

INTRODUCTION



IN 2012 THE BERLIN WALL FELL. OKAY, not *that* Berlin Wall; the Germans knocked theirs down in 1989. I'm talking about my own wall of opposition to having a dog in the family. That Berlin Wall survived the end of the Cold War by more than twenty years. But when it fell, I fell hard for a dog named Albie.

For years my wife, Judy, and sons, Danny and Noah, had pleaded with me to consider adopting a dog. I held them at bay with turtles, hamsters, fish, and eventually a cockatiel named Houdini whose messy cage I cleaned every week for ten years and who I secretly hoped would live up to his namesake and escape all on his own. But I insisted: no dog. *Too much work. Too much responsibility. You can't travel with a dog. I have allergies. The dog will shed everywhere. I'll be the one getting up in the wee hours of those subfreezing February*

mornings risking life and limb on sheets of ice so the dog can poop. Even though I had a dog growing up, sorry, not going to happen. I used every excuse in the book. Then, I ran out of excuses.

We've had Albie, a yellow Lab mix, for three years now, and he's the love of my life, the apple of my eye, my best friend, and every other trite cliché you can think of. I'm sixty-one, and we're going to grow old together. Chances are I will outlive him and I'm already dreading the day we part. Believe me, when I used to hear people talk this way about their dogs, I thought they were slightly daft or had difficulty forming relationships with other people. Now I get it. Completely. I was totally unprepared for the depth of my feelings for this beautiful, trusting, loving creature.

I can trace my change of heart to the weekend we took care of Reilly, our friends' black Lab, while they were away. Reilly nudged me in the right direction. I told Judy we could look around, but I wasn't ready to commit. Around the same time, a guy in Judy's yoga class brought his dog, Tige, to class. He told her he'd adopted her through Labs4rescue, a Connecticut-based organization that matches families, primarily in the Northeast, with Labs rescued mainly from high-kill shelters in the South.¹ Tige, he said, was absolutely the best dog he'd ever had. Judy started looking at pictures and videos online of dogs available through Labs4rescue and filled out an application.

When Judy first said the words "rescue dog," I imagined a Saint Bernard with a small barrel of whiskey under its chin, roaming the Alps in search of avalanche survivors. I was completely ignorant. When she explained, my head—like many people's—filled with preconceived notions about shelter, or rescue dogs. I assumed they were damaged goods, behaviorally unpredictable, susceptible to health

1. Founded in 2002, Labs4rescue has helped more than 12,000 Labs and Lab mixes find homes.

problems, and maybe even slightly dangerous. Nothing, I have since learned, could be further from the truth. But at the time I was especially uncertain about adopting a rescue dog.² Nor was I aware of the enormous number of beautiful, deserving dogs desperately in need of homes, especially in the South.

A few weeks later, my older son, Danny (then twenty-one), and I took an outdoor grilling class taught by our friend Chef Chris Schlesinger. He brought along his new black Lab, Sal, who was mellow and unobtrusive. A little jolt of envy passed through me, and not just because Chris has talents at the grill I can only dream of. It was his bond with Sal. The dog adored him and vice versa. *That, I thought, is a beautiful thing.*

By the time I came home that evening, my reticence had turned into determination. I said to Judy, “Let’s get a dog.”



We quickly learned that the rescue movement was much bigger than we imagined—once we started asking it seemed everyone we ran into with a dog had a “rescue”—and that the matching of dogs and families largely takes place online. The Internet has played a huge role in the growth of the canine rescue movement, especially in pairing and moving thousands of abused, abandoned, and neglected dogs from the South to forever homes in the North. (We’ll come to the

2. For anyone who has a dog or is thinking of getting one (rescue or not), I highly recommend reading *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know* by Alexandra Horowitz, a canine cognition expert who teaches psychology at Barnard College, Columbia University. For those wary of adopting rescue dogs because of their often uncertain pedigree, Professor Horowitz says, “The myth that a shelter dog, especially a mixed breed dog, will be less good or less reliable than a purchased dog is not just wrong, it is entirely backward: mixed breeds are healthier, less anxious, and live longer than purebreds.”

question of why there are so many southern dogs later.) Sites such as Petfinder.com, used by many rescue groups including Labs4rescue, are the Match.coms of the canine world. On these websites, eager adoptive families can peruse pictures of countless dogs waiting for their forever homes, read what their temporary caregivers have to say about them, learn what is known about their previous lives—which is usually little—and, in some cases, watch a short video showing the dog interacting with people, fetching a ball, or just generally looking absolutely adorable.

And this is exactly what we did once our Cold War over canines finally ended. When Judy came across Albie online, she thought she'd met the One. In the short video, his eyes were soulful, his tail was always wagging, and he seemed to be pleading for someone to love him. She hurried into my office with her laptop so I could see for myself. Somewhere between two and three years old, he'd been found wandering, frightened and alone, by a country road in central Louisiana. Now, he was in a high-kill shelter in Alexandria, Louisiana.

My heart also jumped as I watched Albie, confined in a small, fenced grassy area, chase a ball and trot back proudly to someone who was off camera, his tail wagging a mile a minute. He was so earnest, so eager to please, and so obviously sweet tempered. Thirty short seconds and I could already feel myself attaching to this lovable creature twelve hundred miles away. Even though I knew it was a huge leap of faith to commit to a dog you only know from watching a video (after all, the video isn't going to show the dog at his worst, just his best), I was smitten.

Judy and I immediately emailed Albie's Labs4rescue adoption coordinator, Keri Bullock Toth of the Humane Society of Central Louisiana (who, as you'll see in later chapters, is one of the true unsung heroes of the rescue movement), and asked a few questions

to reassure ourselves that Albie was as he appeared in the video. “He has manners,” she replied and verified everything was as it seemed. Thus assured, we set the process in motion, which included a home visit by a local Labs4rescue volunteer in Massachusetts to ensure we were as responsible as we appeared as well. Reputable rescue groups go to great lengths to try and assure successful adoptions. Some of these dogs have been the victims of unspeakable neglect or abuse; many have just been the victims of plain old bad luck. When they place a dog, unless it’s a temporary foster to get them to a safe place, they are truly looking for a forever home. That’s why they also carefully screen the dogs for adoptability and prepare them for their new lives; they assess temperament, and they do everything they can to make sure the dogs are healthy, current on all immunizations and other preventatives, and, importantly, spayed or neutered.

Once the preliminaries were out of the way, Albie was ours. Now the only question was when Keri could find a space on the transport that Labs4rescue relies on to bring many of their dogs north from Louisiana.

The wait was excruciating. Albie, of course, had no idea he was going anywhere or that he had a forever family already in love and waiting for him. But we couldn’t wait a minute longer to open our home to Albie. We kept watching the thirty-second video over and over, our attachment growing each time, until we caught a break a few days later. There was room for one more dog on that week’s transport.

Most people who do canine rescue work will move heaven and earth to save a single dog. Keri drove more than two hours from her home in the wee hours of the morning to Lafayette, Louisiana, to meet a man named Greg Mahle (“May-lee”), who runs an organization called Rescue Road Trips, and get Albie onto his truck. (At the time, Greg wasn’t picking up dogs in Alexandria, where Keri

is based.) When Keri told me this, the whole operation reminded me of that image of the last helicopter out of Saigon before South Vietnam fell to the North. All I could do was admire and be grateful for her extraordinary effort to get our beloved Albie to us.

I didn't know Greg's name then, nor had I heard of his transport service. In fact, I had no concept of what "transport" was or how it worked. And I definitely had no clue how much Greg Mahle would change my life. I only knew that Albie would arrive in three days and would have to spend forty-eight hours in quarantine at a facility a couple of towns over from ours before we could pick him up.³



Knowing Albie was safely on board, Judy started following Greg's progress online. Greg documents every trip he makes on Facebook, posting pictures and short updates about where he is and how the dogs are faring. On the second day, she came running into my office again and practically dumped her open laptop onto my desk. "Look! It's Albie!" she exclaimed.

There, on Greg's Rescue Road Trips Facebook page was a picture of Albie, a little red kerchief around his neck, sitting upright with his paws in Greg's hands, his head turned directly toward the camera. Under the picture, Greg had written this:

"The stress of everything got to be a little much. Had to breathe. Labs4rescue Albie suggested he and I take a walk and try to relax me a bit. As we were walking, he told me how excited for me he was. I told him how excited for him I was. We hugged and then sat and

3. Some states, including Massachusetts, require imported rescue dogs to be quarantined. The practice is controversial, however, as many believe it is unnecessary and ineffective.

talked a while longer. Then he suggested we hop back in the truck and get this journey finished up, because we both have our ‘happily ever afters’ waiting for us at the end of this run. And neither of us wants to be late.

“We just crossed the Mason–Dixon. We are in the North. I hope you are as excited as we are. It won’t be long now. Get Ready! The wait is almost over. We are almost home.”

Judy and I both teared up. He was now not just legally ours but *ours*—to love and protect and provide for.



When the wait ended at last, Judy and Noah drove to the quarantine facility in nearby Medfield, Massachusetts, to bring Albie home. It seemed to them as though he had never ridden in a car before. He didn’t seem to know how to get in and stood nervously the entire ride home. When they pulled up in front of our house, he jumped out, but it was clear he had no idea he had reached his forever home and his forever people. He was excited but confused, running a few steps this way, then that, unsure of what would happen next. He didn’t seem afraid, just a bit like an unguided missile. We were simply strangers to him, and he wasn’t sure whether to come in the house with us or wander around the yard, sniffing his surroundings.

For two weeks, we couldn’t coax Albie upstairs at nighttime. We surmised he’d never lived in a house with stairs, but really, we had no idea what his previous life had been. We could only speculate. He slept under the coffee table in the living room. When he finally screwed up enough courage to come upstairs (to this day he’s never descended the stairs to the basement), he slept under our bed for weeks. Something about being under furniture made him feel secure.

Then he made what I call his leap of faith. My Berlin Wall had

fallen, but I had one last red line: no dogs sleeping in bed with us. But one day, I came upstairs at bedtime, and there was Albie in our bed, curled up, his head resting on the pillow. He looked at me plaintively, clearly unsure if this was acceptable and perhaps expecting to be reprimanded. But as we eyed each other, I realized this was Albie's sign he had arrived in full. It was time for me to make another leap of faith as well, and he's been sleeping with us ever since.

As the bonds tightened between us—as Albie became an indispensable and joyous part of our lives, as we learned to trust him off leash in the woods along the Charles River and in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts where we spend a lot of time—I started following Greg Mahle on Facebook. There were so many heartwarming stories, a welcome respite from the onslaught of dreadful news that bombards us every day. One post particularly struck me: “As the miles melt away, so do a lifetime of bad memories,” Greg wrote. “Lives of neglect, abuse, disease, kill shelters, starvation, and unspeakable cruelties. They are throwaways. They were unwanted, unloved, and about to die. But now they are getting a second chance. The promise of love, a family to call their own, and a warm bed to sleep in are ahead of us. Some of them have eyes filled with excitement, others have eyes filled with hope, and some are even filled with dreams. Gotcha Day [the day when dogs and families are united] and Forever Families are just over our horizon. It's a new beginning. Their time to be unloved and unwanted nevermore.”

After reading that, I felt I wanted to know more about Greg Mahle. *These*, I thought, *are the musings of a man who has found a deep contentment that eludes most people in their lifetimes*. He seemed born to the job he was doing. We should all do work so meaningful.

But I also wanted to know more about Albie. He'd brought so much joy in the short time he'd been with us, and I wanted to know how he'd gone from being a random stray found by the side of a

Louisiana roadway to a deeply loved member of our family. I knew there were some questions I might never be able to answer: Who had he lived with, and why did they let him go? Or, did he run away and leave some poor family to wonder about his fate? How long had he been alone? How had he survived?

But I also thought there were questions I could answer that would help me understand not only Albie's plight, but also that of countless other loving dogs without a place to call home. Where do all the dogs Greg drives north come from? Why are there so many southern dogs in need of homes, more than any other part of the country? Who walks the streets and the halls of the shelters and saves their lives? Who are the people who extend their hands, and their hearts, to help Albie and thousands of others like him make the journey from central Louisiana or Texas or Mississippi to homes more than twelve hundred miles away? And why do so many people care so much that they will strain their marriages, their personal relationships, and their finances to help save dogs?

Those are the questions that drove me to find out more about Greg and the rescue movement—and, eventually, to write this book. I wanted not only to shed light on the plight of these dogs, but also to celebrate the unsung heroes of the rescue world and the families that give rescue dogs a second chance. And there was one man I knew who could help answer the questions I had: Greg Mahle.

So over the course of a year, I would join Greg for all or part of several rescue road trips, logging roughly seven thousand miles with him, cleaning kennels, walking and comforting dogs, and sleeping, with mixed success, on the trailer floor at night. But even if I hadn't wanted to do all this, Greg would have insisted because he knew it was the only way I could truly understand his life, his work, and what it takes to save a dog. Before he would trust me with his story, he needed to test my mettle and make sure I could do it justice.

I also spent time in four communities where many of the dogs Greg transports come from, getting to know some of the rescuers, the fosters, the veterinarians, and the volunteers who make each of Greg's rescue road trips possible. And, sadly, I walked through neighborhoods like Houston's neglected and impoverished Fifth Ward, where thousands of emaciated, flea-infested, mangy strays loiter, suffer, and often die in rubbish-filled ditches, boarded-up homes, and under the wheels of speeding cars. I also went to the shelters where dogs like Albie wait, usually in vain, for someone to fall in love with and adopt them; shelters where as many as 80 to 90 percent—even if healthy and of fine temperament—will be put to death due to overcrowding and lack of resources.

“People think it's so glamorous,” Greg once told me, “that I'm playing with puppies all day.” But a week on the road and you realize how grueling, stressful, exhausting, relentless, dirty, smelly, and demanding the work is; you have to get used to having dog poop smeared on your shirt and the smell of sixty to eighty dogs permeating your clothes. Just driving more than four thousand miles in six days every other week, let alone taking care of scores of dogs along the way, would test even the most determined person. If you wanted to be a trucker, hauling bottled water or auto parts would be infinitely easier. And he's doing it for considerably less than minimum wage to boot.

Despite the endless miles, the stress, the physical and messy work, and the sleeping in a trailer far from home for half of every month, Greg will be the first to tell you he has the best job in rescue. Every other week, he gets to deliver a group of lucky dogs into the arms of waiting families and see firsthand the happily-ever-after scenes that unfold at each Gotcha Day.

In addition to Greg, there are countless others who make these scenes possible, many of whom you'll meet in the pages ahead. They

are the ones who turn stories of despair into stories of hope and give these dogs a first or second chance at love. They may never witness a Gotcha Day themselves, but they keep Greg running. They walk the floors of high-kill shelters; look into the baleful eyes of dogs that have been neglected, abandoned, and abused; save as many as they can; and lie awake at night, haunted by those they couldn't. They spend tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands of dollars out of their own pockets to get these dogs healthy and ready for adoption, sometimes nursing them back to health themselves. They sometimes burn through marriages or relationships, or work eighteen-hour days while raising a family for so long that they can't remember a single day off. Without them, there is no Greg Mahle arriving in the Deep South to pick up eighty of the luckiest dogs in the world and bring them to safety. Without them, there are no joyful scenes in New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and other states where expectant families, signs at the ready, look for Greg's big white truck and wait for their first glimpse of the once-forgotten dog they are about to welcome into their lives.

And for the dogs, whose long journeys began well before they ever climbed aboard Greg's truck, it is because of these people that their lives are about to change forever when Greg swings the doors open, scoops them up in his powerful arms, and places each one in the bosom of their new, loving family. This is ultimately their story too.