
All My Heroes Have
**FUR, FINS &
FEATHERS**

*An Animal Communicator's
Healing Journey of Awakening*

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Open Door Publications

All My Heroes Have Fur, Fins & Feathers
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Healing Journey of Awakening

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The events told in this book are the author's memories of events. Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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Animals have brought more love, understanding, stability, and magic to my life than I could ever have imagined. They have led me, followed me, sat with me, and waited for me through the toughest and most challenging times of my life. Without them, I don't know where I would have ended up. When animals and I meet in our heart space, there is a perfection in life that makes time stand still. That experience, that feeling, still awes and inspires me. Animals are my heroes. This book is dedicated to every single one. With you, I feel safe, protected, and loved.

Contents

Prologue	1
Foreword.....	5
Chapter 1	
Tom, My First Orange Cat.....	7
Chapter 2	
Turbo.....	12
Chapter 3	
Rewriting History With Goldie.....	17
Chapter 4	
Divine Intervention	20
Chapter 5	
Sunshine.....	23
Chapter 6	
Boo Boo Kitty	29
Chapter 7	
Spooky	36
Chapter 8	
Chase.....	42
Chapter 9	
Cooper Chang	45
Chapter 10	
Frankie	49
Chapter 11	
Rocky	55
Chapter 12	
My Sage: The Squirrel	57
Chapter 13	
Hoarder Hell to Heaven	60
Chapter 14	
Raptor Trust	65
Chapter 15	
Owl Medicine.....	69
Chapter 16	
Pickle & Louey	74

Chapter 17	
Diva.	79
Chapter 18	
For the Love of Jack	84
Chapter 19	
A Special Spaniel Named Duke.....	90
Chapter 20	
Charlie’s Stretch: The Observer.....	98
Chapter 21	
Peepers	101
Chapter 22	
Sacred Initiation	105
Chapter 23	
From Fear to Friendship to Folly	107
Chapter 24	
Timmy, Tux, & Trust.....	114
Chapter 25	
The Truth	121
I Am	125
Resources	126
Recommended Reading	128
Acknowledgments.....	129
About the Author	130

Prologue

All My Heroes Have Fur, Fins, and Feathers

We all want the same things. We all want to feel safe, loved, protected, supported, validated, encouraged, trusted, special, heard, and so many other things. The seed of how we feel about ourselves starts very early. How we behave later in life also depends on that seed and how it is watered, fertilized, nurtured, and allowed to grow—or not. How true is the old saying: “You learn what you live with.”

In the beginning you don’t have a choice. You have your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings. If you’re really lucky, all of them have their act together and can provide an environment that includes all those wonderful things and more. If you’re somewhat lucky, most of them are equipped. Heck, you’re still doing pretty well if only a few of them “get it.” Even if you only have one semi-responsible older person in your life, you’ve hit the jackpot in my eyes.

I grew up in a loveless house feeling like an out of place piece of furniture most days. Sure, I received food, water, and shelter but not much in the way of teaching, encouragement, affection, kindness, attention, compassion, or nurturing. The only person who outwardly expressed genuine excitement to see me was my maternal granddad; sadly, he died when I was only 10 years old.

Mom’s only sibling, a brother, died of polio in his teens. I often wondered if that was the cause of my maternal grandmother’s lifelong bitterness and misery. Perhaps it also

explained some of Mom's behavior: survivor's guilt? I don't remember Dad's parents; they both died when I was young. There were plenty of extended family around, but for the most part they were checked out as far as I was concerned. Since Dad was the second youngest, my aunts and uncles were all older and done with child-rearing. One aunt was the family matriarch, historian, and picture taker, but she was a homebody. Her time was spread thin with her own six children and, eventually, their children. Since I was the youngest cousin for some time, I was considered the nuisance cousin—the baby.

Functionally alcoholic parents, a bitter maternal grandmother, and a sociopathic narcissistic older sibling rounded out my “normal.” There was a sense of balance with my parents, though. Dad was a likeable, easygoing guy with an awesome sense of humor who balanced Mom's unpredictable, uncontrollable rage. He had an incredible smile that could cancel out the evil behind the gritted teeth that passed for her smile—a look that served as a warning I was about to get another “lesson” from the wooden spoon. I was repeatedly hit so hard with that spoon my face would tingle. The unfounded beatings stemmed from lies told by my older sibling, lies told for the sheer pleasure that witnessing my beatings provided. Mom's unspoken motto was: “Hit first; clean the house and make dinner later.” And my sibling knew it. Lying provided the pre-dinner entertainment. Once old enough to be my sitter, the entertainment morphed into physical torture and mental and emotional abuse. This was how it started. This was my “normal” childhood.

With the exception of three innocent youngsters, most people familiar with my abusers now fall into three categories: They are physically dead, dead to me, or so far in my rearview mirror any hope of a meaningful relationship with them is completely gone.

Dysfunction has regurgitating ripple effects. It also has incredible rewards. It took me over fifty years to summon the courage to speak up and walk away from the last of my abusers and the people who not only turned a blind eye, but made excuses for them.

It bears mentioning this book is not about everyone who failed me—the family and frenemies who figuratively left me bleeding

by the side of the road. It is about my journey to self-discovery and the animals that *were* there for me. Each one gave selflessly; tirelessly. Many of them provided comfort and made me feel safe, loved, supported, and heard. Others taught me life lessons I could not possibly have received from anyone I share a bloodline with. This book celebrates and honors them. The amazing animals who make up my soul family—the furry, finned, and feathery critters who consistently provided the loving support my heart always knew was possible. They restored my faith and brought more magic to my life than I could have ever imagined. With heartfelt gratitude, this book is for them and the three youngsters I hope to eventually be reunited with.

Foreword

Arduous does not begin to adequately describe the task of contemplating this book's dedication. I wondered if I would even *have* a dedication page. I pondered mercilessly for weeks—even months. As I mentally paged through the thousands of people who have passed through my life, I struggled with who deserved such an honor. Certainly, there have been people worthy of this honor through *pieces* of my life; but who was truly there for *most* or *all* of it? As the book neared completion, it became crystal clear exactly who it was time for me to *see* and celebrate.

This special person has been by my side through all of it. She witnessed each and every single victory and defeat. Sometimes she led, sometimes she walked beside, sometimes she carried me, and sometimes she was tucked away deep in the darkness. Wherever she was and whatever role she played, she was patient, kind, and loving to others. She spoke, and she listened. She felt all the joys and all the sorrows described in this book. Her patience, tenacity, and imagination led the way to this magical adventure of working with and speaking to animals. Without her, none of this would have been possible.

With heartfelt gratitude, I honor my inner child. Her playfulness and love for all beings has guided me through life's harshest moments. Please help me honor her by embracing your own inner child and the special children in your life. Let's play!

Chapter 1

Tom, My First Orange Cat

“I can’t. I just can’t do it anymore,” I cried to my girlfriend. “Look at him! He’s trying to run away from me...he hates me now.” Shaking, I continued. “What am I doing?” I slid down the cabinets I was leaning against to steady myself, then landed on the kitchen floor. I was now sobbing. I held my face in my hands as I tried repeatedly to swallow the burning emotional lump in my throat.

“This isn’t fair to either of us anymore,” I said. “It breaks my heart to watch him suffer without it, yet he tries his best to bolt when I grab the pill bottle. This torment every day is too much, for both of us.”

Tom and I were both drooling now—me from the first raw and real emotion I’d ever been able to express safely with no one to deliberately mock me or tell me they’d give me something to cry about, and my big orange cat in anticipation of receiving his dreaded heart medication.

Tom was the last kitten left from a litter his calico mom, who had belonged to us, had delivered. We were able to find homes for all but him. He was my very first orange cat. I don’t remember exactly how old I was when he was born, but I do remember the life events he saw me through. Those painful and traumatic childhood memories come back to me in fragments, not necessarily chronologically. Sometimes they bounce around. Sometimes pieces are missing.

Through the years I saw different therapists, but they only got

me so far. They helped me recognize many of my adult behaviors were normal for someone who grew up like I had. They explained the difference between coping and true healing. They all tried with their one- or two-hour-a-week sessions—for years. I made a lot of progress, but in the end they ALL missed the biggest abuse of all. That one, the ugliest one, would be uncovered in my 50s. And there would be another special cat to see me through that one.

Healing from just one adverse childhood experience can be a lifelong process, imagine having several. Imagine thinking your experiences are normal. Even the best of therapists can only help uncover so much. Therapists pick the scab and leave you bleeding until the following appointment. Subject matter experts such as doctors and psychiatrists write books you can have access to at any time. John Bradshaw and Bessel van der Kolk have spent their careers trying to decipher how the injured brain recovers from trauma, abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), especially that which occurred during the different phases of childhood development. Bradshaw and van der Kolk's books, *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Healing Your Inner Child* and *The Body Keeps the Score*, respectively, have helped me tremendously in my healing journey. The animals that have come and gone in my lifetime were there when the therapists weren't.

Tom led the way.

Tom was there as I struggled through my teens when I first came to understand the molestation I had endured by not one, but two men (female family members were with them) was not okay. He was there when I started drinking, taking pills, smoking weed, and doing other things to cope with difficult life situations. He was there the morning I found my mother dead from a heart attack. At 20 years old many people thought I would go crazy living in the house where I found her. There was no room in my dad's or grandmother's houses so I moved in with a friend and her mother for a while. Tom waited patiently for me for nearly two years, living outside at my dad's house, because Dad didn't allow animals in the house. I finally moved into Dad's unfinished basement until I could buy a home of my own. Eventually, after a good night of drinking, I snuck him into my area in the basement for comfort. His purring was just loud enough to distract me from

the self-defeating thoughts that filled my head. He slept on my pillow that night and every night after, just like he had before we were suddenly uprooted from my mother's house after her death.

Looking back, I didn't learn much about pet care from either of my parents. We took our pets to the free rabies clinic for shots and to the vet when they were injured or sick. At that time neutering wasn't routinely done either. Tom was an indoor/outdoor cat. He would go out during the day and do "Tom" things, and then come home at night for dinner and to sleep on my pillow. Once when I was about 18 years old, he was gone for a few days. When he finally came home, his paw was huge—clearly swollen from an infection. I rushed him to the vet. In addition to lancing and draining the wound that had clearly been obtained during a cat fight, the vet also neutered him.

When my friend and I went to pick him up, I was told how much he had missed me. He wouldn't eat or drink a thing. He didn't even potty while he was there! When the technician carried him out (we didn't even have a proper carrier in those days), he stretched out his legs in my direction and let out the loudest Tom Cat meow I had ever heard. My boy wanted me! He sat quietly on my lap for the six-mile or so ride home. When we were about four blocks from the house, I felt an incredibly warm sensation in my lap that slowly crept down and around my thighs, followed immediately by the stench of two-day old, stale, antibiotic-filled tomcat urine. I quickly brought Tom inside and returned to clean the lake of urine on the seat of my friend's car. Despite our best attempts to absorb the liquid and wipe down the seat, we were not successful in completely removing the odor. The car was left with the scent of damp Pine-Sol with a hint of stale urine. When time didn't get rid of the odor, my friend got rid of the car.

Not too long afterwards Tom was gone again for a bit of a stretch. This time, I was really worried and canvassed the neighborhood—no Tom. I called the shelter to see if they picked up any orange cats and was met with, "Yeah, we have orange cats. Come take a look." I drove there to find my boy in kitty cat jail. When he saw me he let out the same gut-wrenching meow as he had the day I picked him up from the vet. As I paid his bail, the shelter worker told me how dumb my cat was. Tom walked right

into a trap set for another cat, and they hadn't even put any food in it yet! Tom wasn't dumb; he was a cat and curious and loving and so much more. Stupid shelter worker. I was about 18 or 19 years old at the time.

After sneaking him into Dad's basement for over a year, I finally managed to save enough money to buy my own home. I didn't move Tom in right away because it was a handyman special and required some work. A few weeks in, a well-meaning friend showed up with a gray kitten as a housewarming present. I had mixed feelings about the kitten moving in before Tom, but I accepted him. It wasn't long afterwards I fetched Tom; after all, he had to show the new kitten the ropes. Tom and Mission were inseparable. I had forgotten what it was like to have a kitten, and Tom did his best to keep him out of trouble.

Tom taught Mission when it's night-night time: A cat's place is at their master's head purring them to sleep. That's when I discovered two cats are better than one! Over time, I learned about proper cat care, including dental work, regular exams, and keeping them indoors. During one exam I was told my aging cat's heart was compromised, and medicine would help. It broke my heart to see Tom slowing down. After all, he had showered me with more unconditional love, care, patience, and concern than anyone else in my life. The process of giving Tom his meds was okay at first—until he realized it was going to be every day. My easygoing, calm, cool cat now ran away from me when the meds came out. When I finally caught him, he looked up at me with sadness in his eyes that tore at my heart. He would start to drool in preparation for the pill. The daily struggle we endured getting his meds in was not fair to either of us. He was failing. My boy had been my faithful companion for 18 years. That's a really good run for a cat, especially one that spent a good portion of his time outdoors doing tomcat things.

On a snowy winter day, I said goodbye to Tom in my kitchen. I couldn't bear to take him to the vet to have it done. What I didn't realize at the time was that the incomplete grieving of my grandfather's death when I was nine years old and my mother's sudden death when I was 20 years old was causing incredibly painful flashbacks and PTSD. In those moments I was

simultaneously in pain and numb. My girlfriend and a family member took Tom to the vet for me while my now several years sober Dad struggled for hours to dig a hole in the solid winter ground, and I stayed home and cried. I cried for days. I'm crying now, more than 25 years later, as I write about it. To this day, I regret my decision. I should have been at the vet with Tom when he took his last breath—the way he was there for me through so many painful life-altering moments. *Mine* should have been the last face he saw as he transitioned, not the face of the first (and worst) of my abusers. If I could take back any moment in time, it would be that one. He deserved better. I know that now, but I didn't know it then.

Dear Tom, thank you for that painful lesson. There have been many cats since you. I have never made that mistake again. Rest in peace, my sweet boy.

Chapter 2

Turbo

Kittens! Who doesn't love kittens? They are warm and fuzzy, soft and cuddly. Their rhythmic purring calms and soothes the soul. Simply being in their presence brings out the best in people. Right? It has taken me half a lifetime to realize that. Sadly, my older sibling is not "most people."

"Tennnnn, ninnnne, eiiiiight," a voice said excitedly as a kitten was held out in front between both hands with straightened arms. "Sevnnnnn, sixxxxxx, fiiiiive,"—the person's arms rose and the kitten lifted—"fourrrrrr, threeeeeee, twooooo,"—the kitten was lifted higher and higher, almost overhead now—"onnnnnne, blastoff!" The limp kitten was sharply turned upside down with its head now headed straight for the grass. It was stopped abruptly just short of the grass—just short of crashing headfirst. Laughter followed. Being seven years younger, I laughed then, too. I was maybe three or four years old and didn't know any better.

"You try now."

I was encouraged to imitate—and did—with a different kitten from the pile as the mother cat watched. It was called rocket ship. That scene and my participation as an obedient sibling still make me sick more than five decades later. Many years later, as an adult with a loving nature and conscience, I have subliminally worked to make amends for being taught what "was fun" for kittens.

Enter Turbo.

"Never again," I uttered into the phone. "I just lost Tom and vowed I wouldn't do it again. Once Mission goes, that's it. The

pain of losing them is just too much.”

The voice at the other end of the phone replied, “But he’s just a kitten. Her boyfriend wants him gone by the end of the day or he’s going to the shelter. You know what happens then. They’re already overcrowded.”

“Grrrr, I really don’t want to. It’s too soon. What color is it?” I asked.

“Orange. He’s the cutest little orange kitten” was the response.

“Oh my God,” I said. “Okay, but I’m taking him under protest.”

It was an early morning weekend call, and I wasn’t thinking clearly. I was somewhere between still drunk, hungover, and dehydrated. Always the people pleaser, I never learned how to set proper boundaries as a youngster so my “no’s” were weak at best. I couldn’t disappoint—no matter what was asked of me—and most people knew it. Mission had lost his older brother, and now he was going to be one to an orange kitten found crying outside someone’s bedroom window.

My pets usually name themselves immediately or within a few days. This new kitten was no exception. He was incredibly nimble, athletic, and unbelievably fast for his age and size. “Turbo,” I said. As soon as I said it out loud, he turned to look at me. “His name is undeniably Turbo!” It was decided.

Turbo was a bit of an odd kitten. He didn’t follow Mission around to learn the ropes, like younger siblings do. Instead, he figured things out his own way. He was strong enough to be his own cat, even as a kitten. Turbo was bold and fiercely independent. If he wanted something, he was going to go for it—regardless of the consequences.

I left an opened pint of half-and-half on the kitchen counter. Turbo wanted it. In a flash he was on the counter, grabbed the pint in his mouth, and landed back on the floor. The container remained upright the whole time. I swear his feet didn’t even touch the counter; his body just twisted to change directions in midair. I stopped him just before he tipped the carton to get to the contents. He was so close—but no milk.

Another day I had just baked a tray of wings of fire. They are similar to Buffalo wings, only hotter. The hot cookie sheet was on

the counter with the spicy hot wings. Here came Turbo. He catapulted himself through the air like one of the Flying Wallendas. He latched his jaws onto a hot fire wing like it was a trapeze bar. Just like he did with the half-and-half container, he changed directions while airborne and landed on the kitchen floor with the wing still in his mouth. It didn't take long for him to realize the wings were way too hot for him. On days like those he was called Bad Ass.

Turbo and Mission didn't fight, but they also didn't play together. I wondered if it was the age difference or something else. A friend had a cat about the same age as Turbo so we decided to try a playdate. Punk came over, and the two seemed to get along well while Mission watched. We decided to do a sleepover. I brought Turbo to Punk's house after dinner one night and hung around just long enough to make sure they were okay. My friend showed Turbo where the litter box and water were, and I left. Not much after sunrise I got a call. "Come get your cat!"

"Uh oh, what happened?" I asked.

"I woke up to the sound of scratching and the smell of fresh cat shit" was the reply. "Freaking cat shit next to the bed, and Turbo was trying to bury it with my sweatshirt!" she continued.

I retrieved Bad Ass and brought him home. Funny for me, not so funny for my friend and the shitty situation she was put in.

As Turbo matured, it became clear he wasn't like my other cats. He had a wild side. Now I know he was probably feral. Despite being handled a lot as a kitten, he was not happy inside. Not happy at all. He destroyed curtains and furniture legs. Door trim he would climb like trees or use to sharpen his claws. It was fascinating to watch but expensive to fix. When the screen door was exposed, he would leap onto the top section and hold onto it like Spiderman. To reinforce the screen, I eventually put chicken wire on it. I didn't dare open the door or he would bolt. Occasionally, "helpful" friends would let him out despite my insistence not to. Turbo's route was always the same. He would race out of the house, down the driveway, across the street, and up into the neighbor's tree.

Since I couldn't fight Turbo's deep desire to be outside, I tried working with it. I bought a harness and a leash. *I'll take it slow*, I

thought. Get him used to the harness, attach the leash, and try walking him inside, and then outside. He clearly didn't like having anything on his body. He shook and rolled and rubbed trying to get the harness off. I started with just a few minutes at a time and increased the duration gradually. In the days that followed, he was comfortable enough for me to attach the leash. We stood there. I gave a gentle tug, and he threw himself to the ground. I picked him back up to his feet and tried again. Plop. I begged. I pleaded. I tried reasoning. I felt horrible.

"Come on, buddy. I'm doing this so you can spend time outside—safely" I pleaded. "There's no other way. You have to meet me halfway."

He finally took a few steps on the leash, and we went outside.

Outside on the leash, Turbo threw himself onto the grass and rolled around. It was hard to say whether he was happy or not. I stayed outside with him for a while before calling it quits and bringing him back inside for the night. I would keep trying.

One day I hooked his leash to the clothesline for a little more freedom. Since Turbo seemed content to lie on the driveway and soak up the sun, I left him outside while I went inside for a drink. Moments later, I returned to an empty harness. Glancing across the street, I saw Turbo high in his favorite tree. On days like these, he was called Houdini. Each time he escaped I knew exactly where to find him—every time but once.

It was a Saturday morning, nine-thirty, ten o'clock at best. The cats were fed and watered, and their litter boxes were cleaned. After a quick look around I deemed it was safe to take the trash out—or so I thought. Always the opportunist, the door only had to be partially unlatched for Turbo to nose his way through and out. And he did. As soon as I got outside to chase him, I heard a car coming down the street. My heart started to race as I watched in horror as Turbo ran in the direction of his favorite tree—on the other side of the street. I could hear the car approaching the end of my driveway just as Turbo was.

The only thing I could do was yell his name in the hope he would stop, stop short of the street—and the car. I screamed. "TURBO!"

He turned to look just as his body went under and up over the

car's front tire. The thump his body made when it hit the top of the wheel well is still fresh in my mind. I ran to him and scooped him up in my arms. He was seizing and convulsing and bleeding as I held him. I yelled at the driver. I yelled for someone to call a vet, the police—somebody, anybody. I could feel his warm blood leaving his body, rhythmically with each heartbeat—there was so much of it. It was everywhere. On my arms, my shirt, my thighs, the road. I cradled him like a baby as his eyes rolled back in his head. His heart and seizing stopped before the police officer even rolled up. I just held him—and cried. On this day he was called Free.