

Chapter Six

Home Makeover

Sally and I knew everything there was to know about

adopting a dog and bringing him home. We'd read the books, talked to friends and relatives, and gleaned whatever wisdom we could on our dog-hunting visits to various SPCAs and shelters. No matter how the advice was presented, fancied-up, and elaborated, it pretty much boiled down to this: Love with Limits.

Dogs want and need to be loved. They're sensitive creatures keenly attuned to humans and eager to bond with us and love us back. But if you don't establish dominance and a clear chain of command early on, both you and your dog are likely to be locked in a miserable, endless power struggle that can drain you both. Dogs want to please us, we kept hearing, and they want a consistent set of rules for how to do that. It's in their interests and in their natures. So one of the most important ways of loving a dog and showing you care is to show that you're the boss. A benevolent one, but the boss all the same.

The problem with all this is that dogs don't read, watch public television programs about dog-training methods, or listen to the pronouncements of the experts. It's every bit as much in dogs' interests and their natures to run wild, eat anything and everything they can find, and do precisely what they want as it is for them to toe the line and please us. And that doesn't even account for the particularly strong determination that a traumatized animal might have to do things his own way.

The moment we brought him into the house, the no-longer-Gandalf but still unnamed dog we'd just acquired set out to claim his new territory. That was one way of looking at it, as he dropped his nose to the ground and began vacuuming the living room, dining room, and hallway for scents, bits of food, and who knows what else. But natural curiosity about a new place seemed only a small part of what was driving him. From the frantic way he was going about it, angling across one room and doubling back, sweeping along a wall and suddenly stopping in place, glaring in our direction if any of us moved and otherwise ignoring us, he was behaving like a wild beast caged up with his captors and desperately searching for a way out.

I could identify. If our newest family member felt trapped by his strange new surroundings, I shared the feeling. The more the dog nervously patrolled the downstairs, the smaller and more confining our house seemed. I felt more than a little cornered myself.

"How long do you think he's going to do this?" I asked. It was like watching a pinball careen around without racking up any points.

Phoebe plugged into her sympathetic instincts and got down on the floor. "It's okay, boy," she soothed, as the dog zoomed by

and headed upstairs. “That’s right. Look around. This is your new house.” She clambered after him, a look of serious purpose fixed on her face. Our daughter, who had surprised us with her interest in seventh-grade science after previously despising anything involving a test tube or a number, was taking a methodical, orderly approach to the dog’s adjustment. She seemed to regard it as a real-world environmental challenge. That was fine, but I was feeling panicked about what we’d just done. As soon as Phoebe followed not-Gandalf upstairs, Sally and I had our first chance to talk freely. First I confirmed that she’d heard what the people at the shelter had said about the dog’s history with men.

“I heard,” she said. “I heard all of it. Getting any dog is taking a chance. We knew that going in.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not a man.”

“And you are,” she shot back. “Get over it. Here, help me with this.”

She was unfolding the clear plastic drop cloth we’d gotten at the hardware store. The plan was to line the dining room floor with it and make that room the dog’s mistake-proof zone in the house. We attached the plastic to the bare floor beyond the carpet with blue tape. I’d brought the old folding wooden gates from Phoebe’s toddler years up from the garage and stretched them across all three doorways. Once used to prevent our daughter from tumbling downstairs, they’d now keep the dog confined to quarters. Sally put the dog’s heavy-duty plastic sleeping crate in what she thought was the coziest nook of the room, behind the cabinet we use to store lightbulbs, half-used rolls of tape, and takeout menus.

“Phoebe!” she called upstairs. “Bring him down so we can show him his bedroom.”

Our daughter arrived with the dog in her arms.

“See how he likes it,” Sally coached.

Phoebe set the dog down as gently as possible. For a moment he froze in place. Then he unfroze all at once, tearing at the plastic with his front and back paws and barreling straight at one of the gates, just as he had done at the shelter. But instead of jumping up on it, he shied away at the last moment, as if the gate were electrified and sending off some warning sizzle. The same thing happened with the other two gates he approached.

“It’s pretty weird,” I said, “but I guess it’s going to work. I don’t know about the plastic, though. Looks like we’re going to need something thicker.”

As he continued to circle the room, the dog was making quick work of our temporary flooring. The plastic was soon bunched up in some spots and shredded in others. The blue tape was the next target. He clawed at one corner of it by the kitchen and tried to pull it loose with his teeth.

“Hey, stop that,” I called. That earned me a brief, sidelong look before he went right back to work.

“He must like the smell of it,” Phoebe said. “Or maybe it’s something about the color. It matches his blanket.” Phoebe was in full amateur scientist mode, observing, speculating, postulating. I liked imagining her in a white lab coat, even if her hypotheses made no sense to me. But then I was already getting

used to feeling disoriented by having this animal in the house.

“Do we have any of that black electrical tape?” Sally wondered. “That might work better.”

She was about to look for it in the cabinet drawer when the dog, in a sudden burst of inspiration, left off gnawing at the blue tape, gathered himself, and took another run at the gate that closed off the wide entrance to the living room. This time he kept going and cleared it with room to spare in a great arching leap. It left us speechless for a moment, the way a pole vaulter does when he snaps skyward and soars over the bar. We stood there on the tattered plastic and watched him go, his thick tail lifted in triumphant salute.

Several hours later, after we’d had dinner and Phoebe had taken the dog for a walk and we’d tried unsuccessfully to feed him—he was apparently too stressed to eat or even drink any water—we gathered in the dining room again to settle him down for the night. Sally thought it might be a good idea if we all sat on the floor.

“We must look gigantic to him,” she said.

“We are,” I agreed. “Aren’t we supposed to be?”

“Dogs are just like us, Daddy,” Phoebe instructed me. “They need to feel confident and feel good about themselves. We have to do everything we can to help.” She’d been hearing that sort of message about the values of empathy and community since kindergarten and apparently learned it well. If it was true about people, why not about dogs?

“You’re right, sweetie.” I crawled over toward the dog, who was lurking behind Sally’s outstretched leg. He was watching me closely but didn’t seem too perturbed by my approach until my hand got snagged in the torn plastic and I freed it with a tug. That made him start and pull back.

“No sudden movements,” Sally scolded, as the dog skittered away.

Phoebe had arranged his blue blanket inside the crate and left the door of the little compartment open. She went over to gather the dog up in her arms and introduce him to his sleeping space. A few pats on his tail end induced him to enter.

“Wow, look at that,” I said. “He likes it. It must feel reassuring to him, like that place under the desk in the visiting room. Remember what Katarina said about terriers burrowing into holes?”

The dog’s tail and then the rest of him popped into view. He backed out of the crate a lot more quickly than he’d gone in.

“What happened?” I asked.

“He found the treat,” Phoebe said.

“You put a treat in there for him?” I said, signaling my disapproval of more food bribery.

“That’s right, Steven,” Sally said. “How do you suggest we get him in there?” I knew to back off when she used my name like that. It had been a long, eventful day, and we were all worn out by the excitement and the stress. I changed the subject.

“So what are we going to call him? He needs a name if he’s not going to be Gandalf.”

Sally suggested Prosecco, in tribute to the sparkling wine we’d liked in Italy. “Since he’s so bubbly and full of life.”

“I didn’t have any of it,” Phoebe objected. “Anyway, I decided

I don't want to name him after something you eat or drink."

"What's the Italian word for 'jump'?" I mused. "He really can fly for a little dog." He was roaming around again at the moment, and it looked to me as if he might be considering another steeplechase run over one of the gates.

"Or what about some famous Italians?" said Sally. "There's Dante and Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. And Pavarotti—Luciano Pavarotti."

"Isn't he that fat guy?" asked Phoebe. "We can't name a little dog after a big fat guy who sings opera." Her face scrunched up.

"Palladio," Sally tried. "Remember? We visited all those big houses he built on the way into Venice. His nickname could be Pal."

Phoebe seemed to consider that for a moment. It was in Venice, after all, that we'd told her she could have a dog. That had to mean something. I thought about suggesting Gondola or Marco (for Piazza San Marco) or Doge the Dog. But I could see she didn't need any help. Phoebe's face had gotten that still, inward look it gets when she's made up her mind. Her lower lip pulls in under her front teeth, and her eyes seem to turn a little greener and more focused. She got up, cornered the dog by the hutch, and stood facing us with him in her arms.

"Como," she said.

"Perry?" I asked, without thinking that a twelve-year-old couldn't possibly remember that old crooner in the cardigan sweater.

Sally understood. "No, like the lake."

Phoebe nodded. We had spent a couple of days at Lake Como on our trip, including one when we took a boat ride out of Bellagio at dusk. The silky water, the mountains rising on either side of the lake, the idea of the Swiss Alps being so close, the other boats like great gift boxes of floating light—it had all enthralled her. One dream was merging with another. Sally and I smiled at each other and then at her.

"Perfect," one of us said.

"Como it is," said the other. It was time for bed.

Phoebe did the honors of settling him in for his first night at home. She set Como down by the crate and held on to his collar with one hand while she fluffed up the blanket with the other. He went in reluctantly but without putting up a fight. Phoebe got him turned around so he was facing forward, then shut and latched the door. Each one of us took a turn looking in through the metal-grate window in the door.

"Lie down, Como," Phoebe told him. "Be a good boy and go to sleep. That's a good boy. Lie down."

Sally was next. She went on in more or less the same vein. When I got down on my knees to peer in, the dog was still standing bolt upright, a look of pure astonishment on his harried face. His bony back grazed the top of the crate, and his slim front legs were firmly braced. He looked both miserable and determined to do something about it. I decided to act as if all was well.

"Good night, Como," I called out to him, as I backed away from the crate. "We'll see you in the morning." We turned out the lights and went upstairs.

Our house, which is located four blocks south of Golden Gate Park in the western part of San Francisco, is generally cool and comfortable at night, especially in summer, when the frequent heavy fogs act as a natural cooling system. We usually need a blanket or two in September. But not that year. The month had started out sunny and hot and stayed that way. With the windows wide open as we got ready for bed, the street noise of people and cars and passing buses distracted us from what was going on downstairs. Phoebe popped into our room three or four times to tell us exactly what to do with Como the next day, when she was at school. Sally, a teacher of English as a second language at San Francisco City College, had classes in the morning and got home by noon or one o'clock. I often worked on my *Chronicle* assignments at home.

"I'll take over on the weekend," our proud new dog-owning daughter assured us. We said good night to her and turned out the lights.

Darkness magnifies everything. The moment Sally and I pulled the sheet up over us we heard it—a heavy rhythmic thumping. Since a dread of earthquakes is hardwired into every San Franciscan, I assumed the worst and waited for the bed to start shaking and the window glass over our heads to rattle. Sally caught on first.

"It's him," she whispered. "What's he doing?"

The thumping stopped. The house got very still. Then the noise started up again, this time accompanied by a songlike whining that went up and down a couple of octaves, guttural at the bottom and keening, eerily catlike, at the top. Thump. Bump. Thump-thump. I could hear what had to be the crate banging against the cabinet or the wall or both.

"What should we do?" Sally said, her own voice scaling up. She'd been the model of solidity and common sense all day, supporting Phoebe through her glorious Day of the Dog and dialing back my own balkiness and anxiety along the way. Almost immediately, as it often happens when she lies down at night, her own demons were set loose. There's something about being horizontal and poised on the lip of sleep and the unpredictable chaos of dreams that makes Sally helpless in the face of her own sprinting imagination. I heard it right away in her voice.

"Nothing," I suggested, knowing that was an unlikely strategy. I was trying to sound as if I were in control when I was really just stalling for time to think of something better. The assault downstairs was escalating. The thuds and whimpers had taken on a purposeful if irregular pattern. It was like listening to an amateur carpenter who had taken on a job he couldn't handle, each hammer blow more futile and enraged than the last. The dog's half-strangled howls could have been the canine equivalent of him swearing under his breath.

"We can't just lie here," Sally said. "It's going to wake up Phoebe. She's got school tomorrow. She won't get any sleep, and she'll be completely exhausted, and she's just started all her new classes." I hopped out of bed and told her I'd go check. Whatever I found had to beat listening to more of that. "Don't upset him," she called after me.

Como must have heard me on the stairs. Things were quiet as I stood in the front hall in my underwear to wait him out.

After a few minutes the thumping started up again, but there was also another sound now that we hadn't heard upstairs—a stubborn grinding that old gears or a stone mortar and pestle might make. It was persistent but not steady, and came in the lulls between thumps. I crept closer and listened some more. Once again the dog must have sensed my approach and stopped whatever he was doing.

When I finally peeked over the shortest of the three gates we'd rigged up, I could see that Como had thrust his crate out of the nook and had it angled six feet away from the wall and halfway under the dining room table. He must have done it by propelling himself against the sides of the crate, which didn't have much space inside to maneuver. It was alarming but also impressive in a way—all that willpower. I decided to take it up with him directly.

“Look at you,” I said, stepping over the gate and walking across the sticky plastic in my bare feet. “That’s a whole lot of noise you’re making down here. What’s the idea?” When I bent over to look into the crate, I didn’t see him. I knew there was no way he could have gotten out—Houdini’s dog couldn’t have managed that—but it took a moment to register that the gray shadow pressed against the back wall was him.

“What’s going on in there?” I asked him, sitting down to get acquainted. It was our first real time alone. Como didn’t make a sound or a move of any kind. After a minute or two I put a hand on top of the crate and slid it back into the nook where we’d first placed it. I’d read the books; I was asserting my credentials as a firm but fair boss. “Isn’t that better?” I asked. That produced a quick rustle at the back of the crate. He’d turned around and had two dark, unblinking eyes trained on me.

“Okay,” I said after another five minutes of dominanceestablishing silence. “All set for the night.” I went back upstairs and got under the sheet. We’d dispensed with the comforter in the heat.

“What was it?” said Sally, who was wide awake. “What did he do?”

I told her about the way he’d moved the crate out into the room and how I’d moved it back, then realized I hadn’t determined anything about the grinding noise. We both lay there, staring at the ceiling and waiting to hear what would happen next. As soon as the thumping resumed, as we must have known it would, Sally propped herself up on her elbow and started in about school again. This time it was her own schedule she was thinking about. Her teaching load required her to be up and out the door by a little after seven a.m.

“I’ve *got* to get some sleep,” she said. “What if it goes on like this all night? And tomorrow night? It’s so hot,” she added, flinging off the sheet and flipping over on her stomach. “Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe he’s just roasting inside that thing.”

“It’s not that hot downstairs,” I said. “It’s always hotter up here.”

“We should have gotten the fans out,” said Sally. “Phoebe’s probably burning up in there.”

“Phoebe’s sound asleep,” I said.

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But don’t you think we’d know it if she wasn’t?”

“I don’t know if we’d know. She plays possum and pretends she’s asleep.”

“Why would she be doing that tonight?”

“Why do you think?”

By this point it didn’t matter what either of us said or what it was about. We were playing marital tennis, where the ball can change size, color, weight, and direction and even disappear when it’s over the net.

“I’ll go down and check on him again,” I volunteered, hoping to put an end to this particularly pointless volley.

“No,” Sally said. “Don’t do that. You’ll just get him stirred up again.” She reached out and put a hand on my arm. “Wait. What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“That,” she said, and didn’t have to explain. She was hearing the grinding now. We both were. It had become a steady, pronounced drone that continued for a minute or ninety seconds, paused, and started up again. The thumps and bumps had stopped. The grinding/drilling/sawing sound had taken over.

“What’s he *doing*?” Sally whispered, her eyes widening like those of an actress in some straight-to-video horror film.

“We can’t keep going down there,” I said. “That’s just giving in to him. He’s got to get used to sleeping by himself.”

Once we’d agreed not to pay any further visits downstairs, there was nothing else to do but try to get some sleep. I heard the 6 Parnassus go by a few times, the overheard wires zinging softly as the bus crossed our street at the corner and continued up Ninth Avenue. The sound of it gradually merged with Como’s wailing high notes, and at some point I drifted off. I don’t know when or even if Sally fell asleep, but a few minutes after four a.m.—the alarm clock was inches from my face when she shoved my shoulder—she had news.

“He’s gone,” she said. “Wake up.”

“What? Who’s gone?” I said, groping simultaneously for consciousness and my glasses. A couple of hours of sleep had momentarily wiped the dog from my memory.

“Listen!”

Sure enough, small clawed feet were on the loose downstairs. We could hear the clicking move toward the front door and back down the hallway to our study and then into the kitchen. I got up and put on my bathrobe. I needed to be at least semi-dressed to feel fully prepared. Sally was up, too, cinching the sash of her own robe. I followed her downstairs. When Como heard us, he shifted into high gear, scrabbling around in the kitchen and skidding on one of the throw rugs. I stepped in something wet and still a little warm at the bottom of the stairs and decided not to stop and confirm the obvious.

“You go that way,” I told Sally, pointing down the hallway. “We’ll try to corner him.” That meant me stepping over one gate into the dining room and another into the kitchen. Those were moves that proved to be trickier in a bathrobe than they had been earlier in shorts or my underwear. Landing in another puddle when I crossed the first gate, somehow, kept me from

tripping. The surprise of it held me up.

“I’ve got him,” Sally called out.

“Did he pee in there, too?” I called back at her. I could see now, from the kitchen light she’d turned on, the wreckage of the crate. It looked as if it had been pried open with a giant can opener. I pulled back the top to get a closer look. Como, astoundingly, had gnawed through the thick plastic hinges to make his escape. That, apparently, was what all the grinding had been. The blue blanket was now a heap of fuzzy tangled strips and scraps; a mechanical shredder couldn’t have done a more thorough job on it. I stood there and tried to take it in, to grasp what I could plainly see but still seemed incomprehensible. We were living with an alien.

“Yes, he peed,” Sally said. “What are you doing in there? I can’t hold on to him and clean it up.”

I stepped over the second gate into the kitchen and told her what I’d found. Sally had Como in her arms. With his face wrenched away, as if to see behind her out the window, he could have been a dusty old fur muff she’d found in a costume shop. The sky behind them was showing the first pale pink light of day. We spent the next twenty minutes finding the places where Como had decorated the carpets, throw rugs, and hardwood floors. There were quite a few of them. Neither of us said much as we mopped up and moved on. Eventually, with the dog still riding around in Sally’s arms, we went upstairs.

“Any ideas?” my wife asked me.

I was fresh out. She put the dog down on the floor of our bedroom to see what would happen. After one brief tour of the room, he picked out a spot near the bed on Sally’s side and flopped down with his head between his front paws. It had been a long, busy night for all three of us. Sally and I crawled back under the sheet and tried to pretend the sun wasn’t coming up. When my eyes popped open at one point, I was staring into Sally’s. She stared back and blinked a few times. Then her eyes narrowed and glittered for a moment in the gray morning light.

“It’s going to be him or us,” she said calmly. “I think we’ve got to kill him.”

“I totally agree. How are we going to do it?”

“Pills,” she said. “Poison his food.”

“Gas,” I proposed. “Or stones in a canvas bag and into a pond. That’s how my uncle got rid of extra kittens on the farm.”

“Horrid,” Sally said.

“True,” I concurred. “But effective.”

Marlene Dietrich and Groucho Marx couldn’t have played the scene better—half high-style melodrama and half absurdist comedy. Sally reached over and pawed my cheek. I returned the favor by scratching her behind the ear. It felt familiar and companionable, the two of us awake and loony for lack of sleep, just as we had been when our infant daughter needed to be nursed or changed or cuddled at three a.m. That’s how we got through those nights, turning from misery to joking blackly as we hauled ourselves out of bed. With luck, it would see us through whatever Como had in store.

“I love you, you big lox,” Sally said, mauling me one last time with her hand.

“What, now I smell like smoked salmon?”

“Ox,” Sally clarified. “I said ‘ox.’—‘I love you, you big ox.’ ”

“I love you, too,” I answered, flopping over on my side. “And it’s a good thing. We’re going to need a lot of it.” Drowsy at last, we slept.

As for any worries about Phoebe’s next day in school, that wasn’t an issue. A few hours later, when our daughter’s alarm clock started beeping down the hall, she woke up rested and thrilled to start her first full day with a dog in the house.