

True Stories of Extraordinary
Assistance Dogs

Wonder Dogs

MAUREEN MAURER
with JENNA BENTON

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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

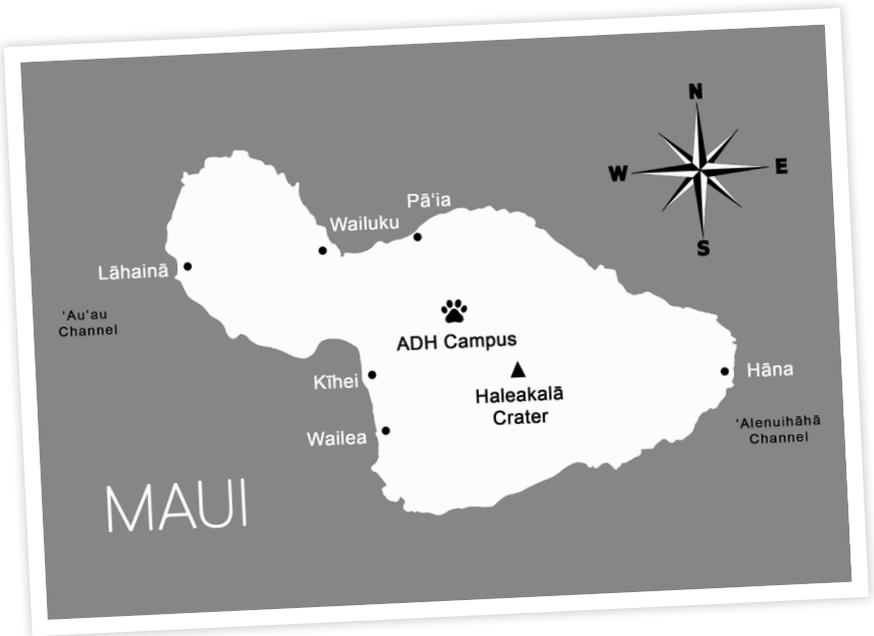
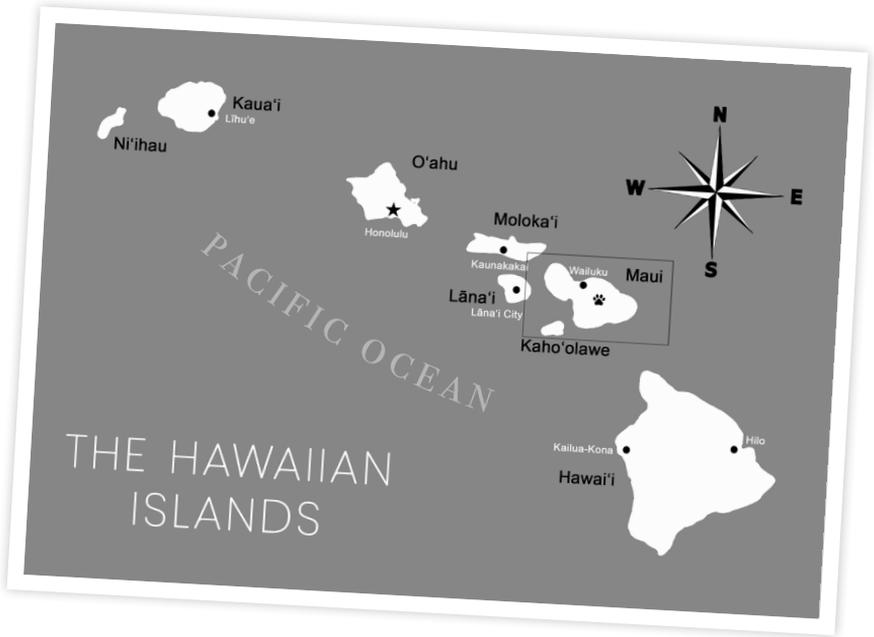
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To Mary King and Momo Monahan,
who shared our vision from the beginning



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Many people (and dogs) have helped *Wonder Dogs* become a book, and I am thankful for every one of them. First of all, my amazing husband, Will, who has helped to make all my dreams come true. None of this—our program, my career, or the book—would be possible without him. I'm eternally grateful for my late mom, who always encouraged me to reach for the stars (and finally let me have a dog!). I'm thankful for my sisters and our dad, who shared his love of dogs with us and always taught by example to help those in need. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention my own dogs, Sadie and Samson, who kept me company while I was writing this book and patiently answered my many questions.

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As I wrote, I felt the entire Assistance Dogs of Hawaii *ohana* right beside me: our graduates, who face unimaginable challenges with grace and courage; our assistance dogs, who go above and beyond to help their partners; and our dedicated volunteers and generous supporters, who make it all possible.

Most of all, I thank God for answering my prayers and giving me a second chance. I feel blessed to have found my purpose and am thankful for the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others.

Maureen "Mo" Maurer

"Are you a dog lover?" Mo asked me during one of our early meetings.

I squirmed in my seat.

Acknowledgments

“I like dogs,” I said carefully. “I was attacked by a dog when I was a kid, but I’m okay, and yeah . . . they’re great.”

Mo raised her eyebrows, smiled, and hired me anyway.

Mo encouraged me to learn everything I could about dogs. I sat in on puppy classes on Bainbridge Island and even experienced my very own “visits” and “snuggles” from dogs who were in training. I spent hours interviewing dog handlers and their families and was moved by their resiliency and the way they generously shared their stories. I wandered the halls of The Queen’s Medical Center in Honolulu to observe hospital facility dogs in action and cried when I met Dr. Wendi and she told me stories about Tucker. I walked the Freedom Trail through the eucalyptus forest with Sadie, and it is as breathtaking as you’d imagine it might be. A good-natured golden retriever lay at my feet and let me dig my toes into his soft fur while I typed away at Mo’s kitchen table. My mind and heart have been forever changed. Dogs truly are a gift to us all.

Just in case you’re wondering, Mo and Will really are as incredible as you hope they are. They are tireless, brilliant, gracious, and fun. I will be forever grateful that the Maurers welcomed me into their world and call me their friend.

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To my family and friends, and also to my writing council, I hope these stories inspire you to lean into your own adventures. To my kids, thank you for pitching in and creating a beautiful space for me to write. I love being your mom. To my

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husband and best friend, David, I love you. I know for a fact I wouldn't be where I am without you. And to my mom, I wish you were here to read this one. I'll miss you forever.

Oh, and guess what? I AM A DOG LOVER.

Jenna Benton

1

Tucker Finds His Calling



There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.

Albert Einstein

CHRISTMAS 2005

The warm tropical air breezed through Kahului Airport, welcoming crowds of bustling travelers to Maui. The vacationers made their way through open-air walkways and down the escalator to baggage claim, pointing and smiling as they caught glimpses of the whitecapped Pacific Ocean and palm trees along the way. Hawaiian music filled the air and the sweet scent of plumeria lei drifted toward me as I sat on a concrete bench in the baggage claim area and stared at the cargo door.

I could hardly contain my excitement. I was about to welcome a special visitor of my own to our island home.

With a loud click, the heavy metal door slowly opened, and I jumped to my feet. A man walked out carrying a small airline kennel and smiled as he approached. He carefully placed the kennel on the ground, and I crouched down to look inside. Staring back at me from behind the wire door was the most beautiful golden retriever puppy I'd ever seen. He had a big head, like a Saint Bernard's, and a fluffy golden coat. His dark brown eyes shone with a friendly and intelligent expression.

"Hello, my friend," I said as I squeezed the metal latch to open the kennel door. He stepped out, surprisingly self-composed after traveling all the way from Australia. He stood calmly and smiled up at me with his bright eyes and slowly wagged his tail. I had seen a lot of puppies over the years but knew in that moment he was going to be something special. However, I never could have imagined the way Tucker was going to change my life and impact the world around him.

As we drove home, I struck up a conversation with Tucker and told him all about my husband, Will. I also briefed him on his new classmates and the adventures he was going to have while learning to be an assistance dog. Instead of looking out the window, Tucker stared intently back at me and listened to every word. He made me feel like the most fascinating person in the world. We followed the winding gravel road past tall palm trees and lush vegetation to our little beachside cottage.

We pulled into our driveway and I opened the car door and lifted Tucker to the ground. He was a solid puppy and surprisingly heavy for only ten weeks old. He looked up at me with a smile and cocked his head as if to say, *What's next?*

Tucker Finds His Calling



Courtesy of Kathryn Reiger

Tucker at 10 weeks old

“It looks like Will isn’t home yet. Would you like to go to the beach?” I asked.

Tucker wagged his tail in response and followed me into the cottage, where I changed into my swimsuit. Our shingled one-bedroom cottage stood at the edge of a crescent-shaped turquoise bay that was fringed with a white sandy beach. It was a sanctuary for us during the early years of launching our fledgling nonprofit.

Tucker and I followed the short path to the beach, and I kicked off my flip-flops next to a palm tree. I took a deep breath of the salt air as I stretched out my toes in the powdery sand. The sky above was clear blue, but billowy clouds nestled along the horizon as they waited for the sun to settle in for the night. We had the beach all to ourselves and walked toward the shallow water. It was Tucker's first experience of the ocean, and he sniffed at the bubbly white foam that left a crooked little trail along the water's edge. He sat down and watched as I waded out into the water. I looked back at Tucker, who had just discovered his first coconut. He pounced on it and paraded up and down the beach, carrying it in his mouth. I laughed out loud and he wagged his tail in reply.

"I see you, Tucker," I called and waved. The coconut was almost as big as he was, and when he tried to shake it back and forth, the momentum was too much, and he fell over and rolled down the sand. He stood up and shook himself off, quickly restoring his dignity. He placed an oversize paw on the coconut to hold it still and began to methodically peel back the fibrous husk.

Seeing him so happily occupied, I took a deep breath and dove into the clear blue water. Its coolness instantly covered my skin. When I popped back up, I saw that Will had arrived home and was playing with Tucker on the beach. He tossed the coconut and Tucker pranced back to him, carrying it in his mouth.

Will was wearing red surf shorts and waved as he saw me coming out of the water. "What a great puppy. I can't believe he's already retrieving!" He bent down and held Tucker's head in his hands. "Welcome to our *ohana*, little fella."

Will carried his surfboard toward the shore as Tucker toddled after him with the coconut in his mouth. He stopped just short of the water's edge and looked at Will with a hopeful expression on his face. I stepped out of the water and bent down to pet Tucker. He certainly was the perfect addition to our *ohana*, our family.

"There's something very special about this puppy," I said. "I think he may be the best one we've ever had."

"You say that about all of them," Will teased. His blue eyes twinkled as he leaned down and gave me a kiss before paddling out toward the waves.

"And I'm always right!" I shouted after him, laughing.

I sat on the beach and Tucker curled up next to me. I stroked the downy fur on his head and noticed his ears were a little darker gold than the rest of his coat. They had tiny waves that looked like they'd been crimped with a curling iron. He rested his chin on my knee as we watched Will catch a few waves. The horizon began to glow with orange and pink streaks where the water met the sky.

"There is something special about you, Tucker," I said, as he snuggled in a little closer. "I can't wait to see what your calling in life will be."

I picked up a handful of sand and noticed the subtle colors of the tiny grains as they fell slowly through my fingers. They reminded me of a poem I liked by William Blake called "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

It had been five years since I'd sold my CPA practice and taken a leap of faith to follow my childhood dream of training assistance dogs. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was fulfilling my purpose and was exactly where I was meant to be. Several dogs had already graduated from our program and were thriving with newfound purpose and making a difference in the world. We currently had four heroes-in-training, and I couldn't wait to introduce Tucker to his classmates the next day. The sun was just setting as Will paddled back to shore. He carried his surfboard in one arm and picked up the sleeping Tucker in the other. I carried Tucker's prized coconut as we headed back to our cottage with growling stomachs and full hearts.

We rinsed off the salt water in the outdoor shower and Will dried Tucker off with a beach towel. We sat outside out on the lanai as the sky darkened to a deep blue and stars began to appear overhead. Will set bowls of puppy food and water on the floor, and Tucker eagerly finished both of them. We laughed as he licked the food bowl clean and then pushed it around the lanai with his nose. I sat in the hammock as Will fired up the grill for dinner.

Will and I had met at a neighborhood barbecue almost twenty years before. I was a business student at Seattle University, and he had just graduated as a mechanical engineer from the University of Washington. From the moment I first saw Will walk through the door, I had the strangest feeling—not that I recognized him, but that I *knew* him. It was a sense of déjà vu that I'd never experienced before. Looking at him standing in the doorway, it was as if I had a glimpse of memories yet to come. He just saw a girl gawking at him, but thankfully he decided to come over and say hello.

Although I was initially charmed by his good looks, it was his faithfulness and steadfast love that captured my heart. We both enjoyed adventure and explored the world together. Sometimes we traveled just for fun, like when we rented a campervan and toured New Zealand for a month. Usually, our trips had more purpose, like the time we volunteered with Habitat for Humanity to rebuild houses in Fiji after a hurricane, or the time we went with our church to bring supplies to refugees during the war in Croatia. We moved to Maui right after college because of our love of ocean sports and the outdoors. We also worked hard to build successful careers. In every adventure, in every season, Will was my partner.

When I woke up the next morning, Will had already gone to work. There was a gardenia and a note from him on my nightstand that said he'd already fed Tucker and taken him for a walk. I leaned over the bed and saw Tucker lying on his back on the dog bed, his big paws twitching in his sleep. His tail was wagging and I wondered what he was dreaming about. After breakfast, I loaded Tucker into the car, and we drove to our office so he could begin the first step in his long journey to becoming an assistance dog.

Our program operated out of donated retail space in the Queen Ka'ahumanu Center, an open-air shopping mall in Kahului. My dream was to eventually build a permanent campus that would last for generations, but for now there were many advantages to this location. Having an office in the mall meant we could practice with the puppies on elevators, escalators, and in the movie theater. It was also a great training ground for navigating noisy crowds, shops, and restaurants. Tucker's first day at work coincided with Christmas decorations being put up in the mall. My heart soared as I saw the

huge Christmas tree being decorated. This was my favorite time of year.

We entered our small office, and Donna, our office manager, greeted us with a big smile. I placed Tucker on the ground and four puppies came scrambling over to meet him. Tucker stood his ground and slowly wagged his tail as he was thoroughly inspected by his new classmates.

At eight months old, Oliver was the ringleader. He was a big yellow lab and the life of the party wherever he went. Penny, a sweet and unassuming black lab about the same age, was a gentle soul. Whenever the dogs played too rough, she quickly excused herself to lie under a desk. The two other puppies, Riggins and Riley, were energetic yellow labs and littermates who were six months old. They quickly formed a racetrack around the small office, chasing Oliver, who was playing keep-away with his favorite pink elephant. Oliver encouraged Tucker to play by shoving the toy in his face. I smiled as I pictured what our little cottage would be like when it was bursting at the seams with all these puppies over the holidays.

We usually went home to Seattle for Christmas, but this year our volunteer puppy raisers (the families who foster the puppies) were all on vacation and there was no one else to watch them. I didn't mind. There were a lot worse things than being stuck on a tropical island with a bunch of adorable puppies for Christmas.

A week later, Will and I sat on our couch as the five puppies played with their toys and gently gnawed on each other's limbs. We were trying to decide how we would celebrate our first Christmas alone. My mom used to have my sisters and me think of a birthday present for Jesus each year, and I liked

to carry on that tradition. Remembering my early childhood suddenly gave me an idea.

“Why don’t we take one of the puppies to visit the children’s hospital on Oahu? Remember our last visit and how much it cheered everyone up?”

“That’s a great idea,” said Will. “Which one should we take?”

The older puppies were now chasing each other around the living room, and I tried unsuccessfully to picture them in a hospital setting. I shook off the mental image and looked down at the youngest puppy sitting calmly at my feet.

“Let’s take Tucker. He’s the gentlest one of all. Plus, he looks like a real, live teddy bear. The children will love him!”

Soon it was Christmas morning. We woke up early to open presents and stockings and then settled Tucker into the car and drove to the airport to catch the forty-minute flight to Honolulu. My fear of flying was second only to my fear of public speaking, but I was starting to get more comfortable with the short interisland flights I often had to take for work. Part of Tucker’s training included exposure to new environments, so traveling with us in the cabin and visiting the big city would be a great learning opportunity for him. I couldn’t wait for the children to meet Tucker and was curious to see how he would respond to all the distractions in a hospital setting.

We parked outside and walked through the sliding hospital doors into the air-conditioned lobby of Kapiolani Medical Center. Tucker had fallen asleep in Will’s arms and looked adorable in his blue puppy coat. Since it was Christmas morning, a single receptionist replaced the usual crowds in the lobby and activity at the front desk.

“Merry Christmas,” Will said with a smile. “This is Tucker, and we’re here for a therapy visit with the patients.”

The woman glanced up from her computer and her eyes went straight to Tucker. He wore a fluffy red-and-white Christmas collar around his neck, and the little bells sewn around the edges jingled softly as he shifted in Will's arms and woke up.

"Oh my goodness! That is the cutest puppy I've ever seen. He looks like a stuffed animal. I'm just sorry there aren't more children here today to see him," she said. "All of the patients who were well enough went home to spend Christmas Day with their families. The only ones still here are from off-island or those who are too sick to leave."

I suddenly realized this visit might not be what I had imagined. But then I thought of how Tucker would bring some much-needed joy to the children who remained. Even if we made a difference for just one patient today, it would be well worth the trip.

"It's okay," I piped up. "We would love to visit with the children who are here."

"Great! Go on up to the fifth floor." The woman pointed to the elevator across the lobby. "I'll let the nurses' station know you're on your way up. Bye, Tucker!"

As Will pressed the button for the elevator, I said a quick prayer. *Lord, please let us be a blessing to these children, and lead us to the ones who are most in need.*

I opened my eyes and watched the numbers above the elevator light up as it made its way down to us in the lobby. I mentally prepared myself for what we were about to see. I reminded myself to be a ray of sunshine for the children, no matter how sad or serious their conditions might be.

The doors opened, and Will put his hand on my back as we stepped into the elevator. Will. My rock. We had been on this

adventure for so long I knew I didn't need to say a word. He smiled at me reassuringly, knowing how I felt about hospitals after spending so much time in them myself. I pressed the button for the fifth floor. Tucker looked at me contentedly from the safety of Will's strong arms as the elevator started to climb. I smiled at Tucker and stroked his big head as his soulful brown eyes stared into mine.

As the elevator doors slid open, we stepped into the bright hallway and immediately heard a squeal of delight as the first child had already spotted Tucker.

"Ohhh, he's so cute. Is he real?" asked the little boy. I smiled at him and the nurse who was pushing his wheelchair. She looked almost as excited as her patient. Will assured him that Tucker was indeed real and asked if he would like to pet him.

"Yes, please. My dog is at home and I miss her so much."

Will gently placed Tucker down, and he melted onto the boy's lap. The boy stroked his soft fur as Tucker rested his chin on the armrest of the wheelchair. Myriad questions tumbled out.

"What's his name? How old is he? Why is he wearing a blue coat?" asked the boy with excitement.

"His name is Tucker," I said. "And he's twelve weeks old. He's wearing the blue coat because he's in training to be a special dog who will help people when he grows up." Tucker looked up at the little boy's face and gently wagged his tail.

"Well, I think he'll be really good at his job because he's already helping me!"

After a few more minutes of visiting with the boy, we continued down the hallway. "Tucker, my friend," I whispered to him, "I have a feeling this may be your calling."

We walked by a private room and I looked through the window to see if the occupants might like a visit. There was a young woman sitting next to a hospital bed. A little girl lay motionless on the bed and was connected to several machines. The woman held her daughter's hand, and I watched as she gently rocked from side to side, brushing away quiet tears. She looked up and our eyes met. I had never seen a look of such sadness, and I felt embarrassed for intruding. A nurse came hurrying over.

"I'm sorry, this patient is sleeping," she said. "But there's another patient in room 526 who would like a visit."

The nurse led us down the hall toward another room. I glanced back and saw the young mom watching us from the doorway as we walked away. My heart ached for her.

We visited several patients, and Tucker seemed to instinctively know what each child needed in the moment. Sometimes he lay completely still and other times he rolled over and wiggled, coaxing a giggle or two. Will and I were amazed at his confidence and the instant connection he seemed to have with the patients, their parents, and even the staff.

We were chatting with a nurse in the hallway when the young mother we had seen earlier walked up to us.

"Could you bring the puppy in to see my daughter?" she asked.

I looked over at the nurse to see if it was okay.

"Yes, but just for a couple of minutes," she said.

I took a deep breath and followed Will and the woman into the room.

Will carried Tucker to the girl's bedside and pulled up a chair next to her. Her frail body lay motionless. I tried not to look at all the machines that were monitoring her vitals.

“Liliana loved dogs more than anything in the world,” the young mother said as she stroked her daughter’s hair. My chest tightened and I fought back tears as I heard her speak of her daughter in the past tense. I almost couldn’t bear the sadness.

She bowed her head and shared with us that Lili had an incurable disease and had not responded to anything in weeks. “She was taken off life support two days ago,” she whispered.

“I’m so sorry,” I replied, wishing I could think of something better to say. Will leaned in toward Lili with Tucker in his arms. The woman placed her daughter’s hand on Tucker’s head, guiding it, as she stroked his soft fur. We all watched in silence. Tucker was completely calm, but his twinkling brown eyes stared intently at Lili’s face.

The sound of steady beeping from the machine above her head suddenly grew faster. I glanced up at the screen and noticed that the zigzag line on the heart monitor was changing too. I looked at Lili, whose hand was still resting on Tucker’s ear. Almost imperceptibly, her fingers began to move. Her mother stared in disbelief as we watched Lili move her fingertips over Tucker’s ear. “NURSE, NURSE!” the mom’s shout echoed down the hallway.

“What is it?” a nurse asked as she rushed in and checked the screens above the bed.

“She’s moving!” cried the mother. “Her hand. LOOK!”

We all looked—Liliana’s fingers were deliberately touching the crimped hair on Tucker’s ear. The nurse’s eyes widened as she checked the numbers on the screen and pushed a button attached to the bed. Suddenly there was commotion everywhere, as doctors were paged, and more hospital staff came rushing into the room. Will picked up Tucker, who smiled at Lili and seemed unfazed by all the activity.

“I’m sorry, you’ll have to leave,” said the nurse as she herded us toward the door.

“Wait,” said the mom. She came over and hugged Tucker as tears spilled down her cheeks onto his soft fur. “Thank you, Tucker. You’re our Christmas miracle.”

Will and I moved to the end of the hallway so we would be out of the way. I took a deep breath and looked at Will, whose blue eyes brimmed with tears. He took my hand, and we prayed for Lili as the doctors and nurses gathered in her room.

We visited a few more patients before it was time to leave. As we passed the nurses’ station on the way back to the elevator, I caught a flash of neon yellow out of the corner of my eye and saw that there was a sign taped to a door that read “ISOLATION—Do Not Enter.” Looking through the window, I saw a small hospital bed that was enclosed in a clear plastic tent. It contained a young girl, who was staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry,” a nurse called from the station. “That patient is in isolation and can’t have any visitors.”

“Would it be okay if we just showed her Tucker through the window?” I asked.

“That’s fine,” she replied as she returned to her phone call.

Will held Tucker up to the glass and smiled at the little girl through the window. Her body shifted under the blanket, and she turned her head our way, trying to focus. Her eyes widened as she saw Tucker in his Christmas costume. Will waved one of Tucker’s big paws at the girl, who looked to be about five years old. A faint smile appeared on her face. It wasn’t the biggest smile I had ever seen, but it was the most beautiful.

Tucker Finds His Calling

As we waved goodbye to the patient in the isolation room, I suddenly noticed my own reflection in the glass. Distant memories came flooding back. I knew exactly how she felt, because I had once been that little girl . . .



Tucker comforting a patient