*Wild Running: Lessons from Dogs, Wolves, and the Natural World – A Memoir*

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Excerpt:

MAGIC

Running trails in the forest, my dogs and I see a wolf.

In the wild.

Maia, my older Alaskan Malamute, sees him first. She stops, turns, and stares through the trees behind us. I see her tail drop.

Then, following her gaze, I lock eyes with the wolf.

A silhouette of a dog

Description automatically generated

It was July 2006, our first full summer in Idaho. We’d arrived early at the trailhead deep in the Payette National Forest. My two Alaskan Malamutes, Maia and Meadow, and I were eager to start running. The early-morning sun threw long shafts of angled light through the lodgepole pines, and lingering wildfire smoke gave the air a campfire smell. The pattern of sepia light and shadow made the forest feel both dense and spacious. Ruby Creek burbled nearby.

Among the trees, the forest floor was covered in low-growing grasses and wildflowers. There were phlox, its delicate white-lavender flowers providing a cushy carpet and the scent of cloves. Bright orange Indian paintbrush, blue-purple lupine, and tiny blue larkspur added more color. Native huckleberry shrubs, bushy with tiny leaves, lined the trail.

The girls quickly settled into their long-distance trot, which nicely matched my running pace. I watched them moving together along the trail several feet ahead of me, tails feathery plumes of white curled over their hips, waving gently side-to-side as they moved.

I heard a distant raven’s caw, but mistook it for a dog’s bark until I heard it again. Then Maia spooked a grouse next to the trail. It exploded into the air, wings beating furiously as it lifted from the ground and flew through the trees. My senses sharpened with the sheer joy of running through the forest as well as the knowledge that surprises always lurked.

About a mile in, we heard small branches snapping, the sound of a large animal we couldn’t see through the trees. I looked to Maia and Meadow, hoping their body language would tell me what it was. The girls stood still, listening, looking in the direction of the sound as we waited for the tell-tale thump of hooves made by leaping deer or elk. We didn’t hear it, but the girls weren’t too concerned so I decided not to worry.

“Let’s go, girls. It was probably just an elk.” Maia resumed her trot, I followed her, and Meadow tucked in behind me. *This,* I thought. *This is what I live for, what makes me happy. Running trails deep in the forest, alone with my dogs.*

Maia and Meadow were less deliberate than I in their approach to trail running. They frequently slowed, even stopped, inhaling scents on the breeze, sniffing a wildlife track, or listening intently to something only they could hear. I continued running, letting them indulge their senses before catching up with me. When they resumed their usual positions, their breathing—lightly panting, tongues out—added a comforting soundtrack to our run.

For four-plus miles, we ran in this casual, easy way. Then, reaching a section of forest so thoroughly burned that no adult trees remained, we lost our shade. The climbing sun was turning up the temperature and the trail had diverted away from Ruby Creek. With no easy access to water for the girls, I decided to turn around.

“Okay, girls, let’s go back!” I called out. Ahead of me on the trail, they reacted with joy, turning and dashing past me to retake the lead, then settling into their trot. As much as Maia and Meadow loved running trails, they were always happy when we headed back, relieved to have survived the unknowns of running *away* from the car.

A mile later, the trail brought us close to Ruby Creek again. “Go get a drink, girls.” They didn’t need much encouragement. Lapping wild water as they slowly walked along the creek bottom, they took their time. Then, back to the trail and running. But within a few yards, Maia, who was just ahead of me, stopped.

A silhouette of a dog

Description automatically generated

Time slows. The wolf stands among the trees, just sixty feet away, directly facing us, watching.

“Maia, stay,” I whisper, although she doesn’t seem inclined to move. Meadow, observing Maia’s body language, turns to look through the trees as well. Her tail drops as she, too, looks directly at the wolf. Telling her to stay, I grab the short loops of climber’s rope attached to their collars. Meadow’s posture surprises me. She’s usually fearless, her tail a plumy flag of confidence when encountering people, dogs, wildlife.

This wolf is new. Different.

Confident that neither girl wants to approach the wolf, I look up again, directly into the wolf’s eyes. My heart pounds. I barely breathe.

Sunlight on the wolf’s face brings his amber eyes alive. I sense his intelligence, his curiosity. His thick coat resembles Maia’s, black-tipped gray, but with brownish tints throughout. He’s tall, his long, skinny legs distinguishing him from a Malamute. Relaxed and still, he stands confidently, ears perked, bright eyes studying us.

If there are sounds in the forest, I don’t hear them. The world has telescoped to this small patch of land inhabited only by me, my dogs, and a wolf. Nothing else exists.