



HOW MYA



SAVED JACOB

After the war, Jacob thought he had put the worst behind him. Then the panic attacks and depression began. Just when he had nearly given up hope, he found an extraordinary soul who ended the nightmares.

BY KATE SILVER PHOTOGRAPHY BY TYLER STABLEFORD

Mya senses something wrong. Sitting in the back of the SUV as they barrel down a back road, she detects a change in the air. Jacob is driving, on their way to camp in the Grand Canyon. Though Mya met Jacob only a month ago, she knows him better in some ways than he knows himself. With his ‘yes ma’am’ Southern twang and lanky, broad-shouldered, 6-foot-3-inch frame, he can seem like a big, easygoing guy. But there are times, urgent times, when **Jacob needs Mya.**



Outside the window, the desert hills that stretch as far as the eye can see might as well be in the Middle East. A car comes up behind their SUV—the first car they have seen for many miles—and it passes them, kicking up a whirlwind of dust. Mya doesn’t even look to see Jacob’s shoulders tighten. She leaps into the front seat just before Jacob



First Responder
Mya's training lets
her sense when
Jacob needs help.

slams on the brakes. They skid to a stop, and in an instant Mya is on top of Jacob, licking his convulsing body so hard she almost seems to smother him.

In reality, this highly trained black labrador accomplishes just the opposite. Her care leads him out of his dark terror and back to the dusty road.

BEDFORD HILLS Correctional Facility in New York consists of commanding, institutional-looking brick buildings enclosed with fences topped with spools of razor wire. The only women's maximum-security prison in New York State, it holds 840 inmates, some of them notable. Pamela Smart, Amy Fisher, Jean Harris, and Kathy

Boudin have all been housed here. And so was Mya. Her mother, a breeding dog owned by an organization called Puppies Behind Bars, conceived the dog and bore her inside the prison walls in January 2008. Mya and her siblings trained for two years, two of them at bomb detection, Mya and a fourth helping veterans with psychological disorders.

Gloria Gilbert Stoga, the president and founder of Puppies Behind Bars, chose the training venue. Puppies Behind Bars got its start 13 years ago, after Gilbert Stoga read about a veterinarian in Florida named Thomas Lane who had begun enlisting inmates as dog trainers. Prison gave inmates plenty of time to work with the dogs, and the rigid schedule proved ideal for a strict training regimen.

What's more, the cost was a fraction of the \$26,000 it can take to train a service animal. In 1997, Gilbert Stoga's new organization placed its first five puppies in the Bedford Hills prison, where the inmates trained them to work with the blind. A few years later, Puppies Behind Bars added explosive detection; and in 2006 it launched a unique program, "Dog Tags: Service Dogs for Those Who've Served Us," to train service dogs for veterans

Laurie wrote, 'Several hours ago, I had a 15-pound fluff ball of black fur placed into my arms. She is Mya, and she is beautiful.'



returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Inmates look after the puppies when they reach between six and eight weeks of age. Laurie had written a letter explaining why she wanted to be a "puppy raiser." The prison confirmed that Laurie met the requirements—a clean prison record for the previous 12 months, a reputation for being reliable and trustworthy, no history of any sex offense or of harm to a child or animal. Then Laurie and other qualified inmates interviewed with Puppies Behind Bars instructors, who explained the program's expectations: In addition to mandatory attendance at weekly puppy class and successful completion of reading assignments, homework, and exams, the puppy raiser must always put the needs of the puppy before her own. Instructors selected the candidates who responded best. Laurie learned she'd made the cut.

After Mya was born, the inmates fitted her with a red cape that identified her as a service dog in training. Then they took Mya to Laurie's cell to meet her new puppy raiser.

When Laurie saw Mya for the first time, the short, thin brunette's usually stoic demeanor shattered. She immediately created a scrapbook, documenting everything the puppy did from day one and preserving every tag from every toy. Over the 16 months Laurie had Mya, the scrapbook grew to nearly three inches thick.

The first page contains a photo of Mya standing in the prison yard. Words cut out of a magazine read, "Our first day together." Across from the opening page, Laurie wrote, "Today is March 25, 2008, and several hours ago, I had a 15-pound fluff ball of black fur placed into my arms. She is 'Mya' and she is beautiful!"

Like a doting mother, Laurie dedicated an entire page to "Firsts": fur from Mya's first brushing, Mya's baby teeth, Mya's first nail clippings. Laurie wrote on the page beside the nail clippings, "took several attempts while she slept."

Mya spent most of her time with Laurie, but two days a week a different inmate would train her while Laurie took on another puppy. Mya learned that a command is a command, no matter who it comes from. And there were so many commands to mas-



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ter. First, Mya learned how to respond to her name, along with the standard "sit," "leave it," "heel," and "stay." The more Mya learned, the more complex the orders became. She worked on the 82 basic commands that service dogs know (turning on the lights, closing

skill couldn't be taught. It would prove invaluable to a veteran whose bad days seemed to outnumber the good.

Other days, Mya left prison to spend time with volunteer families and Puppies Behind Bars staff. They took her on all kinds of adventures and intro-

Even the other puppy raisers thought that Mya was special. She showed a remarkable ability to sense the mood of any human around her.

the door, unzipping a zipper, tugging socks off feet, picking up a pen, retrieving keys), in addition to a repertoire created specifically to help a veteran with a psychological disorder. Over a number of months, Mya learned how to "block" her puppy raiser by casually standing two feet in front of her in order to keep anyone who might approach at a safe distance. She learned "got my back," sitting behind her master to provide space from other people while they were waiting in line. Mya would "pop a corner," walking ahead of her puppy raiser and looking to the right and left to communicate that the coast was clear. And she could dial 911 on a special phone if a human fell and became unresponsive.

Besides the training, Mya attended regular services with Laurie in the prison chapel, and she received blessings from both the chaplain and a Catholic priest. She accompanied Laurie to discipleship training classes and choir rehearsal, earning the nickname "The Church Puppy." That's how she learned her 88th command: When someone says "Praise the Lord!" she leaps several feet off the ground.

Even the other puppy raisers thought Mya was special. She showed a remarkable ability to sense the mood of any human around her. Before she had turned five months old, Laurie would take the pup into a room full of people and let her off the leash. Mya immediately headed toward the one who was having the worst day, mentally or physically, and lie at the person's feet. This

duced her to a wide variety of sights and smells. By her first birthday Mya had been to Manhattan, visited the aircraft carrier USS Intrepid, participated in a charity walk for cancer, spent time in a residential treatment center for adolescents, and frequented Dunkin' Donuts, K-Mart, gas stations, banks, grocery stores, coffee shops, post offices, parks, meadows, and many other human habitats. Along the way, she met countless people and pets and practiced her commands in every setting. The volunteers wrote letters to Laurie to tell her what a wonderful job she was doing with Mya, calling the dog "confident," "intelligent," "charming," "loving," "playful," a "pure delight to be around."

Finally, after 16 months with Mya, Laurie had to let her go. She wrote the dog a letter:

You be my good girl, and you make sure your soldier knows that they are special and loved every day; and you do everything you know how, to make their life fuller and richer, and better, even if it's just by being there. Loving is your strong suit so I know you'll be on point, no matter how much they need!

*I'll always love you, Mya Bug!
Always your PBB Mom.*

JACOB USED TO go by Jake. That was six years ago, a lifetime, before he joined the military. A smart, punk kid in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, he had no goals, drank too much, and worked too little. He

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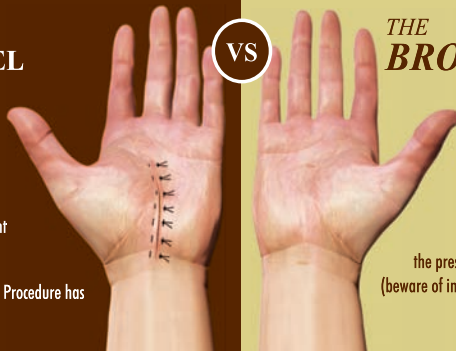
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lived with his parents and took classes at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, quitting after a few months.

One day, at 19, Jake saw battlefield footage of Iraq during CNN's coverage of the Presidential election. He had never thought about joining the military, but maybe it would give his life some direction. He talked to a recruiter and signed up. The Navy gave him 11 months' training as a Fleet Marine Force hospital corpsman, or medic, including instruction in assisting with battlefield surgery. In August 2006, they sent him to Iraq. He served for eight months at combat outposts in the Euphrates River Valley, a hotbed of insurgents. Several minutes after he got to his first post, an Iraqi military vehicle dropped off the bodies of two Marines. *Hi, welcome to Iraq*, Jake thought. Two days later, an ambulance brought two teenage Iraqi sisters to the makeshift clinic with gunshot wounds. Jake had been well trained for the physical part of his job, but nothing prepared him for the look in the eyes of the girl he worked on. As he cut off her clothes, the look of terror and mistrust that flashed made him feel her shame. Both girls survived, but Jake never got over that look.

During those eight months, he couldn't let his guard down. As he talked to Iraqi kids on the street or had dinner with other Marines in the homes of

ling the streets or standing watch in a guard tower. Sleep meant catnaps, a couple of hours at a time.

Throughout it all, he liked the work and formed powerful friendships with the other Marines. He got promoted to first assistant to the base's physician. But he missed his girlfriend—they'd been dating for four years—and he felt ready for college, to become a physician assistant. When his tour of duty was near an end, he got accepted at Hofstra University and returned to the States. He would live with his girlfriend in New York City. In June 2007, he loaded up the car to start his new life. It was a big deal, he thought, a country boy going to the big city.

The first panic attack hit while he was driving through the Baltimore Harbor Tunnel. Something was happening to him; he didn't know what, exactly, except that he felt overwhelmed with anxiety. His girlfriend was driving behind him, and he called her, saying, "I don't know if I can make it through the tunnel." He started to hyperventilate, the car slowed, and he reached the end of the tunnel and had barely pulled over when he passed out.

More attacks hit him over the following weeks—moments when he couldn't move, couldn't even breathe. His entire body would clench, convulsing, as tears streamed from his eyes. Between attacks, even in his sleep, the memories kept coming: the

The first panic attack hit while he was driving through the Baltimore Harbor Tunnel. Something was happening to him; he didn't know what.

Iraqis, he would wonder whether they were the enemy. Once, he escaped a pair of mortars that exploded ahead of him as he was walking. He didn't have time to think of the horrors of war that he witnessed and literally touched. He and his fellow corpsmen dealt with a constant stream of wounded men and women that flowed into the clinic. Breaks from clinic duty meant patrol-

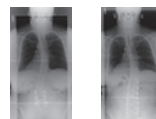
mortars, the suffering, the look in that Iraqi girl's eyes. He drank heavily, got into terrible moods, was always on edge. His life began to seem just too painful, and he even went so far as to buy himself a gun and hide it from his girlfriend.

Three months after Jake and his girlfriend moved to New York, she walked in one night as he was load-



“I was desperate. Now I’m fabulous.”

Scoliosis sufferers know that it’s much more than a back problem. “You’re miserable all over. There’s pain 24/7. It never goes away,” says Darleen Jordan. She tried for years to get relief. “I’d had numerous surgeries,” she says, “and I was still miserable.” Then Darleen went to The Baylor Scoliosis Center. “The doctor knew exactly what to do,” she says. Anterior and posterior spinal fusion surgery straightened her back. “I was desperate,” she says. “Now I’m having fun.”



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Frontal view of
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ing the gun. She panicked and rushed him to the VA hospital's emergency room. There he told the doctor and his girlfriend about his suicidal thoughts. He talked about the memories and the nightmares, and the doctor diagnosed him with post traumatic stress disorder—a disease that affects roughly one in eight returning soldiers, according to the Army. Jake shrugged off the

diagnosis at first, thinking he wasn't disabled. Then he talked to his two closest friends from his unit. They reported similar problems: panic attacks, moodiness, nightmares. The diagnosis began to make sense. So after mulling it over for a couple of months, he began therapy. His psychiatrist put him on five medications totaling 11 pills a day.

They seemed to help, but not that

much. The symptoms continued. He switched to another therapist, then another, then another. Jake's disorder became his whole life. He and his girlfriend broke up. New York was too much for him, so he transferred to Southern Utah University, in the quiet mountain town of Cedar City, about two hours northeast of Las Vegas. One night, while reading about police dogs on the Internet, he learned about Puppies Behind Bars and applied for a service dog. And without ever really knowing why, he began referring to himself as Jacob.

IT WAS A BROODING Jacob who flew to Colorado last August to meet the puppies and their instructor. His face flushed when he spoke, and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. You could almost smell the anxiety. His teeth chattered as he walked toward the baggage claim in Denver International Airport. He had waited six months, but he still knew just how lucky he was: Only 20 percent of veterans who apply get a service dog. He spotted the instructor from the distance. She was waiting with two black labs. He hung back, taking a few deep breaths before he could bring himself to approach. That's when Mya's eyes met his and she flopped onto her back for a belly rub.

They all drove to Loveland, Colorado, a mountain town about 45 minutes outside of Denver. The whole way there Mya sat on the floor between Jacob's legs.

Jacob and three other veterans stayed in a hotel for two weeks as they trained with the dogs. The first four days were introductory. Each vet worked with a different dog each day, learning their commands, how to feed and groom them. Jacob tried not to play favorites, but he found that no matter which dog he was paired with, he kept slipping



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The instructors disappeared to see who would get which dog. Jacob wanted Mya—he really, really wanted Mya. He went to his room to wait.

and calling it Mya. At night, the dogs would return to the instructors' home and the veterans would return to their rooms.

At the end of day four, the instructors disappeared to decide who would get which dog. Jacob wanted Mya—he really, really wanted Mya. He went back to his room to wait and couldn't shut his mind off. He tried watching TV but couldn't concentrate. He thought about calling a friend, but knew he was too on edge even for that. His stomach was upset, and he felt like he might be on the verge of a panic attack, when there was a knock on the door. *This is it*, he thought. He opened the door, where an instructor stood, alone. She told him to follow her to the conference room, and the three other veterans joined in.

As soon as she opened the door Mya rushed over to Jacob, her tongue out, brown eyes lit up. As Jacob reached down to pet her, his eye caught a list posted on the wall: Mya was his.

"Is there anything else we have to do today?" he asked, giddy. When they told him no, he took Mya back to the hotel room and wrestled with her on the floor for more than an hour, beaming the whole time. He called his parents: "It's a girl!" he told them. He hadn't been this happy in the two years since he'd been back from Iraq.

For the next week and a half, Mya and Jacob were immersed in dog training. Jacob discovered that he could take Mya into Whole Foods, and through a series of commands he could get her to pick up a can of

creamed corn and put it in his basket (that's not a skill that his disorder demands, but it's something she was taught in case she had an owner with physical limitations). He could drop his Visa card at Home Depot and Mya would pick it up for him. He could usher her under his table at P.F. Chang's and she would rest quietly while he ate lunch.

It was hardest to adjust to all the attention. She was like an advertisement for the walking wounded, a bandage on his formerly invisible disorder. Since coming back to the United States, Jacob had learned to camouflage himself, sitting silently in class, walking unnoticed across campus. Mya was about to change all of that, and it made Jacob nervous.

The dogs and veterans learned all they could over two weeks, and then it was time to leave Colorado. Jacob and Mya graduated as a team, Mya wearing her new blue cape, adorned with an American flag patch that said

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"Puppies Behind Bars Service Dog" on the top and "Veteran" on the bottom. Then the two flew to Las Vegas and drove two hours to Cedar City, their home.

AS MUCH AS JACOB had to learn about Mya, Mya had to learn about Jacob and the world without prison bars. She was used to her routine: getting up at 6, going to the yard, eating breakfast, following Laurie to work, playing in the yard, eating lunch, following Laurie back to work, recreation, eating dinner, getting groomed and massaged, and going to bed. She was used to working with women who knew her commands and had very defined roles and expectations. They led. She followed. Jacob's world wasn't nearly so structured.

Jacob had never had a dog before. Prior to meeting Mya, he had always assumed service dogs were like robots, creatures that could perfectly complete a series of simple commands, but possessed few other capabilities. They were high-functioning untouchables in a separate category from "real" dogs, he thought.

But Mya was never a robot. A bouncy ball of energy, she'd eye his muffin on the Starbucks table as longingly as any dog. When visitors came to the house she'd pant and jump up to greet them, spinning in rapid circles and running around the house. She'd whine while he was rock climbing, growing antsy as he grew more and more distant. She was still a dog. She just happened to be a dog that could open the refrigerator and bring him a soda, or retrieve his Blackberry and the TV remote control. She could also rescue him from the panic attacks that laid him flat.

A major panic attack knocked him off his feet just days after Mya joined Jacob and his roommate in the three-bedroom home they rent

on the edge of the Dixie National Forest. It started with a feeling of doom. Jacob collapsed, fell into the fetal position, and his body locked, shaking uncontrollably, hyperventilating. Mya straddled him, climbed right on top of him and started licking his face. The panic attack went on for a couple of minutes, and she just stayed there, licking.

Before Mya came along, Jacob would come out of his three- or four-times-a-week panic attacks wanting to die. The experience was so horrendous and so painful that he didn't think he could bear to go through it again. Since he'd moved to Utah he'd even begun rock climbing without equipment, daring death to come for him.

This time was different. Sweating and spent, Jacob just put his arms around Mya and held her close. Things didn't seem so bad anymore. He had something to live for.

He'd been haunted by nightmares since he got back from Iraq. They were the war images that were still in active combat in his brain—that Iraqi girl, that exploding bomb, all accompanied by night sweats, and the taste of fear. Once Mya arrived, those changed, too. Rather than fears of the past, they turned into fears of the future: At first he had nightmares about someone stealing Mya. Gradually they became more gruesome—someone was cutting Mya up and handing him her limbs. He would awaken, drenched in sweat, screaming in terror, and Mya would be on top of him licking his face.

Even an act as simple as petting Mya had the power of setting his mind at ease. He found that with her along, he could handle being in crowded spaces, the kind of areas he'd spent two years avoiding. With Mya at his side things just got better. Immediately. She was a reminder that he was still actively living his life—he wasn't stuck in a state of

“A SENSATION!”

— *TIME Magazine*



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flashback, or a world of paranoia, and he wasn't still fighting the war.

Those first few months he thought a lot about Laurie. He'd flip through Mya's scrapbook, reading every word this woman wrote about her. Sometimes he'd go online to the Puppies Behind Bars website and listen to the video clips of the inmates talking about the program. He didn't know which voice was hers, but he watched Mya, hoping her ears would perk up and give him a clue into the life of this stranger who has helped him in so many ways.

IN THE SIX MONTHS since Jacob brought Mya home, his psychiatrist lowered his drug dosages by a third. Jacob also committed to living a responsible life—no more high-risk behavior, no more rock climbing without proper equipment. If something happened to him, who would take care of Mya?

As fall semester of his senior year flew by, Jacob could see the end in sight. His days were filled with psychology classes, and his nights were filled with homework and grad school applications. All his time spent with therapists—he went through eight before finding one he clicked with—inspired Jacob to pursue his doctorate in psychology. But it's not just for him. The plan is that Mya will join him every step of the way as a therapy dog, when and if Jacob no longer needs her every day. If she can just help others a fraction of what she's done for him, then he feels as though the two of them, as a team, have done something right.

On a chilly afternoon in November, the two walked into the Pastry Pub in Cedar City, where he bought a sandwich for himself and a bottle of water for the dog. They'd just gotten out of statistics class, and Jacob wanted to give Mya a treat for being so good during such a boring class.

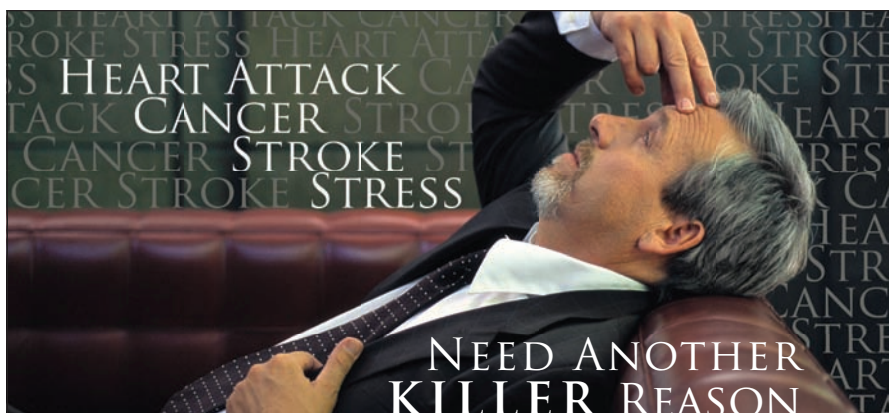
Sandwich in hand, he drove 15 minutes up a mountain in the Dixie National Forest to play. The snow was 6, maybe 8 inches deep at the top, and untouched. When Jacob stopped the truck, Mya leaped into the front seat, staring at the white powder with excitement. Jacob took off her blue cape. Mya knew that when the cape was untied, she was off-duty. This was Mya time.

The door opened, and she squeezed out just as fast as the hinges let her. She bounded through the snow, picking up speed as she ran circles around trees, jumped over mounds of white, tucked her tail and reached full gallop.

"Hey c'mere!" Jacob's voice took on a special tone just for the cape-free Mya. The sound was high-pitched and playful, like a Muppet. "What're you doing?" He yelled in that falsetto. Mya was in hyper drive, zipping around him, acting like any playful puppy. "Snow dog! Snow dog!" Jacob's whole face was smiling, from the eyes to the lips, like a kid. As he scooped up a snowball, his clenched shoulders relaxed, his eyes stopped darting and followed her. The sound of Mya's panting filled the quiet, pine-scented mountain air as she sprinted through the snow, carrying a stick in her mouth that was nearly the length of her body. "Gimme that!" he said, pitch still high. "Good girl! Drop. Leave it. Ready?" He hurled it, those smiling green eyes following her and the tracks she left in the snow. "Get it. Bring it. Good girl! Good girl!"

This, it seemed, was Jake.

MYA AND JACOB have been apart only once since she arrived in Cedar City. It was a hot day in September, and between classes he'd taken her to swim in a creek near his house. He didn't calculate enough drying time, though, and felt bad taking a



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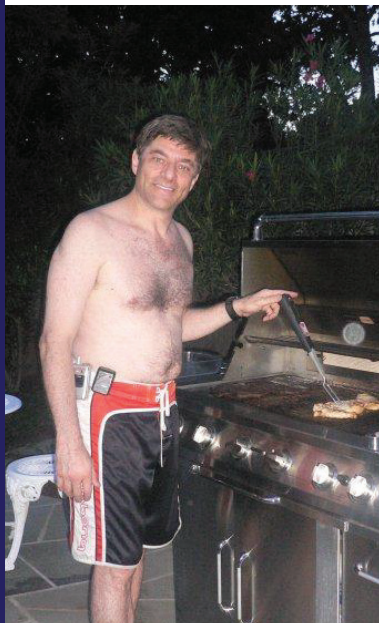
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wet dog into class, so he dropped her off at his friend Jesse's house.

Jacob couldn't focus for the entire class. He was irritable, shift, kept staring at the clock. Mya was the same way. She stared out the window and cried the whole time he was gone. The two stuck together ever since. Every night, Mya slept in Jacob's bed (and insisted on using his pillow), she accompanied him to all of his classes, and she was at his side for every peppermint mocha he purchased at the city's only Starbucks.

Out in public he slowly grew to accept the attention that bothered him so much in the beginning. On days when he was feeling good, he'd even open up to people who asked and tell them what it was like to live with PTSD. People were not shy about asking personal questions or giving him The Look.

The Look starts with a hint of surprise, as the passerby eyes Mya, and then scrutinizes Jacob, before returning to Mya. He knows what a woman in a bar must feel like.

One evening, he got The Look for the fifth time that day. Jacob was studying the menu at Starbucks while a young girl working behind the counter was studying him. Tall, brunette, and plain looking, her eyes scanned Mya, then moved to Jacob with a slow, skeptical up-and-down probe, then back to Mya.

"So are you training her?" She didn't sound so much curious as accusatory.

Jacob reached down and touched Mya, subconsciously, as if to glean some calmness or inner strength, and then fell into his lines. "No, she's already been trained. She's working for me now."

Kate Silver is a freelance writer living in Chicago. Her 2-year-old dog, Lucille, is currently in doggy boot camp in hopes of learning one-tenth of the commands Mya knows.

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