

An excerpt from...

Dogs of Dreamtime: A Story about Second Chances and the Power of Love

Searching for the Dalai Lama

She was just sitting there, cool as a cucumber, staring right up at me. She was so still, I wasn't sure she was real. As I inched forward for a closer look, I could see her bright eyes blink and her body vibrate with excitement. She was exceedingly happy to see that I'd come, but she was more concerned with making sure I got a real good look at her, and that I burned the picture into my brain. Until I did, she was unwilling to move. I can't tell you how I knew this exactly; it was something in the way she locked her eyes onto mine. So I took in as much of her as I could and committed it to memory.

No more than eight weeks old, with round puppy tummy, she was obsidian black, with fluffy white shawl around neck and chest. She had a white muzzle, with a blaze traveling up and over the top of her head, meeting up with white scruff between shoulders. Four white socks. Little tan eyebrows. No tail.

As I was busy soaking in every detail, I could have sworn I heard her say, "I've come back to be with you."

This startled me so much that I woke up.

The dream had been so vivid and so real that, for a moment, I wasn't sure where I was. Could it be possible... ?

My beloved Sheltie, Kiera, at eleven years, had died from a brain tumor not quite one year before. She'd been my unswerving friend and safehold through some of the most significant changes in my life. She'd seen me through changes in relationship, career, and geographic location, as well as the milestones of marriage, birth, and death. Her presence had always had the effect of steadying me in a way that no other could. I tried to offer her as much when it came time for me to let her go.

I'd prayed that I would know when that day was, and, mercifully, my prayers were answered. It came on a calm fall morning, shortly after we'd exhausted all the treatments available. Disoriented and unbalanced, Kiera could no longer stand up. She couldn't eat. She wouldn't drink. I called the vet. He agreed to come to our house so she could die peacefully in my arms, in her home. I cradled her, whispering gently, telling her over and over how much I loved her, stroking and kissing her beautiful face, my tears staining her fur, until she took her last breath.

After the vet left, I sat holding her for a long while, unwilling to give up the feel of her in

my arms. After some time, Andrew gently helped me take the next step. He went and got the blanket I'd planned to wrap her in. It was her favorite blanket, one that I'd made for her when she was a puppy. Then we buried her under the shade of an arching ash tree by my garden.

The ache from her absence was still very much with me. I'd reconciled myself to remaining dogless. Kiera had been such an exceptional companion that I was afraid any other dog would always suffer from the comparison.

That Kiera would come back to solve this problem for me would be just like her. The very notion had me shaking my head and chuckling out loud. Still, this really would be too fantastic to be true—even for my wonder dog.

Mesmerized by this thought, I moved trancelike around the kitchen that morning, while some other part of me got my four-year-old daughter's breakfast ready. Andrew sat with the morning paper in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Caitlin, a blend of the both of us, having my sandy blond hair and curved mouth, and Andrew's sparkling blue eyes and gangly arms and legs, wasn't used to all this quiet. She piped up, "I had a funny dream last night, Mom."

Snapped out of my reverie, I answered, "You did? What was it?"

We're a family of prolific dreamers, and sharing them at breakfast has become something of a tradition at our house. It's a way for us to start the day feeling more settled and connected.

As Cait began her recollection, Andrew put down his paper to give her his full attention.

She began, "Well, I was walking in the woods behind our house and..."

It was another bear dream.

I'd been trying to get Cait to enjoy hiking in the woods with me. There was a beautiful, gently rolling path that meandered around a lake not far from my mother's house a couple of hours north of us in the Adirondacks. I'd made the mistake of forcing the issue one day, even after my normally spunky daughter had refused several times. She reluctantly came along with me, and, though we saw no wildlife to speak of, she finished the walk somehow associating woods with a fear of bears. She'd spent many dreams working this out. In this dream, the bear had turned out to be a friend, so that was progress.

After Cait shared her dream, Andrew looked over to me and asked, "So, Mom, any dreams last night?" They both waited expectantly.

"Uh, no . . .," I lied, "I don't remember any."

I wasn't ready to share this particular dream for a couple of reasons. It wasn't that I

thought Andrew would dismiss my dream as strange or silly—on the contrary, after all these years, he'd gotten used to more than the occasional dream of mine somehow managing to drop into reality. It was just that the subject of animals in our household was always a loaded one. I was a dyed-in-the-wool animal lover. Andrew was not.

Whenever I'd had animals in my life, they'd always consumed a considerable amount of my attention and love—Andrew might say an inordinate amount. Having gone through a spate of human and animal losses within the last few years, I knew that Andrew would have two reactions to my dream. He hated the thought of seeing me set myself up for more loss, even if it was a loss that was more than likely at least a decade away. And he was enjoying the benefits of an animal-free home—no hair on clothes, no tripping over furry bodies, no worrying about when we had to get back home or how much dog exercise needed to be fit in.

So, even if there was a remote basis to my dream, even if Kiera had found a way to come back, Andrew wouldn't be inclined to want any part of it. He'd be apt to say this was just as likely brought on by my recent research into dog breeds. (I'd been trying to help a friend find a dog who would make a good buddy for her young daughter. This little girl was paralyzed from the neck down and spent her days in a wheelchair.) And I'd have to allow that this analysis could be true.

I'd spent the last couple of weeks investigating some breeds that my vet had recommended. His list of suggestions had included Border Terriers, Australian Shepherds, and German Shepherds. I was already familiar with German Shepherds, as almost everyone is. And my mother had quite a wonderful old German Shepherd girl, of whom I was very fond. I'd never heard of the other two breeds, so I hit the Internet to get educated. Border Terriers looked kind of like "Benji" dogs, with little otter-shaped heads. They were on the smallish side of a medium build, and did what terriers do very well—hunt rodents, foxes, et al. Australian Shepherds, or "Aussies," basically looked like Border Collies on steroids, without tails. They were medium-sized herding dogs. What all three breeds had in common was that they were all very intelligent, loyal, working dogs needing lots of exercise and stimulation to be happy.

Given the limited information I'd relayed to my vet, I could see why he'd suggested these breeds. I had emphasized the guarding and companion qualities that my friend wanted for her daughter. But as I delved deeper into learning about all these dogs, I became concerned that none of them would be a good fit for first-time dog owners. These were all dogs who would go squirrely after a while just lying around keeping an eye on a little girl who wouldn't even be able to throw a ball for them. I also knew it was extremely unlikely that anyone else in her home would have the time to adequately exercise such high-octane animals.

My friend eventually wound up with a very sweet little Bishon Frise.

I wound up with an acute case of "Aussie-itis."

I'd become totally smitten. I'd always had herding dogs, and had become hooked on their intelligence and character. I'd had a long-standing love affair with Border Collies but was discouraged from getting one by a dog-loving friend who'd had several. Not one to mince words, she put it this way: Unless I was willing to get some sheep, too, I should do them a favor and leave them alone. These were dogs who needed a job. From what I could gather, Aussies, while similar to Border Collies in many ways, appeared to be a little less intense (or, as my friend would bluntly suggest, less inclined to be neurotic). Anyway, if I were ever in the market for another dog, I knew what breed it would be.

Taking all of these recent developments into account, I knew that Andrew's response would be a flat "No," so there was no point in going there. I tried to put the idea right out of my head.

And I did.

Until a few nights later, when a remarkably similar dream played itself out. The same little Aussie puppy sat stock-still again, looking up at me. This time, I sat down next to her, to pet her. She couldn't contain herself any longer; she bounded up into my arms and slathered me with puppy kisses. I held her close and relished the wonderful smell of her puppy breath.

Again, she announced—quite clearly this time—that she'd come back for me. Again, I awoke with a start. Lying there, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. This was all too much to contemplate.

A few more days passed, and with each new day I found it harder and harder to get her out of my head. I had this overpowering sensation that she was with me everywhere I went. It occurred to me that if I was going to try to find her, she was already around eight weeks old. That meant I'd have a couple of weeks at most to track her down before she might be sold to any buyer who happened to be in the market for an Australian Shepherd female pup. My stomach knotted up at the thought of her going to someone else's home. I felt an uncomfortable urgency growing.

I was nervous about talking to Andrew about these dreams. It wasn't that he was unreasonable or unfeeling. It was just that I didn't want to force another dog on him when he felt that he was finally home free. There was so much about having a dog that had been a struggle for him, even though he had come to dearly love Kiera before she died, and even though he mourned her death nearly as deeply as I did. I also knew how much Andrew loved me, and how much he'd try to do anything for me if he thought it was something I really needed. Weighing it all out, I decided I'd have a better-than-even chance if he was made aware of how much this meant to me.

At the first quiet moment, I decided to bring it up. After we'd gotten Cait to sleep one evening, we sat down in the living room. Our way of unwinding had always been to sit and talk at the end of the day.

The conversation began with discussing a potentially big client with whom we'd just acquired a hard-won meeting. On that happy note, I segued into my "exciting" news.

"Boy, have I been having some really weird dreams lately," I began.

"What are they?" Andrew asked.

"Well, Kiera's come back..."

The words hung in the air.

The mood in the room instantly changed. Andrew looked at me, not quite knowing what to say.

I hurriedly went on to explain that I'd been having these dreams where Kiera made it clear that she fully expected me to come and find her. It was also clear that it didn't occur to her that I might fail. I hoped to get Andrew to see that I couldn't let her down; I couldn't lose her if she really had come back for me.

He didn't even comment on the strangeness of the dreams, or what they might mean. He just said, "Please, I can't do another dog."

"But—"

"I don't want any more dogs. I like our life the way it is. Besides, even if I said yes, what would be the odds that you could find her? If she has come back, she could be anywhere in the country."

Without actually coming right out and saying the whole idea was ludicrous, Andrew had landed a one-two punch. Realistically, I hadn't considered what the search might mean. And I really did respect Andrew's feelings. I really didn't want to make our lives more complicated. But this was a no-win situation: One of us was going to be unhappy no matter what happened.

I conceded Round One. The conversation turned to other subjects.

The next night, she came again. This time I could see that she was in some kind of farmlike setting with several other puppies and dogs. I awoke thinking this would help rule out some breeders. But it would still be an incredible long shot, notwithstanding this whole idea of her reincarnating to be with me again in the first place. I was beginning to feel a little nutty.

Even so, I couldn't stop myself and began furtively looking up breeders on the Web. I started with a local search, assuming that if Kiera had gone to the trouble of figuring out how to come back, she wouldn't choose someplace thousands of miles away. She'd want to land as close to me as she could—or so I speculated. Then it would be a matter of

finding breeders who had puppies around eight weeks old, specifically one black-and-white female puppy.

Christmas was less than a week away. I was normally much more organized about the holidays, but I was hopelessly far behind this year. The new business was still front and center, consuming all our efforts. I wasn't one to go in for the commercialism of the season anyway, but I always liked to take some time to find a few really thoughtful gifts. As it was, by necessity, presents would be sparse this year. Andrew and I had agreed not to get each other anything. So, amid the encroaching holiday chaos, my desire to persuade Andrew about Kiera, and my attempts to find her, were put on the back burner.

Christmas morning rolled around. Colin had arrived home from his freshman year at college earlier in the week. Both he and McLean, a junior in high school, were still asleep upstairs. Cait had used up every ounce of restraint she could muster. It was nine o'clock; she had been up since six. Andrew finally gave her the go-ahead to wake her brothers. She jumped on each of their beds until she was sure they'd be incapable of falling back to sleep. Her job done, she raced back downstairs and began opening presents.

By late morning, the stockings had been emptied, and the bottom of the tree was looking pretty bare. There had been a few surprises and much to be thankful for. The kids were organizing their stuff into neat little piles. I was about to go start breakfast when Andrew motioned to me and took out a white envelope from his back pocket.

As he handed it to me, I shot him an irritated look that said: We promised not to exchange anything . . . We can't afford to exchange anything . . . I kept my end of the bargain and didn't get you anything . . . There's nothing I want or need . . .

The card contained three words: "Go find her." There was a blank check inside.

The magnitude of his gesture opened the floodgates. I broke down and wept.