

CHAPTER 3—LOANER DOG

Susan S. had problems of her own, so we'd formed a mutual support society and were calling each other several times a week to see if the other had bothered to get out of bed or get dressed or accomplish any to-dos. She had nine dogs at the time: half a dozen six-month-old puppies, their dam, and two older dogs.

The dogs were part of her problem. Feeding and dosing and grooming and walking and minding nine dogs didn't leave a lot of time for finding a job, much less selling the pups. My problem was simpler. I wasn't overwhelmed with tasks. I just lacked motivation. A few weeks after meeting the gorgeous dog in the parking lot at Easter, she asked if I'd like to borrow one of her seniors to see if the cats could tolerate a dog. I said okay. My heart sank a little at the word "senior," but it was just a test drive, right?

I met Susan S. at the ride-share lot off 280 on Page Mill road in mid-April. The 280 claims to be the most beautiful highway in America, and it may well be. We were facing California foothills, which I think of as sleeping lions: rounded, thinly clad in champagne-colored grasses, sinewed with canyons, and sparsely studded with round-crowned live oaks. Behind us, the wooded slopes of the Santa Cruz mountains rose steeply, thickly studded with multi-million-dollar, geologically and flammalogically precarious homes amid towering Douglas firs, madrone, and fuel-rich chaparral scrub. Susan S. was standing under a live oak by the van when I drove up, and had the cargo door open so Magnus the dog I'd met after church, could catch the breeze.

What's this woman doing here?

She's a tallish, handsome woman with long brown hair that she wears in various old fashioned styles, up or down. She is

sturdily built and in her middle age. She can be very hard to read. As you're talking to her, her eyes will go abstracted, or they'll go sharp, or she'll gaze off into the distance. You can hear the wheels turning, but she doesn't reveal the workings of her mind.

"There you are," she said, with a big, flashy smile. "I just bought him a new leash and collar, and brought enough food to last him for a couple of weeks." She took out a new choke collar and slid it on. "That's a perfect fit. You have to work a little to get it around his ears, which is the way it should be. Take it off when he's in the car or at home. I never want to see that collar on him in the car."

"Why?"

Her eyes went dark. "They can get hung up and die horribly. I've seen it. You don't want to." She was wearing a light yellow blouse, and a long cotton skirt with a pink-and-white floral pattern on it. It struck me as oddly femmy clothing for a strong-jawed, opinionated person who was casually wiping drool from her dog's chin with her bare hand.

I didn't think I could do that.

We got into choir-gossip for a while, which is always fun because the singers are all high-flying intellectuals with strong convictions. Susan was going on about her own strong convictions about Bible-based religion. I'm always interested in this—there are so many ways to read the Bible, and people always bring up something new.

I think I'll just amble off and entertain myself.

"Magnus, come here. NO." Susan said.

"He's just going to find a place to pee," I said.

"Yeah, you pee when and where I tell you to pee," she said, giving Magnus the look. He came back quietly.

It was clear that I was not as macho a dog person as Susan was. Then again, I've only had one dog, and she was a Labrador, and they're known for their good nature and obedience skills.

Kuvasz dogs are not known for either of those qualities, but I didn't know that. Yet.

Susan snapped a brand new, bright blue, nylon leash onto Magnus's collar, and handed me the loop at the other end. She got a kick out of watching him disappear into my little Nissan.

"Look! He just fits." She paused, tilted her head and smiled. "Your nice black upholstery..."

As if I cared.

The whole way home, Magnus whined and licked my face, drooled, barked at other dogs, barked at bicyclists, motorcycles, men wheeling strollers (?), and people carrying yellow plastic shopping bags (??). His bark was a big basso profundo WOOF. It made me jump and flinch when it went off directly into my ear. It was going off directly in my ear a lot. I tried to calm him, speaking softly and touching his neck.

Who are all these people? Where is she taking me?

Later that afternoon, I took him for a walk to introduce him to the neighborhood. He walked right beside me, on the yard-side of the sidewalk so he could sniff, see who had been there, when they'd been there, what they'd done, who he could expect to encounter in the future, and how he might expect them to act. I watched him, trying to see into him, but he was placid, not expressing much of anything that I could see.

I slipped his leash off to see what he would do. He continued to walk beside me calmly. After a minute or so, I snapped the leash back on.

He'd had some training.