

Daisy



Daisy arrived in our lives as if she'd been dropped on the porch by a helicopter dousing a blazing fire. Suddenly, she was there, and we had no idea why. Just as suddenly, the plan would become clear to us, further down the road.

On a bitter, gray Friday in January, I stopped at the La Plata County Humane Society to renew licenses for Sophie and Tucker. I filled out the forms and handed them to the pretty, blonde lady at the front desk. After perusing the data, she uttered those fateful words:

“Oh, golden retrievers. Would you like another one?”

I laughed and said, “I always want another one.”

“A little six-month-old female was turned in an hour ago,” Pretty Blonde Lady said with a beguiling smile.

My heart stopped. It was as if God himself had stepped into the office and said, “Here’s your next dog.” How could I not at least take a look at her? It seemed too perfectly orchestrated to ignore.

“She’s still in quarantine, so I can’t bring her out for you,” said this woman, who was about to change our lives so dramatically. “But you can look at her through the window.”

With a bit of trepidation—*What was I thinking?*—I peered into the back holding area. The pup was young, energetic and cute as a bug. I stepped back, took a deep breath, and said, “Okay, let me fill out the papers for her. But I have to bring my husband in to meet her, too, and our other dogs as well.”

Breathing a little rapidly, my hand shaking just a bit, I filled out more forms and drove home to ponder what this would mean. We’d had three dogs before and it was a little more work, but so much fun. Of course, one of those dogs had been Nikki. We considered her more human than dog, since she was never cause for concern, always well mannered and a superb traveler.

But our household was so settled. At nine, Tucker was solid as a rock, placid and a kind, loving soul. Sophie was seven, still in her prime, energetic but polite, and sweetness to the core. Days were predictable, life was tranquil, and we were a congenial, comfortable family.

I fixed a nice dinner, poured Walter a second glass of wine, and then broached the subject. “There’s a young golden in the shelter. She’s just six months old and has already had two homes. What would you think about looking at her?”

“Well, she needs a home,” he said, “and we have one.” I was stunned. Maybe between God’s intervention and Walter’s receptivity this was meant to be.

Sunday afternoon, we took Sophie and Tucker with us to the shelter to meet Daisy. Walter and I waited in the private meet ’n greet room, agreed that if we both liked her, it was a done deal. The door burst open and a leggy flurry of blonde dog burst in, pulling on the leash. “Take as long as you like,” the shelter worker said, and closed the door behind her.

By that time, Daisy had charged up to both of us, spun around the room at least three times and continued to sniff the corners, as if she were tracking a prime rib.

“She’s pretty cute,” Walter said.

“How can you tell? She hasn’t stopped long enough for me to see her face or even put a hand on her.”

We managed to reel in the whirling dervish long enough to pat her, appreciate her big brown eyes, and then, she was off again. Her frenzied energy should have been a red flag to me, but I was already smitten and had decided to go for broke. “Let’s take her for a walk with Sophie and Tucker.”

In the parking lot, we leashed up our two and let them jump down to meet Daisy. All three circled around, sniffed various body parts, and then seemed comfortable with each other. We walked up and down a bit, and decided the trio could work.

“Let’s do it!” we agreed, and returned with Daisy to the front desk to finalize the deal.

Daisy needed to be spayed before we could adopt her. That was scheduled for Monday morning, so we could return in the afternoon to pick her up. When we arrived, she was still well under the influence of the anesthetic, but was given the green light to head for home with us.

Mindful of the issues involved in introducing a new dog into the household, we used metal exercise pens to cordon off a quiet area for Daisy in the TV room. Groggy and unsteady on her feet, she stumbled into her pen and slumped into a heap on her fluffy new bed. Sophie and Tucker circled around, curious, but polite, as we’d expected. Within an hour, poor Daisy vomited up an ill-timed meal from earlier in the day, and looked pitiful. We cleaned her up, replaced her bedding, and walked her outside. Then, I curled up in

the pen, her limp body sprawled next to me, her head in my lap. “Oh, you poor dear,” I said and stroked her gently. “You’ll feel better in the morning.” After we patted her goodnight, the rest of her new family trundled upstairs for bed, hoping we’d all sleep well and the sun would rise on a happier camper.

I padded downstairs the next morning, and was greeted by a new dog. Daisy, alert and perky, stood atop those long legs, grinning, begging to get the day started with a bang.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I cautioned and clipped a leash to her collar. “You’re supposed to stay quiet for the next week, so you can heal.” Daisy ignored my caveat, put her front paws on the top of the pen, and continued to wiggle from end to end.

“Off!” I commanded and opened the gate to walk her outside.

I could scarcely believe what I saw. This couldn’t be the same sorry dog I’d cuddled the night before. With no sign of post-operative pain, no apparent memory of her upset stomach, and every intention of dragging me across the yard in pursuit of any evidence of wildlife, Daisy hit her stride way faster than I did that morning, and she would for years to come.

This being Tuesday, I was packing for a long-planned trip on Wednesday to visit friends Margo and Jenny in the Seattle area.

“Are you sure you’re okay managing the threesome?” I asked Walter.

“Oh, sure,” he answered in his usual casual manner. “How hard can it be?”

“Just keep everyone separated until I get home. Then, you won’t have any worries or surprises.”

Wednesday evening, I phoned home from Washington. “How’s everything going?”

“Pretty good,” Walter said. “Except she ate her leather leash.”

“The whole thing?”

“Pretty much.”

“How did that happen?”

“I didn’t want to leave her home unsupervised, so I brought her skiing with me,” Walter said. “I left her in the Explorer, with her bed and water. I guess I forgot to hide her leash. I called the vet and he said it would just have to work its way through her. But you have a good time and don’t worry about anything here.”

Hmm. This may be more of a challenge than we expected. But Walter still sounded cheerful, and he was trying to do the right thing for the new kid on the block.

Thursday night, I called again. “How did it go today?” I said, somewhat hesitantly.

“Today she ate the seat belt.” This time, Walter sounded a little less enchanted with the leggy blonde. “I had a meeting in town, so I brought her with me. I even went out to check on her a couple of times each hour. She was always sitting in the driver’s seat, looking out at the world. But as soon as I left, she must have returned to her work. She severed that strap as cleanly as if she’d used a scalpel!”

Uh oh. Things were going from bad to worse. From a small price tag to a big-ticket item, the girl seemed to be setting her sights higher. But at least her first indiscretion hadn’t caused any GI problems.

Over the next several days, when I phoned in to check on the destruction derby, Walter gave shorter and less detailed reports. All four of them were surviving, and I would be

home soon. But it was a rocky start to life in the Pfau house for Daisy.



For the next week or so, we continued to set up pens and move barriers around the house, so Sophie and Tucker could become comfortable with Daisy's presence, while we observed doctor's orders for her incision to heal. They both seemed somewhat interested, but showed no hostilities toward the newcomer. Daisy, meanwhile, was stockpiling her unspent energy and enthusiasm to explore her new digs. When we thought it safe, we opened the doors to the back of the property for all three to become better acquainted.

Tucker trotted up the hill to sniff fresh tracks from whatever night visitors had crossed his domain. Sophie raced over the same territory with her usual speed and grace. But Daisy put them both to shame when she attempted a new land speed record, all the while sniffing, spinning and stretching those long legs.

The threesome returned to the back deck on this unseasonably mild and sunny February afternoon. We watched their interactions and felt pretty confident that this was going to work.

Then, Tucker voiced a different opinion. Daisy had sailed toward him, almost sliding into him on the deck in her eagerness to get a game going. From somewhere in the depths of his being, Tucker summoned a growl that meant business, claimed his territory, and set limits for the youngster. As if to say, "Get out of my face—NOW!" the ferocity of his snarl shocked us. Startled, Daisy found her brakes, and skidded to one side to avoid a collision. Undaunted, she scampered off to play with Sophie.

Daisy decided to return to the deck one more time, and again rushed Tucker to see if he'd changed his mind. Nope—this rebuff sounded even fiercer, a “Don't even think about it!” with severe consequences threatened if she did. This time, Daisy stepped back, almost with respect. They never had words again, although she'd occasionally hurtle toward him, realize her mistake, then change course on a dime, and remember, “Oh, yeah. You don't do play. Okay.”

It was a very clear lesson in dominance from the pack leader. We'd never seen it from Tucker before, but never before had he needed to use it. Nikki had been the elegant matriarch for most of his life, and Sophie had never been rude, to his way of thinking. But this out-of-control intruder was another story. Tucker had spoken what we now realized: This girl needed some serious discipline.

Inexperienced with such a wild child, I needed professional help. That's when we found Mary Babbitt. A recent graduate of our local Fort Lewis College with a degree in business, Mary had combined her lifelong love of dogs with her solid experience training and showing dogs since childhood. With a newly minted business plan under her arm, she opened *Bravo!*, a dog board-and-train facility in Durango.

A spacious room allowed for year-round obedience classes, and indoor pens served as rest areas for doggie day care clients as well as overnight accommodations for boarders. The outdoor fenced area included a child's wading pool for water lovers, and room for every dog to stretch legs in supervised playtime. We liked Mary's gentle but firm approach, her smiling, twinkling eyes that never missed a thing, and Daisy adored her at first meeting.

We started weekly obedience classes, but found even that was insufficient to curb this girl's uncontrollable urges.

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After three sets of classes, and good attention to practice, we knew we needed more. Since we'd scheduled a two-week vacation in Yellowstone quite some time before Daisy whirled into our lives, leaving her under Mary's tutelage for those weeks seemed like the perfect solution. Or so we hoped. Sophie and Tucker might also enjoy a vacation from Daisy, safe at home with our house sitter.

When we returned, Mary gave us a two-page document titled "Send Home Instructions." Sort of a report card, with directions for more homework, it started like this:

"Overall Daisy needs solid structure and discipline in her life. She hasn't been allowed to make many of her own decisions in the past two weeks and that has really changed her demeanor. Now, she walks nicely on a leash, waits at doors, doesn't jump, and remains in good control. The bulk of this has been accomplished by expecting and demanding respect and certain behaviors from her—all the time."

Wow. How could I have raised, owned, trained, worked and lived with four goldens over the past twenty years and not known how to do this?

But Daisy was a livewire who knew what she wanted and ignored everything to get it. She pulled on leashes, jumped on people, barked, charged across the property, ignored recalls, ate anything (and everything) in the landscape, and essentially ran wild. I had to keep up with Mary's good work or risk living with a golden grenade. There was only one choice.