

Black Dog Diaries Volume 1

by Susan Purvis

I'm not a stay-at-home dog. I have a job. I am a wilderness worker. I go out with my handler, Susan and look for lost people in the woods, buried beneath avalanches, or drown under water. Our Colorado condo sits in a neighborhood one block from a world-class ski resort where I have access to wide-open, unrestricted terrain. Only a handful of residents live on our street which is great for a free-roaming dog like me. I don't have to worry about getting mowed down by fast-moving automobiles.

This is story for my owner during my seventh year in Crested Butte. Susan is the same age in doggy years, mid-life and 48. She tells me I have about five good years left before I'll be too stiff and old to search anymore.

I am a black Lab, wearing my glow-in-the dark collar, operating on a 9 volt battery. I must wear it so Susan can keep tabs on me. She spent \$56 on the thing and shipped it from Canada so I couldn't blow her off anymore. She was sick of me disappearing into the drainage ditch or vanishing in the night, ignoring her pleas to come home. Now she's either got a glow collar on me, or an annoying tinkle bell she brought back from Nepal, or the dreaded shock collar. She even bought a "fake" shock collar so I couldn't tell if the real one was on or not, all so she could keep track on my whereabouts. And I'm thinking, all this? Why didn't she just teach me to "Come," like other dogs do when their owner calls them?

I'm not much of a retriever, maybe that's why I don't come. I couldn't care less about bringing a stick back. She stands there yelling, hands slapping her thighs, "Tasha, here. Bring the stick." At first, she's all cheery-eyed and enthusiastic, talking me in that annoying high squeaky voice.

Most of the time, I ignore her and continue to play, tossing a thick stick in the air, one I can barely get my jaws around. I love sinking my teeth into the hard wood, chomping it in half, and stripping bark.

If I disobey, she gets pissed, and her tone and posture change, "Tash. Bring it here."

I stop what I'm doing and stare at her. She'll stare back, waiting for me to make a move. Often, I'll roll on the stick, dropping to my right shoulder, feet in the air, and land on my back, spine swishing back and forth, rubbing against stick and dirt. I pulse my legs up in the air, joyous with self-amusement.

Then, I'll hear her growl, "Tasha, you little shit. Come Here, NOW!" Followed by the classic posturing: stamping her foot, pointing her finger to the ground.

Like intimidation is a good way to teach loyalty?

Once my owner has gone thru her repertoire of escalating anger, her command usually works. I jump to me feet, stare at her red face, which puffs up like a blow fish, reminding me of an over inflated balloon

I'd love to pop with my canines. I drop my stick, but, remind her, "I ain't fetchin, lady." I saunter to her with my eyes avoiding hers, tail slightly tucked under my bum.

But over the years, I've brought home some treasures. Like a shiny new 9 mm pistol—to be exact—in a rawhide case. I picked it up underneath a truck at the neighbor's condo. The dumb ass owner, probably drunk when he came home, must have dropped it when he opened the truck door. I found it the next morning when Sue let me out to take a quick pee. It was six degrees outside. She was too lazy to get up, put on clothes and walk me. So, she set me free. She thought I'd stay close—hah! I gallivanted down the street with Molly, another black Lab and BFF. Molly is what you call the "perfect" field trial Lab, all satin with long legs for jumping and running fast. I'm a plodder and a lover, not much of a runner. I don't have Molly's looks either. I'm sort of full-figured: big chest, short legs. But, I'm the smart and clever one.

Anyway, Sue did turn the gun over to the cops. Too bad, I think it was worth a couple thousand dollars. She could have used the money to buy me fresh elk steaks and lamb chops. Once, I also fetched a brand new pair of Oakley sunglasses, still in the case, while we were hiking in the mountains. Some poor guy must have left them on a rock during a stop. Why else would you leave your sunglasses behind? Sue wore those glasses for years.

I'm not entirely sure I am a dog. I have a ravenous appetite like a bear. Yet, I move sleek and silent like an otter, especially in water. No one hears or sees me. I love water. I also love the cold. Maybe, I'm a bear in an otter suit. But, probably not, because I am a great search dog. I'll tell you that story later.

My food habit is like a drug. I can't help it. Sue gives me meager rations that would starve a miniature poodle, a dry cup at 7 am and another at 3:30. Since most of the time I run free, I scout for food, seeking potential open doors, especially ones where kitty cats and dogs live.

In Aspen, Colorado, at the house of another dog handler, I happened to wander by the open garage door and caught a scent of food, up there, on the work bench four feet tall. With my stump legs, I couldn't jump that high, although my friend Molly could have. But the owner thoughtfully parked a shiny red Mercedes convertible next to the bench. So I climbed onto the fender, and scrabbled across that darn slippery paint onto the wooden bench. Success! I buried my nose in the five pound sack of cat food and chowed down. That's how Sue found me, about two-thirds through my feast, when she shrieked and yanked me off the counter.

In order to maintain my full figure, I must seize every opportunity to scrounge. I know how to access tightly secured tin cans and plastic garbage bins. I can paw open pantry doors and nose open sliding glass doors. When Sue notices I'm missing she'll find clues to my whereabouts. Her first stop is the Hoogie House, the neighbors across the street. Sue will dash up the stairs to see if their pantry door is open. If it is, she usually finds my black butt up in the air and my face down in the bag. When she jerks my collar I come up coughing and gagging as dry kibble shoot out of my mouth.

Since I am a search and rescue dog, I fly in airplanes and helicopters. Ride escalators. And in motor boats and rafts. On special days, I ride in department store shopping carts. I even climb ladders and rappel off

cliffs. I am good at what I do. I find people when humans can't. To work that hard, a dog has to keep up her strength, so I'm always vigilant for food.

Our lives have changed. I'm not seven and not with her anymore. She was right. I worked until 12 and died of a brain tumor a year later. Floating around in doggy heaven gives me the opportunity to peek in on her. I check to make sure she's doing the things she said she would. Sue talks to me almost daily when she walks through the front door on her Montana home. That tinkle bell I once wore around my neck now hangs on her door knob. This is the house we moved to after I retired from my search dog career in Colorado. She says hello as she tosses her car keys on the granite counter top inside her cold, dark house. She'd rather wear a down jacket inside than turn on the heat. I wag my tail, but she can't see that. The house is empty and a lot quieter than when I lived there, my nails constantly ticking across the hardwood. The only life is a few house plants. They struggle to survive. She's never been good at keeping house but I bet she wishes she'd find a few black hairs balls I always left for her. She promised me she'd write a book about our adventures together and the people and dogs that influenced our lives.

So my job now is to hound her.