



Introduction

Phantom was one of the biggest wolves I've ever known. He weighed 140 pounds, and the giant-sized Varikennel added another forty pounds. It must have been the adrenaline rush that allowed C.C. and me to get the crate out of the enclosure and into the road, all while keeping an eye on the fire that was now eating its way much too quickly through the brush. Already at the bottom of the hill, it was racing toward us. At the top of the hill, another set of flames blazed a trail toward the house. There was nothing we could do. C.C. ran up the driveway and got his car. I opened the hatchback of my Jeep Cherokee, and when he returned, we loaded the crate into it. Or, I should say, we tried to load the crate into it. The crate was one I'd borrowed from Tia months before, and somehow I'd assumed that, like the others, it would fit. I cursed myself for being so stupid. How could I not have tried it? Phantom couldn't fit into a smaller crate, and now we were out of time.

"*Nicole*," C.C. said in a stern tone I'd never heard before, "we have to go." He began to walk quickly away from the Jeep, toward his car.

The crate was sitting in the middle of the dirt road, and the fire was coming. "I can't just leave Phantom here!" I cried. Surely there was a way to bring him with us...

But wait. I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me explain how I ended up trying to rescue a wolf from a fire, and for that matter, how I began living and working with dogs and wolves in the first place.

~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ *

As a child, when asked by adults, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I lacked an appropriate response. Other little girls would say, "A teacher," "A nurse," or even, "A wife and mother." But none of those

things appealed to me. What I was interested in—and by “interested in” I mean *crazy* about—was dogs.

The only serious career path I knew of that involved working with animals was that of veterinarian. Unfortunately, my lack of interest in the medical sciences, paired with my distaste for the curriculum requisite of cutting up dead animals, put me out of the running. I place blame for the latter squarely on the slumped shoulders of my high school lab partner who, in a stoned-out haze, had ripped the eggs out of our shared frog with maniacal glee. It didn't help that the heart was still beating after we'd removed it. With veterinary school off the table, I didn't know what sort of future could involve working with dogs. Still, I still longed for one. Although my dreams would not be realized for quite some time, dogs were a constant presence throughout my formative years and provided a warm, furry soundtrack to my life.

Our first dog had begun life with the proper Scottish name “McTavish.” My parents, for reasons unknown to my brother Bobby and me, decided his name must be changed. And so, in democratic fashion, we kids were allowed to suggest new monikers. We were so excited! My seven-year-old ideas ran toward darkly descriptive names like “Midnight” and “Onyx.” I don't remember Bobby's suggestions, but he was only four at the time and I believe one of his choices had to do with a type of cheese. Suffice it to say the names he came up with weren't anything you'd want to shout across a crowded park. In the end, my father chose one of his own suggestions: *Happy*. I hated the name, but Happy it was.

Happy was, as Scottie pups can be, rambunctious and nippy. He would chase Bobby and me around our small Brooklyn apartment and, if we weren't fast enough, leave tooth marks on our heels and ankles. I quickly developed a strategy of racing to my bedroom, jumping on the bed, and plastering myself against the wall just out of reach of Happy's snappy jaws. Looking back, it seems odd that my mother never called a dog trainer. Then again, it was a different time and trainers weren't on the public radar like they are now. Besides, nippiness aside, Mom always seemed to have a way with dogs. Without ever having read a single book about training, she'd been able to teach Happy to behave well, and to perform a catalog of tricks including Shake and Roll Over. Mom was a natural. Fascinated, I watched what she did, and absorbed my first lessons in dog training.

My mother was also very athletic. Not only had she been an acrobat in her native Norway, performing across Europe in places like the Moulin Rouge in Paris, but here in the States, she was an excellent tennis player and an accomplished bowler. She bowled in a league, and she was very, very good. Our apartment sported a style that could best be described as Silver and Gold Trophy motif. The wall-to-wall bookcases were crammed full of statues sporting proud, winged figurines and plaques that read *1st place—League* or *Individual High Score*. There were smaller, candy-dish style awards strewn across every coffee table, end table, and other available surface as well. Mom finally began to refuse the trophies, having run out of places to put them.

One afternoon when Bobby was five and I was eight, my mother took us along to the bowling alley. The 20-minute walk from our apartment wound through a safe, middle-class neighborhood—safe, that is, except for one desolate stretch that ran under an elevated set of train tracks. In the center of this no-man’s-land sat a junkyard filled with cars in various states of disrepair. As many times as we’d passed the metal wasteland, I’d never seen a person inside. I was, however, acutely aware of the large black and tan German Shepherd who patrolled restlessly back and forth along the chain link fence, barking out stern warnings at anyone who dared trespass anywhere near his kingdom. Our collective pace always quickened as we passed.

As we approached the path that led past the junkyard, I didn’t see the dog pacing along his usual route. Where was he? Moments later, the answer became horrifyingly apparent. He had escaped. There he was, the beast who had achieved legendary monster status in our juvenile minds, standing not fifty feet away, with no fence between us. He stood still, his head lowered, staring...and then ran straight toward us! Hackles raised, barking furiously, the dog flew at us. Mom pushed Bobby and me firmly behind her as she took a step forward. Facing the dog squarely, she thrust her palm forward in the international signal for “Halt!” The dog, startled, paused mid-stride. She then commanded in a stern, authoritative voice, “Sit!” The dog’s rear hit the ground immediately. Mom walked calmly away with us in tow, our hearts pounding wildly. I glanced back. The dog, still seated, wore a most quizzical expression as he watched us leave. What my mother did that day left a lasting impression. Who knows, maybe dog training is in my blood.

When I was twelve, I returned one day from playing outside to find Happy gone. My parents had given him away because of a new no pets rule in the building. We hadn't had a chance to say goodbye; I suppose my parents were trying to save us the grief. Still, Bobby and I were heartbroken. But as children do, we became involved in other things and were able to move on. When I entered high school at thirteen (yes, thirteen...but that's another story), we got another dog. Skippy—you *know* I didn't pick that name, either—was a smallish Schipperke-Lab mix. We'd visited the local humane society, where my parents had quickly spotted her. Just five months old, the black, long-haired puppy was standing her ground in the corner of a crowded pen. A group of dogs surrounded her, barking and snapping, and she was giving it right back to them. My parents liked her spirit.

Despite her early bullying experiences, Skippy grew into a wonderful, well-adjusted dog who loved people and other dogs. I delighted in lying on the floor with her after school, stroking her long, silky black fur and telling her about my day. I had fun teaching her obedience skills and tricks. Skippy was a fast learner and an enthusiastic student. She'd prance about in excitement, eager to spin, give her paw, and roll over. I was so proud of my brilliant pupil.

Skippy was a constant companion to Bobby and me throughout our adolescence. Bobby eventually moved to Long Island, and I attended Brooklyn College. Because I'd been in an accelerated high school program, I began college just after my sixteenth birthday. My declared double major was English and psychology, but what I really majored in was driving motorcycles and dating guys with long hair and black leather jackets. Imagine my parents' delight. After graduating at nineteen, I took up the electric bass guitar and started playing in rock bands, once again thrilling my parents to no end. But I also had to earn a living, and so, a string of office jobs ensued. Whether my hours were spent in a stark grey cubicle or a fancy office, my goal was always to get my work done, keep my head down, and fit in until I could figure out how to get a job working with dogs.

Regardless of where I worked, on the side, I trained dogs who belonged to friends and neighbors. I eventually got a few paying clients. Still, it wasn't enough to support me. And so I persevered in the corporate world, wearing the proper attire (I still say pantyhose are from the devil), dutifully oohed and aahed over baby photos, and discussed television shows that seemed

inane but were apparently all-important to my fellow employees. That I had dog photos lining my cubicle walls instead of baby pictures seemed odd to most. Then again, I'm sure I seemed strange to them anyway, with my rock and roll hair and laid back attitude. For me, the days were endless. I was stuck in Stepford. Years later, I was lucky enough to land a job in the music industry, where a more relaxed atmosphere prevailed.

All in all, my life was not bad. I was fortunate to have a rent-controlled apartment, a job at a hip record company in Manhattan, a boyfriend who also happened to be a nice guy, and a few close friends. But I also had a persistent, nagging feeling that I was meant to be somewhere else. And I knew exactly where: California. True, I hated the freezing Brooklyn winters and the noisy, crowded subways, but it was more than that. There was a very real, constant nudging at my psyche to get on a plane and head for the West Coast. It was like being homesick for a place I'd never been.

~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ *

Little did I know all that California would hold. My life took some amazing twists and turns, and led me to places I never would have imagined. Over the years, I volunteered for city animal shelters and private rescue groups, and served as volunteer coordinator for a Los Angeles city shelter. I eventually became a dog trainer, canine behavior specialist and author, and traveled around the world lecturing on dog behavior. I was privileged to share my life with an amazing man, some wonderful dogs, and even wolves. But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

What follows are stories of working and living with dogs and wolves, from my vantage point as a rescuer, trainer, and dog mom. Some experiences are funny, some are poignant, and some are downright strange. But they're all absolutely true. For ease of reading, I have kept the dog stories and the wolf stories separate, even though both species were living here with us at the same time.

I hope these offerings entertain you, lift you up, and maybe even make you feel better about life with your own dogs. My years with dogs and wolves have been funny, challenging, joyous, and heartbreaking. They've also been some of the best times of my life. As the Grateful Dead say, "What a long, strange trip it's been."