

DOGLAND

A Journey to the Heart of America's Dog Problem



JACKI SKOLE

DOGLAND

A Journey to the Heart of America's Dog Problem

JACKI SKOLE

Dogland

A Journey to the Heart of
America's Dog Problem

Jacki Skole



“Some of our greatest historical and artistic treasures we place with
curators in museums; others we take for walks.”

— Roger Caras, author and former ASPCA president

Author's Note

While some names and identifying details of people and places in this book have been changed in the interest of privacy, all events are accurate, based on extensive research and firsthand interviews conducted during the reporting and writing of this book. In addition, in the parts of this book that are memoir, certain memories and incidents are portrayed through my own subjective lens; while these conversations and events are accurate to the best of my knowledge, they are based on my own interpretations. Finally, some people quoted in this book may have left the organizations they were associated with during the course of the reporting, writing, and publication of *Dogland*.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Ready or Not ... Here She Comes.....	5
South Paws in the North.....	23
Property with a Heartbeat.....	41
Death-Row Dogs.....	59
Never-Ending Flood of Need.....	81
If You Build It, Will They Come?.....	107
Pet Deserts	133
Dogs for Dollars	161
Teach the Children	187
Meeting Miss Daisy	215
Afterword	241
Appendix I: Rescue 101.....	247
Appendix II: Pay It Forward	249

Preface

I PULLED UP TO A HOUSE, not sure I was where I wanted to be. None of the homes in this rural North Carolina neighborhood were numbered, at least not that I could see.

I got out of the car and stepped onto the edge of the property. Glass and plastic bottles, metal canisters, cigarette boxes, and household trash littered the yard, which was a tangle of knee-high grass and overgrown weeds. There was no sidewalk, no pathway to the front door, just a dirt driveway leading to the side of the house. Five very large cats sat on wooden stairs just outside the front door; others slinked through the deep grass—perhaps at one time feral, they now looked well fed.

I wasn't sure I could do this.

The entire drive here my mind had been racing. Would I find the house? Would anyone be home? What would I say, showing up as I was about to do, completely unannounced? I didn't want to be accusatory. I just wanted to find out how Galen and her litter ended up in Gaston County's animal shelter.

The air was thick and hot, as it often is in North Carolina in late August. The house's windows were open, and I could hear muffled talking. I could even make out a man sitting at a table smoking.

Standing there, absorbing my surroundings—the trashed lawn, the run-down mobile home—I found myself hoping I was at the wrong house. I took a few steps onto the property, my eyes focused on the cats. They stared back but didn't relinquish their posts. I have an irrational fear of cats, stemming, I think, from being scratched when I was about five years old. So rather than knock on the door, I stood my ground and called out, "Excuse me!"

Moments later, a man, fiftyish perhaps, in jeans and an untucked, rumpled yellow button-down came to the door, cigarette in hand. He gave me a quick once-over before stepping outside, onto the landing.

I spoke first. "Hi. I know this may sound like an odd question, but did you, by chance, turn a litter of puppies over to Gaston County's animal shelter about two years ago?"

He shook his head. "Don't got a dog."

"I'm looking for house number three-fourteen. Would you know which property it might be?"

He shook his head again.

Silence.

Then he pointed over his shoulder and gestured behind him. "I think a house over that way has dogs."

I thanked him, and a moment later I was back in the car, bumping along the unpaved road. The houses were small but stretched apart, each on about two acres.

Again, those nagging questions. Did I really need to know how Galen came to be in the Gaston County shelter? It would change nothing about our relationship or my love for her. At the same time, I really did want to know, to understand. After all, I was more than 600 miles from home, and, at this point, I felt like my journey—inspired by Galen—was about so much more than one quirky, not-so-little canine. The more people I spoke with, the more research I did, the more I was beginning to grasp the complexity of the crisis—in the South, certainly, but throughout much of the rest of the country, too:

America has a dog problem. It's somewhat hard to believe, as nearly sixty million U.S. households have at least one dog and Americans spend tens of billions of dollars annually satisfying our dogs' needs and our wants. (After all, Fido isn't the one who asked for that rhinestone collar, cashmere sweater, or organic pet food.)

I knew Galen was unwanted—she was surrendered to the shelter by her owner, and the odds were good that Galen was part of an accidental litter, as so many shelter dogs are. Her story, as I was beginning to understand, is one that unfolds daily all across the country. Yet Galen's story, unlike the stories of hundreds of thousands of other dogs, would have a happy ending.

I pulled in front of another house—gray, with several cars crowding the driveway—and looked through the passenger window, into the yard, for any sign of canine inhabitants.

That's when I saw them—two dogs—one tied to a tree several hundred yards to the left of the house and one tied to a shed at the rear of the property.

I took a deep breath and stepped out of the car.

Ready or Not ... Here She Comes

MY FAMILY WAS ABSOLUTELY NOT READY for a new dog. It was the fall of 2010, and my husband, Kevin, suggested we wait until at least spring—after all, he kept saying, who wants to take a puppy out to pee in the middle of the night ... in the middle of winter? I certainly didn't want to, our daughters were too young to, and Kevin made clear he wouldn't. We would wait.

Yes, we would wait.

Then, sometime in late October, I started browsing through Petfinder, the online database that connects homeless animals with people looking for a new pet. I told myself I was just getting a sense of how the site worked so that, come spring, I'd be all set to start a serious search.

Looking back, I'm not sure what sent me to Petfinder, or how I even knew the site existed. I had never engaged in the kind of months-long dog searches many people conduct before adopting a dog. Gryffin had come along sort of like an unplanned pregnancy, with no forethought, no prior discussion. Later, I'd learn that spontaneous adoptions aren't uncommon. A 2011 PetSmart Charities survey found that just over 40 percent of pet owners said they'd done nothing before acquiring their pet—no search online or in pet stores or shelters, no discussion with breeders or even friends.

During one of my daily browsing sessions, I stumbled on a picture of Sherman, a handsome five-month-old black Labrador retriever who, his post read, liked carrots, was almost fully house-trained, and was living in a shelter in West Windsor, New Jersey, just a few towns south of us. For a few days, I couldn't shake Sherman from my mind: good-looking guy, right age, geographically desirable ...

Ultimately I showed his picture to my daughters—Lindsey, who was then eight, and Dhani, then six. They asked the inevitable question: Are we adopting him?

“No,” I said. “I’m just looking. But he’s cute, isn’t he?”

Later that evening, Kevin and I were in our bedroom getting ready for bed and prompting the girls to do the same. Lindsey, our queen of nighttime procrastination, lay on her stomach at the foot of our bed, feet swinging back and forth, head cupped in her hands. Suddenly she pronounced, “Lindsey is not Lindsey without a dog.”

Kevin and I exchanged glances. We knew exactly how she felt.

We were still trying to come to terms with Gryffin’s sudden death. Lindsey and Dhani were handling the situation far better than we were, but kids have a way of moving on more quickly than adults, and Kevin and I considered Gryffin our first child. For us, Gryffin’s death, out of the blue as it was, had come too soon.

I had adopted Gryffin on September 7, 2000, from the DeKalb County Humane Society in Georgia. The decision made no sense, but in a rare moment of spontaneity—I am, perhaps, the least spontaneous person you’ll ever meet—I did it anyway.

Back then, Kevin and I were engaged and living in Philadelphia, but as a producer with CNN, I would commute to Atlanta a couple of times a month. On one trip, a girlfriend introduced me to Caleb, a ten-week-old puppy she had just adopted. I’m not sure whether it was her powers of persuasion—she was determined to find homes for his siblings—or the few minutes I spent playing with the puppy, but the following day I found myself at the shelter staring at Caleb’s littermates,

particularly smitten by one guy in particular. He was a blend of bronze and black fur, and as friendly and clumsy as his siblings, but he seemed the calmest and least affected by the hubbub of the shelter. I took the little guy's picture and e-mailed it to Kevin. Despite my having no intelligent answer to his most obvious question—"Couldn't we just adopt a dog in Philadelphia?"—Kevin humored me, and our conversation turned to potential names. On Kevin's recommendation, I had just finished several books in the Harry Potter series, so talk turned to all things Potter. We immediately nixed the name "Harry," thinking it too obvious a reference to the series, which was nearing its height of popularity. But Gryffindor—Gryffin for short—resounded in our ears; it was restrained, subtle, yet the connection would be evident to anyone who'd read even one of the books.

The next day I called Delta Air Lines to make sure Gryffin could fly coach with me to Philadelphia—I wasn't going to adopt him if he had to fly cargo—filled out the Humane Society's application, paid the mandatory \$80 "donation" fee, and became a mother.

Gryffin's papers from the Humane Society identified him as a "retriever-chow" mix. From the moment I saw him I was never sure whether "retriever" referred to a Labrador or a golden, because he looked like a mix of the two. As he matured, he developed a Labrador's shape but a golden's dark gold coloring; his fur was longer than a Lab's but shorter and thicker than a golden's. His chow lineage was evident in the dense fur that surrounded his neck, the purple spots that dotted his tongue, and the regal way he carried himself. He was a gorgeous dog, and when I would take him for walks around Philadelphia, people would stop me to inquire about his breed. "Pure mutt," I would tell them with pride, as if I had something to do with his good looks.

Gryffin's personality also reflected his mixed-breed heritage, with the chow in him most strongly defining his character. The American Kennel Club describes the chow's personality as catlike and uses words

like “independent” and “aloof” to describe the breed’s temperament. Gryffin was all that, and remarkably gentle. No dog has ever taken a treat from my hand as tenderly as he did.

After Lindsey was born, I started referring to Gryffin as our Secret Service agent because he was always around but never underfoot. He would position himself in whatever room of the house we were in but at a distance. He wasn’t the type of dog who nudged his head under your hand while you were sitting on the couch to demand that you pet him; he was the type who tolerated you when you lay on the floor beside him to stroke his soft fur because he understood that allowing you this time benefitted you more than it did him.

Gryffin was my son, my teacher, and my protector. As my first child, he brought out maternal instincts I didn’t even know I had, and he prepared me to be a mother to my two daughters. When we lived in Philadelphia and Kevin was spending long days and overnights in the hospital training to become a gastroenterologist, we never installed an alarm system because we had Gryffin. When we moved to New Jersey, Kevin and I joked that we bought our home especially for the dog because our city boy now had two acres of yard to patrol—no squirrel, groundhog, bird, or bunny was safe when Gryffin was around. I loved to watch him and my daughters romp in the backyard, especially during the winter, when the frozen ground was thick with snow. Only once in their lives together do I recall my girls getting angry at their brother, and that was after he tackled a snowman they had worked so hard to build.

Almost ten years to the day after I adopted Gryffin, Kevin decided to take him hiking in the Sourland Mountains, a not-so-rugged but picturesque preserve just minutes from our home. Lindsey joined them, and the trio set out a little after ten o’clock. It was Rosh Hashanah—the Jewish New Year—the day, the Jewish people believe, that God decides the fate of all living things. It was a beautiful morning—blue sky, bright sun—and we would be going to synagogue that afternoon.

Kevin thought a hike in the mountains would tire Gryffin sufficiently enough that he would sleep while we attended services.

Not long after the three left, Kevin called my cell phone. Gryffin, he told me, wouldn't jump out of the car. They were coming home.

Back in the driveway, Kevin opened the Prius's hatch; Gryffin lay on his side, completely still, except for the slow and rhythmic rise and fall of his broad chest. I gently stroked his fur and asked him what was wrong. As I did, he slowly lifted his head and looked at me, as though he wanted to tell me something. I could see pain in his eyes. I kissed his forehead and whispered, "I love you."

That was the last time I saw him.

The vet at the emergency animal hospital told Kevin that a tumor tucked behind Gryffin's ribcage had burst and that his stomach was filled with blood. We hadn't seen this coming, and I don't think Gryffin had either, because the previous night he had played ball like a puppy, and that morning he had eagerly jumped into Kevin's car to go hiking. Now Kevin, who loved that dog from the moment he laid eyes on him, and who affectionately referred to him as "my son," could do no more than comfort him as the vet delivered a life-ending medicinal cocktail.

At home, I cried. Then I called the girls into my bedroom, got down on my knees to see into their eyes, and kept crying as I told them that Gryffin wasn't coming home. I think they started crying and hugging me before I got all the words out, and I recall wondering what effect, if any, Gryffin's passing would have on them—they were still so young.

As for Kevin and me, Gryffin's death left us numb. In the days immediately following, when Lindsey or Dhani would ask if we were getting another dog, our answer was always, "Yes. But not yet." We needed to grieve; we needed to process the suddenness and unexpectedness of our loss. I agreed with Kevin that putting winter—and time—behind us made sense; perhaps by spring, the thinking

went, our heartache—now so raw—would have begun to heal.

In the 1980s psychologists began studying—and taking seriously—the grief people report feeling after a pet dies. Their findings may not surprise those who've lost their best canine or feline friends, but researchers discovered that the grief triggered by the loss of a beloved companion animal can surpass the grief associated with the death of a human companion, even a family member. The day-to-day interactions and interdependence that ground the human-pet relationship lay the foundation for what can become a profound and anguished bereavement.

All I know is that there I was, weeks after Gryffin died, looking at dogs on Petfinder. Not just any dogs: dogs in Central New Jersey who were less than one year old. After seeing Sherman's picture and showing it to Lindsey and Dhani, I even called the rescue group to inquire about him, but I was quickly shot down by a woman who told me she wouldn't give Sherman to a family that didn't have a fenced-in yard. We have an invisible fence—most of my dog-owning neighbors have invisible fences—but the woman wouldn't negotiate. I was taken aback by how quickly she brushed me off—Sherman needed a home, and we could offer him a great one. (I've since learned that invisible fences are quite controversial within the animal welfare community and that many rescues refuse to adopt their dogs to homes that have them. Among the reasons: Invisible fences don't keep out animals or people who might do harm or be harmed, and once dogs cross the fence, they will often not return onto the property for fear of inviting another electric shock.)

Several weeks later, still surfing Petfinder, I came across pictures of six puppies being offered for adoption by a Flemington, New Jersey, rescue group. They were adorable, as all puppies are, but what caught my eye—in addition to their proximity to my home—was their breed mix. The postings said the dogs were Australian shepherd and Labrador retriever, two breeds with reputations for being good

with children, smart, and easy to train.

The rescue organization had a curious name: It was listed on Petfinder as Catnip Friends Cat Rescue, but all I was concerned about at the time was whether this rescue would let us adopt a dog even though we didn't have—and weren't getting—a fenced-in yard. The woman I spoke with on the telephone asked me a few questions about whether I had ever owned a dog, and I told her about Gryffin—how I'd adopted him a decade ago and how we'd lost him suddenly and recently. Then I asked if she had any issues adopting dogs to families whose yards are enclosed by invisible fences. She told me she cared more about the quality of the people adopting her dogs than what kind of fences they had. And, by the way, if we wanted to see the puppies, they would be in Raritan, a town neighboring ours, that Saturday.

I kept returning to my computer to look at the puppies. Kevin was still adamant about waiting to adopt a new dog—I think he felt guilty that we would even consider replacing Gryffin so soon. I felt that guilt, too, but I also felt an emptiness that needed to be filled. No matter how much I loved Kevin and the girls and they loved me, they just couldn't fill that space, which is funny because I didn't even know that space existed until Gryffin came into my life. Now I knew I couldn't let it remain empty.

To my great relief, Kevin humored me—just as he'd done when I'd called from Atlanta wanting to adopt a dog—and agreed to go with me to see the puppies. We left the girls home with a sitter because I needed Kevin's full attention to persuade him we were ready to let a dog back into our lives; he wanted my full attention to persuade me we were not.

THE LOCAL AGWAY, A HYBRID GARDEN AND PET STORE, may have been less than ten minutes from our home, but we had never shopped there before. The rectangular store was small, its aisles to the left of

the entrance packed with lawn and garden products, its aisles to the right crammed with pet products. We turned right, and as we neared the back I saw cats in cages stacked three high, a reddish-brown dog that resembled a fox splayed out on the floor eating a bully stick (a popular and not inexpensive chew toy made from the penises of bulls), and a dog pen crowded with puppies climbing over each other, hustling for human attention. Five of the dogs were black with a random white spot here or there; one was a speckled gray-black mix.

The woman in charge told me her name was Linda, that the puppies had arrived that morning from North Carolina, and that before being transported north they had been in what she called “a high-kill shelter.” None of that information registered with me at the time. I just wanted to hold a squiggly little puppy, run my hands over its soft fur, and stare into its innocent eyes.

Kevin and I picked up each puppy one at a time to get a sense of each dog’s individual personality. Even when puppies are about eight weeks old, you can get a sense of which guy is more rambunctious, which gal is more skittish, and which pup seems mellower than the others. I was committed to adopting a dark-haired dog for no other reason than our home has dark hardwood floors, and I had spent too many minutes of every day vacuuming up Gryffin’s golden locks, which seemed to taunt me with their ubiquitous presence. I also presumed we would adopt a male because Kevin repeatedly joked about Gryffin being his ally in a house full of women.

But as I tested the temperaments of the black-furred boys, Julia, the petite gray puppy with eyes lined black like Cleopatra’s, was squirming her way into Kevin’s broken heart. I thought the puppy was a little funny looking; to me, she shared an uncanny resemblance with Stitch, the blue doglike alien from the Disney series *Lilo & Stitch*, but Kevin liked her unique look. The next thing I knew, Kevin was telling me that if I was truly ready to deal with all the work—and potential headaches—that come with adopting a puppy, he would

support me, but he was sorta, kinda leaning toward Julia. I interpreted that to mean we could adopt a dog as long as we adopted this one.

For \$250 in cash and a promise to spay her, Julia was ours. On the car ride home, I broke out my BlackBerry to look up girls' names. In the Jewish religion it is customary to name a baby after a relative who has passed away. It is said this keeps the person's memory alive and, in a metaphysical way, forms a bond between the soul of the newborn and of the deceased family member. For me and Kevin, it was a given that our new pup would be named after Gryffin, so I started down the list: "Gabby, Gable, Gabriela . . ." When I got to "Galen," Kevin stopped me. The name held no significance to me, but he'd learned in medical school that Galen was the name of an Ancient Greek physician who today is considered one of the most influential physicians of all time. As if to confirm we'd hit on the right name, a quick web search informed us Galen meant "calm," which is, of course, the canine temperament we were hoping for in our new dog. In a nod to her Southern roots, we chose "Belle" as her middle name: Galen Belle.

When we arrived home, we called Lindsey and Dhani to the family room and let loose their pint-sized sibling. "Galen's a Southerner, like Gryffin," I told them. "Only she's from North Carolina." I don't think they heard me, and in truth, they probably didn't care where she was from. They just wanted to hear that she was theirs to keep, and they wanted to pet her and to hold her. And so, in true sisterly fashion, they proceeded to argue over who would get to do so first.

GALEN AND I GOT ACQUAINTED on my kitchen floor, where I was immediately taken by how emotionally needy she was, far needier than I recalled Gryffin ever being. When Gryffin was a puppy, he just wanted to be in the room Kevin and I were in, and then he would happily settle down and entertain himself with a chew toy. Not Galen;

being in the same room with us wasn't enough. She wanted to be on our laps—mine, Kevin's, Lindsey's, or Dhani's—and she'd whine if she wasn't. So, over the course of a good many weeks, I spent a good many hours sitting on one of Gryffin's two-inch-thick brown dog beds, my back flush against a cabinet door, with Galen curled up on my lap chewing a bone or her stuffed hedgehog, or nibbling my fingers with her tiny, razor-sharp teeth. Not knowing how much, if any, time she'd had with her mother, I turned pop-veterinary psychologist and wondered if the neediness I perceived stemmed from a broken maternal bond or reflected feelings of abandonment.

At night, so Galen didn't feel alone, and so I could hear her cry when she needed to go outside, she slept in our bedroom in a toddler's pack-and-play. We were crate training her, but neither Kevin nor I wanted to schlep the crate to and from its perch in the family room every morning and every night, so we decided the pack-and-play was a perfectly acceptable substitute.

Getting up with Galen in the middle of the night brought back memories of being a new mom and waking with my girls for their nighttime breast feedings. But I have to say, Galen treated me far more kindly than my newborn daughters ever had. Unlike them, she did her business quickly—by that I mean she peed in the yard—and after I returned her to the pack-and-play, she went right to sleep. In no time, this baby girl was sleeping through the night.

During the day, because I teach at our local community college, my schedule was flexible enough for me to drop in to spend a little time with Galen. We would go on mini-excursions around our backyard, and I noticed that the closeness Galen craved inside the house extended to the outdoors; she would explore her surroundings only if I explored with her, step by step. Of course, the benefit of this behavior was that I had no fear she would run away, but I did wonder about her apparent lack of curiosity.

Then I discovered Galen didn't even want to leave our property

for a walk. I would leash her up and start down the driveway, and she would sit down. At first, I thought she simply didn't know how to walk on a leash. My vet—to whom I was making regular trips since Galen had come to us with an intestinal parasite common in shelter dogs—told me dogs need to be taught to walk on a leash (I don't remember teaching Gryffin) and that I needed to take the reins of our relationship. I became the alpha, but I felt bad yanking Galen's twelve-pound body along when she really seemed opposed to walking; treats of any kind provided little motivation.

But I kept the pressure on, week after week, and ultimately I got her taking regular walks with me around the small, horseshoe-shaped development across from our house. The route is about a mile, too short for a workout but long enough to notice another quirk of our canine: She never peed on these walks; she's still never peed on a walk. She's like a person who won't use public restrooms. So Galen and I would take our walk—such as it was—and then I would send her into the backyard to do her business.

I wish this had been her only urinary issue, but she had what veterinarians call “submissive pee,” a condition not uncommon in puppies and rescue dogs but a common gripe of dog owners who don't appreciate their otherwise potty-trained dogs urinating on their hardwoods and rugs. Most dogs with submissive pee lose their bladder control when greeting people—even people they know well. The urination—combined with a cowering posture, tucked tail, and flattened ears—is the dog's way of saying, “Hey, I'm not a threat; don't hurt me.” Galen cowered so low she would turn her head sideways and scrape her right ear across the ground while whining and whinnying like a horse.

It got to the point where no one—not me, Kevin, or our daughters—would say hello to her anywhere but outside. When I would return home from teaching or running errands, I would enter the house; rush to Galen's crate, which sits alongside the family

room's sliding glass door; open the door, then the crate; and make a mad dash onto our deck, down the stairs, and onto the grass before saying a single word to her. When I was lucky, not one dribble would land in the house or on the deck.

On one of our visits to the vet—after Galen peed in the waiting room when a vet tech greeted her, and then again, in the examining room—the doctor told me dogs often outgrow this condition by the time they turn one. I hoped Galen was listening.

Then one day Galen gave me something else to ponder: She stopped walking on our hardwood floors and started slinking around the house spy-like, moving from room to room along circuitous routes determined by the layout of our area rugs, all the while hanging her head and looking like a child who knows she's done something wrong. She even refused to enter the kitchen for meals—we have hardwoods there—or for American cheese, her favorite treat, so I started feeding her outside. To this day—no matter the weather—she takes her meals on our deck and refuses to enter the kitchen. And she continues to slink, head low, about the house. “She looks guilty,” Dhani has said on more than one occasion. I've often wondered what, if anything, she might have done or what it is she might fear.

All this is not to say that Galen wasn't also displaying typical puppy behavior and getting into typical puppy trouble. She ate my favorite brown slippers, chewed the wicker off a basket that stored some of my daughters' books, left teeth marks on the wooden leg of an end table in the family room, and nipped at Lindsey's and Dhani's ankles—herding them to nowhere. As for my ankles, she preferred to nip at them whenever I took the stairs from the second floor down to the first. She never nipped at them on the way up.

When the herding started, Galen was about four months old. She had a lot of energy, and I was having a hard time getting her to release it. Long walks were still not happening; neither was playing fetch in the yard because there didn't seem to be any type of toy or

ball that she liked enough to chase, let alone retrieve and chase again.

Kevin was beginning to get frustrated with my inability to tire her out by day because she was starting to harass our daughters at night, and the problem was growing worse as Galen grew bigger. It got to where the girls couldn't take the few steps from their bedrooms to their bathroom without the dog charging them and nipping at their ankles with her sharp teeth. Commands such as *No!* or *Stop!*—whether issued by me, Kevin, or the girls—went unheeded; if anything, they would make Galen's harassing more frenzied. If the girls tried to push Galen away, she would bite at their hands and fingers. They were starting to fear her, and Kevin was afraid Galen was going to hurt one of them. He even started making subtle asides about returning Galen to the rescue if I didn't control her behavior. At first I didn't take him seriously, and fortunately the girls—despite being the victims of Galen's repeated attacks—didn't want to see her go. But as the herding continued, I could see in Kevin's face and hear in his voice that his threats weren't empty.

He knew all too well what a dog could do to a young child in a moment of unexpected aggression.

It was July 4, 2003, Lindsey's first birthday, and we were celebrating at my father's house on the Jersey shore. I was sitting on the living room floor next to my dad's golden retriever, Isaac, and Lindsey was crawling about, as she had yet to master walking. When she crawled over to pet Isaac, he swiftly and unexpectedly grabbed her by the ear, picked her up, and threw her to the ground. Kevin, Lindsey, and I spent much of the afternoon in Shore Memorial Hospital's emergency room, where a doctor stitched together the very top of Lindsey's ear, where Isaac's teeth had torn the cartilage.

Kevin hadn't been in the living room at the time of Isaac's attack, and even if he had been, there was no way he could have prevented it. But he could prevent Galen from hurting his girls, and if protecting them meant getting rid of our dog, I believe his thought was: "So be it."

PUPPY SOCIALIZATION CLASSES expose puppies to other young dogs in the hope that when a dog comes into contact with another—which it inevitably will—it will be less likely to respond with fear or, worse, with aggression. I viewed the classes as a twofer—they would acclimate Galen to other dogs, as well as give her an opportunity to release some of that pent-up energy that was leading Kevin to view her as a threat to our daughters.

The classes—more like a puppy free-for-all—were held on Wednesday nights at my vet’s office, in the large waiting area. The trainer would ring the exterior of the room with chairs and benches for the dogs’ human parents and siblings, and the puppies would play in the circle’s center. I watched many dogs play, but not Galen. On our first excursion, she hid under a bench and wouldn’t come out—not to play, not to eat the treats the trainer sprinkled all over the floor, not to drink from the bowls of water she set out. And of course, when it was time for the dogs to go outside to pee, Galen simply sniffed the grass surrounding the parking lot. We went to four sessions, and only once did she venture out from under the bench to play with other dogs; never did she pee—she always held it in until we returned home. All that stimulation did take the edge off her nighttime rambunctiousness, but by morning she was back to her unruly self.

The best advice I got for sapping Galen of some of her energy came from a trainer with an affinity for border collies, which, like Australian shepherds, are high-energy herding dogs. By the time I reached the trainer, frigid temperatures and a snow-filled yard were making spending long periods of time outside unappealing to me, if not to Galen, and the nighttime ankle nipping was increasing, as was Kevin’s frustration. Fortunately, one suggestion—to have Galen run up and down the basement steps retrieving treats—did slow her down, but only for short periods because she would tire of the exercise before the exercise fully tired her. The herding continued.

Then, one February evening, Kevin snapped. About eight inches of snow had turned the backyard—which stretches two acres to the South Branch of the Raritan River—a luminous swath of white, and he, the girls, and Galen were outside: the girls making angels and poorly packed snowballs, Galen sniffing the snow and bunny-hopping through it, and Kevin drinking in the whole scene. It's this ruralesque nature of our property that initially drew Kevin to it, and at that moment, with the grass and trees blanketed by freshly fallen snow, his girls playing, he was having what he affectionately calls “a Hillsborough moment,” when all is right in our little world.

And then it wasn't.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kevin saw Dhani fall to the ground and Galen jump on top of her.

“She was nipping at my boots,” Dhani would later tell me. “So I started walking, and she followed me. I thought she wanted to play, so I ran.”

Galen, who by now weighed more than Dhani, tackled her.

“I got up, and she tackled me again.”

This time Dhani couldn't get up. She had fallen face-first into the snow. Galen climbed onto her back and started wrestling with the faux fur lining the hood of her winter coat.

From where he was standing several yards away, all Kevin could see was Dhani struggling to get up. He ran toward them, fearful that Galen would bite Dhani's face, the only part of her that wasn't covered in cold-weather wear. He grabbed the dog with two hands, lifted her off of Dhani's back, and threw her into the snow.

Not until that moment—and never since—had I seen Kevin so angry. He grumbled under his breath something about giving Galen back and being serious this time. But I wasn't ready to let her go, and neither, still, were our daughters.

I gave Kevin his space for the rest of the night, and neither he nor I brought up the incident the following day. I hoped he would

simply put it behind him and give Galen another chance, or two.

WE USHERED IN SPRING as we do each year, hosting our family's Passover Seder. This year our gathering numbered twenty-two. With the main course complete, the adults remained at the table talking, while my daughters and five of their cousins ransacked my living room looking for the Afikomen—pieces of matzo I'd wrapped in tin foil and hidden. Galen, I thought, was napping in her crate.

Somehow, through adult talk and kid ruckus, a steady growl caught my attention.

Galen was under the table growling at my father. For so many reasons this struck me as odd, but primarily because prior to dinner I'd seen my dad petting Galen in our backyard. But now she was glaring at him, releasing a low-grade rumble. Rather than try to engage her, my dad simply ignored her and laughed it off; he wasn't much for confrontation with people, let alone dogs. Galen didn't let up until he left our house.

Galen had previously signaled she was no fan of strange men—strange as in the plumber, electrician, or contractor who would come to fix the routine problems associated with home ownership. She would bark angrily at the man before he entered the house, but as soon as he came in, she would rush into her crate. She seemed to have no problem with women she didn't know; with them, she would wag her tail wildly and whine, begging for attention.

This fear of men, Galen's severely submissive nature, and her idiosyncratic habits left me filled with questions. We adopted her when she was just eight weeks old—what could possibly have happened in such a short time to have so impacted her?

As I wondered about Galen, I remembered that in Gryffin's early years I would question some of his peculiarities, like his outsized fear of large black garbage bags and his hatred for boxers; he had an

uncanny ability to identify dogs of that breed, and once he saw one, he would become uncharacteristically aggressive. I used to speculate about what experiences he might have had before I adopted him, but all those years ago, it had never occurred to me to look into his past.

But there was something about Galen, something I saw every time I looked into her big brown eyes and at her sweet gray face, that seemed to be telling me not to leave it at guesses. If I'm honest with myself, I saw something else when I looked into her eyes—I saw a woman who had traded career for family, journalism for motherhood, and who, while not regretting a single decision, still struggled with her identity.

This may sound a tad crazy—or maybe a lot crazy—but I believe that in the early spring of 2012, Galen inspired me to dust off my journalistic mantle to find out all I could about how an eight-week-old puppy from a North Carolina shelter ended up at a New Jersey garden-supply store available for adoption—and why there are so many dogs like her making an exodus from the South to live out their lives in the North.

At the time, I had no sense of the enormity and the complexity of the situation.

Back then, I knew only that I needed to dig out Galen's adoption papers. They had Linda Wilferth's contact information, and, as the woman responsible for bringing Galen to New Jersey, she would have some, if not all, of the answers to my many questions.

Dogland is forthcoming
from Ashland Creek Press in August of 2015.

If you are a member of the media and would like a review copy, please
contact Midge Raymond at midge@ashlandcreekpress.com.

To join our mailing list, visit
<http://www.ashlandcreekpress.com/subscribe.html>



www.AshlandCreekPress.com