now and then, he'll set down for a spell and let the kids, who are grown now, pet him like they used to.

"No matter where he goes, or what he does, Sparky will always be the dragon in our family," Homer said.