

Chapter 1: First, Everybody Leaves You



“Hey! Is my husband here?” demands an ancient woman in a wheelchair as I’m searching for the activity coordinator who will orient me as the first animal-assisted therapist in the Golden View Nursing Home. I’ve signed in, draped matching purple photo IDs around Hannah’s neck and my own, and skirted two patients parked near the receptionist’s window because my dog is already making a fool of me. I take her aside for a little chat about her behavior, but Hannah’s obedience training has apparently been deleted and she’s got enough pull on the leash to dislocate my arm. Now she thinks she’s going to climb into this patient’s lap.

“Hannah, dammit, quit that!” I hiss, not the exactly correct command, but I’m getting a little rattled.

No matter. The old woman hasn’t noticed. She’s scrunched her eyes beneath her forehead, a low-slung storm cloud, to better peer into the distance behind me. I hoist Hannah back and say I’ll go find out about the missing husband. But the old woman cuts me off, flipping her wrist dismissively in front of her own face.

“Oh no. He’s dead,” she answers herself nonchalantly. Recovering the fact seems to cheer her. “What’that you’ve got there?”

I’m pleased by the question, of course. This is what we’re here for, my trusty trained dog and I. I square my shoulders and answer proudly. “This is Hannah.

She’s a Labrador retriever. This color is called chocolate. Would you like to pat her?”

As she considers, the cheer disappears. “I don’t know. Dogs are complicated.”

“You don’t need to take care of her. You can just pat her if you like.”

“Is it a boy dog or a girl dog?”

“She’s a girl.”

“Oh. The boys are even more complicated.”

I am undeterred. “Men can be like that, can’t they? But this one’s a girl. Much easier. Would you like to pat her?”

A pause, then a negative head shake. “Still too complicated. He’s dead, you know, my husband. Sooner or later they leave you. First thing you know, everybody leaves you.” Another dismissive wave in front of her own face, and she will not speak again.

This job is not going to be as easy as I thought. I’m not ready after all. Hannah’s not ready either. Who cares what tests we’ve passed? Training for this already appears as helpful as classes for fish on how to ride a bicycle. I remind myself that just yesterday Hannah and I hiked an unfamiliar section of forest where mounds of fallen leaves were so deep as to obscure the trail, if there even was a trail. I’d had no choice but to follow my instincts...and my dog.

The first day I met her, it's a good thing I didn't know I'd ever have to follow Hannah anywhere because I'd have panicked. An eggbeater on a trampoline might have been less in motion. I wanted a good look at the ten-month-old chocolate Labrador retriever we were adopting, but Hannah's greeting involved bouncing four paws off my torso while administering an exuberant French kiss. I squatted to aim a calming hand at her collar only to be knocked the rest of the way over and given a face, neck, and ear bath. "You don't get out much, do you girl?" I gasped, a canny observation of the exquisitely obvious.

Our feisty fourteen-year-old cockapoo had died. We'd loved Peaches and, against advice, kept him although we were constantly warning people—or apologizing to them—about his snapping. My closest friend has had Labs for years and my family had grown attached to old black Shadow and pup Betty, watching Shadow's muzzle gray and her gait falter by arthritis until the summer they had to put her down. But through years of trail hiking with Barbara and our dogs, I'd seen the reliability of the Labs' friendliness, their eagerness to please, the sweetness of their tolerance.

My husband, Alan, and I contacted the coordinator of a regional Lab rescue organization, a woman who takes in endangered or stray Labs, giving them medical care and remedial loving until she can find a family who is a good match. Hannah needed a home and attention; we wanted a young, people-loving, female Lab. "I have the perfect dog for you," Carol said when she called.

"This is an exceptional puppy without an aggressive bone in her body and equally without an ounce of training," she enthused through the phone. "She's spent an inordinate amount of time alone, muzzled so she won't cry and get the young woman who owns her evicted from a no-pets apartment. She's finally realized that much as she wants to keep Hannah, she just doesn't have the time or the place to meet a Lab's needs. She was going to donate her for training as a Seeing Eye dog, but she's called Lab Rescue instead because she thinks Hannah would be happiest if she can run and swim and play with other dogs and people, have a home like yours, if you get my drift. You're perfect for her. And she's perfect for you." Carol definitely hadn't said anything like this when we'd discussed other dogs, all of which had had some problem that gave me pause.

So I went to pick up this dog for whom we were so perfect, who was so perfect for us.

Ah yes. Perfect with one small exception: Hannah absolutely hated to be left home alone as I discovered when I went to the post office the next morning, a fifteen-minute trip which cost me one black dress shoe. The Puppy Retaliation-For-Being-Alone Diet for the first month included but was not limited to: one silk tree (expensive), numerous house plants (African violets in bloom preferred), my reading glasses, one bottle of Oil of Olay (made her coat nice and shiny), one Chapstick (made her lips...etc.), one framed picture of my daughter (who'd apparently annoyed Hannah by returning to college), twenty-four foil-packaged FiberBars (produced enough gas to power a small city), two double batches of brownies left to cool on the kitchen counter by some slow learner, one Birkenstock sandal, and a roll of toilet paper (assumed necessary after the brownies incident). The financial damage in the first week or so approached the cost of purchasing a Westminster Best of Show dog, and I thought we'd been tricked into adopting the devil's protégée. Plus, people staggered under the onslaught of her greeting; I was afraid she'd eventually overtax the local ambulance system.

In retrospect the obvious question flashes in neon: why on earth didn't we crate her? I have no excuse for such stupidity except that we were overly eager to make her happy and were also convinced that once she began getting exercise (the first owner had had no place to run her, and she was about ten pounds overweight as a result) she'd settle down. We were correct in that assumption. Sort of.

We began serious training. Hannah was brilliant in obedience school, one of two dogs who passed Level II and the American Kennel Club (AKC) Canine Good Citizen Test out of nine who'd been in that intermediate class. People still staggered under the onslaught of her greeting, but she'd sit nicely afterward. And her distaste for solitude continued unabated; even now, leave her alone and she's not above chowing down a roll of paper towels or amusing herself by removing all the little appointment cards and notes stuck to the refrigerator. Her coup de grace was eating the first obedience diploma she earned, displayed there like the children's report cards used to be.

And she seemed to enjoy the Christmas lights she took down for us, although unfortunately she didn't wait until the season was over.

Meanwhile, I was falling in love. I found myself saying things like, "I'll be back, Sweetheart, I promise," ad nauseum every time I had to leave the house however briefly. When I started taking her with me—not because she'd still be upset at being separated but because now I would—I knew it was all over. I have no idea how the first owner found the strength to give her up. It was an extraordinarily unselfish thing to do. I thanked and blessed her daily from the storehouse of gratitude Hannah's presence created in me. And I never forgot her first notion, that Hannah, this beautiful animal of long-tongued kisses and earnest work to please, would be an ideal service dog, because she was absolutely right. I'd been the recipient of such a gift that sharing her, giving service with her, seemed the right thing to do.

Most dog owners' faces soften with pleasure—with love—when they're asked about their animals. They think their dogs are unique in temperament, intelligence, perception. So I'll probably sound like other dog people when I claim that Hannah is remarkably suited to being a therapy dog, but it's the truth. For one, I've never heard her growl. She approaches all creatures from insect to human with interest, affection, and trust. As open-hearted and consistent as Labs generally are, Hannah has one extra trait making her an extraordinary dog for this work: a sense of humor. She cavorts with an eye to the audience, then stands back and absorbs their laughter like applause, her waving tail a flag of self-satisfaction.

As Hannah starred in ongoing advanced obedience classes with Alan, I applied to Therapy Dogs International (TDI), an organization that certifies teams to work in institutions like hospitals, nursing homes, special schools, and prisons, places where we know people benefit from direct animal involvement. First, the dog must pass the American Kennel Club (AKC) intermediate obedience test and be approved by a vet, then be tested by a TDI animal evaluator on obedience skills again as well as the ability to work around medical equipment and to tolerate clumsy patting, restraining hugs, startling noises, and sudden movements. (The Delta Society has extremely similar requirements—along with a lengthy training manual and video on which the handler is tested.

Both organizations provide insurance for the handlers of the animals they evaluate and accept, as well as photo IDs, special collars, and tags.)

Hannah had already earned the AKC obedience title before we applied. Given her innately affectionate nature, it didn't take much more work before she trotted through the TDI certification test, and I thought we were ready. I might have been a bit delusional, but that's what I thought.