

Prescription: K9

Busy Rottie Series – Story No. 4

Learning Together

by D. Barnes

Jared stepped outside before the sun had fully climbed above the hills, the air still cool and soft with the scent of earth and morning dew. The ranch spread around him, open and inviting, a space that felt more like a canvas than a property. For three years, all he had known were walls, bars, and ceilings too low to stretch his arms. Now, every step across the grass felt like reclaiming something he had lost before he even knew it existed.

Pepper bounded beside him, head high, tail a proud whip of energy. She had grown quickly, legs long and strong, chest broad and firm. Her black-and-tan coat glimmered in the early light, and her eyes — intelligent, focused, always aware — tracked every movement he made. The first time he had held her as a tiny, uncertain puppy, he had wondered if he could keep up with her. Now, she kept up with him, and he with her, in a rhythm that had become natural, almost effortless.

Training had become their ritual. Each morning, after breakfast and the initial stretch, Jared would pull out the small kit he had purchased: leash, clicker, treats, and a few toys. General obedience was the foundation, and Pepper responded well. Sit, stay, come, heel — these were not just commands; they were lessons in communication, trust, and mutual respect.

“Sit,” Jared said softly, kneeling on the grass.

Pepper paused mid-step, tail flicking, eyes locked on his. Then, fluidly, she dropped into a perfect sit. He clicked the clicker, reached for a small piece of jerky, and held it out. She took it gently, chewing once, then looked back at him as if to say, *Again?*

“Good girl,” he said. His voice was quiet but firm. Encouragement, not authority. She leaned forward slightly, nudging his knee with her nose, tail wagging slowly.

They repeated the exercises for half an hour. By the end, Pepper was rolling onto her back for a brief belly rub, muscles tense from work relaxing into the grass. Jared lay back for a moment, closing his eyes against the morning sun, feeling

the warmth and weight of the earth beneath him, Pepper curled nearby like a living pillow.

Jared had noticed something new in her behavior lately.

She had always been attentive, always aware of him. But now, she was learning more than obedience. She was learning him.

Two weeks ago, he had started smoking marijuana again. Not excessively — a single joint or a few puffs to help calm his mind after long days. He didn't expect Pepper to notice. He didn't expect much besides her quiet companionship. But she had smelled it first. A hint in his clothing, subtle and unfamiliar. At first, she had glanced at him, tilted her head, and stepped back slightly, uncertain.

Then, gradually, she began to understand. She didn't judge. She didn't react aggressively. She simply came closer. Leaned into his side as he lit up, eyes soft but alert. Sometimes, she would nudge him gently with her nose as if to check in. If he coughed, she would meet his eyes, hold the gaze, and tilt her head in that way that seemed to say, *Are you alright?*

It surprised him. Pepper was learning more than commands. She was learning nuances, behaviors, and rhythms. She had read him. She had understood patterns that no human had bothered to notice, or perhaps, that he hadn't allowed anyone to see.

After the morning exercises, they roamed the land. Pepper explored every tree, every patch of grass, every shadow along the fence line. She ran in wide circles, chased imagined prey, sniffed the ground, and returned to Jared with eyes bright and tail high. He laughed, something he hadn't done freely in years, and she barked once, short and sharp, like applause.

Jared practiced leash control even off the leash. He called her back at intervals, testing her recall, reinforcing consistency.

"Come here," he said, watching her pause mid-bound, ears flicking. She jogged over, landing with a light thump on the grass beside him. He clicked the clicker and offered a small treat. Pepper took it, then leaned into his side, soft eyes watching him carefully.

He realized he had come to crave these moments as much as she did. The land, the air, the sun warming his back, the soft weight of her presence — it grounded

him. It reminded him that he had the capacity for patience, for care, for consistency. And he was learning to trust himself again.

By mid-morning, Jared settled under the largest oak tree near the far end of the property. The shade stretched long across the grass, and the air was cooler here. Pepper sat beside him, tail gently sweeping the dirt, eyes tracking every movement. He lit a small joint, careful to keep it away from her nose. She smelled it instantly, lifting her head slightly, but didn't move away.

He exhaled slowly, letting the smoke drift upward. Pepper shifted closer. Her head rested near his thigh, ears alert. Every now and again, a faint cough would escape him, and her eyes would meet his, concern mirrored in their dark depths. He smiled, a small, genuine curve of his lips.

"Don't worry, girl," he whispered. "I'm fine."

Her gaze softened slightly, and she nudged him gently with her nose, pressing close as if to confirm she was there. He could feel her warmth through the fabric of his jeans. It was grounding. Protective. Healing.

The afternoons were spent in playful training, mixed with freedom. Pepper would chase sticks, roll in the dirt, investigate every bush and log. Jared practiced more advanced commands now, teaching her to wait while he moved objects, to stay while he disappeared briefly from view. The trust between them was growing, deep and deliberate.

Pepper tested him occasionally, ignoring a command for a few steps to see if he would insist calmly, then returning without incident. Jared had learned to maintain firmness, to control without anger, to reward without overindulgence.

"Stay," he said once as she stepped toward a low tree branch. She paused. A shadow of hesitation flickered in her eyes. He held her gaze for a long beat. "Good girl." She backed up, then leaned into him, tail wagging slowly.

By sunset, she would settle beside him again, panting lightly, fur warm and heavy against his legs. He would scratch behind her ears, rub her chest, and simply sit. The horizon glowed pink and gold, and for a few moments, nothing existed but the land, the air, and the steady presence of Pepper.

Evenings brought a new ritual. Jared would prepare a simple dinner and Pepper would wait patiently near her bed. She had learned her boundaries — crate at night, bed in the corner, quiet except for occasional soft whines or shifts. After dinner, he would walk the perimeter of the property with her, leash or no leash depending on her focus. Sometimes, they would simply sit on the porch steps, gazing at the hills, listening to the wind sweep across the grass.

He found himself talking more, not aloud but in murmurs, small reflections of the day, comments on her behavior. She would cock her head, ears pricked, tail flicking, as if following each word.

“You did good today,” he said softly one evening. “You remembered the recall perfectly. And you didn’t chew the shoe again.” She nudged his hand with her nose, leaning closer. “Yeah... you know that’s right.”

He laughed softly, a dry sound that caught in his chest. She leaned further, pressing her body against his leg.

Jared had begun noticing her subtle interactions around his habits. He knew she smelled the marijuana — it was faint but persistent. It had become part of their rhythm. She would stay close, head near his, observing, guarding in a way that felt both maternal and disciplined. Whenever he coughed from it, she would glance at him sharply, ears forward, eyes searching. Then, once reassured, she would settle again, tail sweeping the floor, weight gentle against him.

It struck him how aware she was, how empathetic. Not just intelligent, but emotionally present. She had watched him rebuild himself in weeks, observed his patterns, noted the cues and rhythms of his days, and adjusted her own behavior to support him. Pepper wasn’t just a dog. She was a companion, a confidante, a living anchor.

Training progressed beyond obedience. He began working on tracking exercises, scent recall, and simple agility on the open fields. Pepper excelled. She ran the courses with grace, eyes bright, always returning to him when called. She nudged him occasionally, playful but testing boundaries, reminding him that their partnership required attentiveness, communication, and patience.

Sometimes, she would pause mid-run, glance back at him, and he knew instinctively that she was checking in. That look — the intelligent, connected gaze — had become their secret language.

By nightfall, after a long day of exercises, exploration, and companionship, they returned to the porch steps. The sky stretched vast and star-studded, and the world felt calm. Jared exhaled, leaning back, hand resting on Pepper's side.

"You know," he said quietly, "I never thought I'd get this far. Not really. Not since... well, you know." She pressed closer. "But we're learning, huh? Together."

Her tail thumped gently. She nudged his hand with her nose. The warmth, the weight, the steady presence — it was enough.

They sat together in the night silence, breathing aligned, rhythm established. Pepper had learned his patterns. Jared had learned hers. They were a unit, a team, a pair navigating new territory in the open, expansive, forgiving land of possibility.

And Jared finally felt it: stability. Growth. Trust. Love — quiet, patient, grounded love that didn't demand, only asked for presence and care.

Pepper lifted her head slightly, met his eyes, and held the gaze. She seemed to say, *I'm here. I see you. You're okay.*

Jared smiled, brushing her side softly. "Yeah," he whispered. "I'm okay. Thanks for that."

He didn't know what tomorrow would bring. Challenges, setbacks, new lessons — all inevitable. But for tonight, they had learned something invaluable.

Two lives, intertwined. Learning from each other. Growing together.

And the land, wide and open, held them in its calm embrace as they rested, side by side, under the fading light of day.