

★ CATHY LUCHETTI ★

SKIDBOOT
THE SMARTEST
DOG
IN THE WORLD



Skidboot



**Skidboot
The Smartest
DOG
In The World**

A True Story written by Cathy Luchetti

Based on the Screenplay by Joel Carpenter & Guillermo Machado

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In memory of my brother, Francis Colligan, who called me up a few years ago and said, “Cathy, have you ever heard of a dog called Skidboot?”

Author's Note: The warp and woof of Skidboot's life is true to fact...but with a tweak or two. Chronology gives way to story, with the belief that a good narrative often creates its own detours. Many situations are conceived as possibilities within the story's context. Names are altered for the sake of privacy. Some good citizens of Quinlan, Texas might be fuddled by these changes, but consider this creative nonfiction, Texas style.

"I had long been of the opinion that dogs are much cleverer than men. I also believed that they could talk, and that only a certain obstinacy kept them from doing so."

—Nikolai Gogol, ""Memoirs of a Madman"

"God gives you a dog, you do the responsible thing. He gives you an extra smart dog, you go where that leads you."

—David Hartwig

FOREWORD

by

Dr. Steven "Bo" Keeley, Worldwide Veterinarian,
Commodities Consultant, World champion racquetball star, and author of
'Executive Hobo, Riding the American Dream'

I grew up sneaking kibble from dog dishes before becoming a veterinarian and consider my taste in canine books highly trained. This book is gourmet. A blend, not a mix because that wouldn't be authentic. This book recalls John McCormick's *Fields and Pastures*, James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*, and certainly Louis L'Amour's great story telling, along with a dash of scientific spice. *Skidboot* is the smartest dog in the world, a fictionalized biography that will have you scratching the kennels for pups that might grow up or be like the protagonist, and searching the bookshelves for more Cathy Luchetti animal stories and true westerns. *Skidboot* the real dog and *Skidboot*, the biography based on the screenplay, are destined to follow Lassie and Rin Tin Tin straight past Snoopy into the hearts of every reader and become the next mischievous, loveable and, yes, most intelligent, advisor to humankind.

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PROLOGUE

"Skidboot?" Oprah flashed her huge smile. The dog put out his paw. Oprah looked terrific in lavender while Skidboot's green kerchief wasn't bad. Dressing a dog for national television made David Hartwig uneasy, but so did everything else on this Tuesday morning on the Oprah show. Here he was anyway, nerves or not, and so was his dog. *Better just get through it.*

Reporters called his dog "Zen like," which might or might not be true. Skidboot had lockfire concentration and right now, he was frozen into pointer position, one paw curled up, nose straight, staring at the toy.

"What's he doing, David?" Oprah beamed another of her crowd-pleasing smiles.

"He's sneaking up on his toy." David choked back the word "ma'am" and smiled instead. "It may sound simple but he's got his own style." On command, Skidboot advanced in panther mode, belly low, stalking, eyes fixed, barely moving, not a muscle out of place. Inch by inch, he drew closer.

"Now stop."

The dog froze, eyes pinpoints.

By now everyone who tuned in knew that Skidboot was waiting for the count of three to magically break free and claim his toy.

"One – two – six – seven –fourteen – twenty nine."

You could feel the frustration.

"...seventeen – forty – five- twelve..."

There were about 9 million more numeric combinations he could cite, but Hartwig could feel the crowd's anxiety as they watched the dog, frozen as a popsicle. They were anxious because they wanted the dog to do well, to not move, and to not screw up. They didn't trust that an animal could obey for this length of time. Hartwig looked bored with it all until softly, like an oversight, he slipped in "three."

Skidboot collapsed onto the toy. Oprah drew in her breath and clapped while five hundred people roared. David Hartwig stood there, stunned again, for the hundredth time, that he was on live television leading his Blue Heeler through his paces. Just a few weeks ago in a taxi heading down Fifth Avenue in New York, he told the cabbie that he was a simple man who lived in a double wide on a small ranch in a pit stop in Texas and had no idea what he was doing here. The cab driver nodded sympathetically but wasn't convinced. They were headed for NBC after all. Really?

The question that the cabbie didn't ask was bound to come up.

Oprah was the next one to ask it.

"David, how did you and Skidboot get started with all this?"

Slowly, as if on cue, Skidboot turned around and stared at David, almost as if Oprah had asked him the question. He stared long and hard, as if searching the man's face for an answer, and finding something familiar there, something that felt like what he wanted, Skidboot relaxed. And in that moment when the tension flowed out, everyone swears that the dog smiled.

David Hartwig was used to this and so was Skidboot. They looked at each other.

It had been one heck of journey, and longer than a hound's tooth.

Heeler History

The Blue Heeler dropped her litter behind a granite outcropping in the Australian outback. She was agile, muscular, rank as a wolf. She turned and tongue-slapped her puppies into the world, grooming them with every lick, calming the tiny hearts that raced with excitement. The world made them squirm--Grass! Sky! Wind!--but her tongue relaxed them, helped them secrete more digestive juices to better absorb food, while their bodies rocked in a healing sea of neurochemicals. These chemicals are not much different than those the pharmaceutical world buys and sells: beta-endorphins, oxytocins and more. Soon she pushed them aside and stood up, shaking her pelt. Her tail hung at a slight curve. Her feet were round with short toes. Her skull was broad with wide-set ears, but her coat marked her as a Heeler, generally known as an Australian cattle dog. She wore a smooth, dense coat of frosty grey and black, oddly speckled with blue. She glanced down at the pups and almost sneered. Poor things. They were solid white. It would be months before their beautiful speckled coats grew in.

She shook herself. Time to get back to work. Every Australian cattle dog worked hard and loved to work. She had taken enough vacation from her job of herding cattle. Heelers could nip and snap a herd into shape faster than any man on a horse. Proudly, they worked the stock, fast and forceful, able to drive the cattle for days under a sweltering sun, through blinding desert sandstorms.

The Australian pioneers of the 1800's were creative survivors, beefing up the weak English breeds of dog that could never handle the rigors of the new continent. One veterinarian in Sydney threw Dingo, Kelpie, German Shepherd, and Kangaroo Hound into the mix, creating a breed swift as a snake, and tough. This odd lot mongrel made its way to the United States and was known as the Australian Cattle Dog of America, aka, the Blue Heeler. This new dog probably had traces of Dingo plus Blue Merle Collie, possibly Dalmatian and even Bull Terrier

There in the outback three of her puppies lived and mated, and it was good. Their puppies lived and it was also good. As each succeeding generation sprang forth, they proved more able, agile and cooperative than the former, and it became ever better. The breed allowed marginal dirt farmers to profit at round-up time because one dog equaled at least two men, and the dogs cost a lot less. The Australian Cattle dog stands as the unofficial mascot for the Australian beef industry. And on it went, a canine genealogy that finally found its way to Texas, where a pup was born that nearly bridged the symbiotic animal-to-human gap, with the potential to become a canine soul mate as well as a work engine, a furry phenomenon.

This dog showed supersensory powers that outstripped ordinary dogs, who only possess the ability to detect cancers, announce earthquakes, and howl at barometric

pressure changes. Avid as a three-year-old, this dog could understand a glance, a word, a gesture, and act accordingly.

This dog would be the canine manifestation of Einstein's theory of a unified field, where everything, even species, interact with eerie prescience and are part of life's great interconnectedness. A dog born to bond, he needed someone empathic, a lover of animals, who could tune himself to "listen" as well as to instruct. Someone who lived as a cowboy rancher on a plot of land in Quinlan, Texas--David Hartwig.

Rodeo Life

A hot Texas sun blazed over the arena, and already the rodeo fans were guzzling beer, trying to cool off. The Mesquite, Texas rodeo arena was no different than a hundred others, a semicircle of wooden benches facing a gladiatorial ring where men battled beasts and each other, winner take all.

David Hartwig was striving to be that winner. He felt the win inside him, like a fist. He'd always had this special knowledge about himself when it came to two things: sports and animals. You might say, he possessed animal spirits, an energy that pushed him through championship swimming right into the roping arena.

Nerves jumping, he fingered the rope like a rosary, seeking help, wanting that prize. *Sometimes I pray myself from one side to the other*, he thought, knowing that energy and faith could propel him right through this boot heel existence, straight into a national roping championship. Today he was riding in the Mesquite, Texas Pro Rodeo outside of Dallas, a homespun little operation that would someday draw crowds and celebrities, but was now, still, just a local show. He'd turned down a swimming scholarship to Southern Methodist University to be here, or at least, to be a world champion.

I'm still in the holding pen, he thought. No championship, no scholarship. Just that pervasive inner voice that assured him, *it's ok*. And he knew it was ok. A hard-headed man, he never backed down. Even as a skinny kid who looked like a walking bully magnet, if anyone even touched him, they'd end up on the ground so fast that not even David knew what happened. *I was never a fighter*, he thought. Not consciously. All he knew was that he never backed down.

He turned to locate Barbara in the crowd, then remembered their little argument. Nothing serious, but she'd huffed off and he knew he'd ride without her support today. They both believed that she brought him luck, and if she was in the stands, then all would go well. Well, he'd ride without her then, so much for lucky charms.

Eyes narrowed, he watched the calf bolt into the arena. Another flash brought in Randy Coyle, resident champion calf roper and personal nemesis, a cocky 30-year-old whose relatives ran the rodeo. Nepotism never hurt a man's chances of raking in prizes, David thought. No sir.

Stomach churning, David watched Coyle sail his rope neatly over the calf, shoot off the saddle and slam himself into it, upending the calf so fast it forgot to bawl. With three loops of piggin' string, Coyle bound up the calf's legs, stiff as firewood. Then he flung himself away, strutted toward his horse, and swung himself easily into the saddle with the same jaunty insolence he'd shown ten minutes earlier. He'd seen David in the john, hurling over the cracked toilet.

"Sick again, Hartwig?" He'd winked, laughed, and slammed the door shut on a

man's private anxiety. David tried to get over the embarrassment. He couldn't understand himself: if he knew he could win, why get so nervous? Calves, dusty and tag-eared, shuffled through the chute toward the spring-loaded doors. One squeezed in and the door slammed behind it. His calf.

"Welcome David Hartwig!" The announcer lobbed his microphone around like a magic wand, predicting a *special feelin'* about *this up'n'comer from Quinlan Texas!* David felt the same way.

Settling down, he turned stone cold. Determined. *That's the stuff, what he'd been waiting for.*

He nodded for the calf. Minutes exploded into seconds. The gate banged open, the calf shot out, and David felt Hank lunge under him. The rope sailed overhead, looping the calf's neck as Hank braked to a shuddering halt, his skid boots trailing dust. Skid boots are a protective sleeve around the horse's heel, reinforcing Hank's heels and shanks as his skidding hooves dragged through the hard-packed caliche soil of the rodeo arena. The calf sailed through the air, landing with a thud.

David flung himself off, sprinted to the brawling animal and flipped it upend. Gnawing at the piggin' string between his teeth, he clutched its legs, feeling the weight of a fifty-pound calf pull against him as he roped the legs together, shouting *two wraps and a hooley!* Hank held the rope taut, moving steadily backwards. David signaled "time." He strained to hear the count.

"One one thousand, two one thousand...we got a tie!"

Roars, music, confusion. Tension gripped them. Yells of support, bets placed, animosity rampant. Hank, trained to release the calf rather than drag it pitifully around the way some did, slackened the rope. David glared at Randy. Randy glared back. David scanned the bleachers to see Barbara. Instead, he caught Russell's eye and waved as the eleven-year-old jumped up and waved his hat, shouting, "Way to go, you got it!"

What a good kid. His stepson, his fan. He needed the support, and he knew the deck was stacked. The loudspeaker blared like a tornado warning, "the judges have spoken, the 1991 Mesquite calf-roping winner is Randy Coyle!" Naw, David thought, the uncle has spoken. It was pure hooley, Texas style.

As if mind-reading, Coyle thrust at him, chin out. "You got a problem, boy?"

David's anger surged. All those years, now come to this. Effort and opportunities given away like coupons, so that somebody's uncle could tilt the deck. He spat on the ground, fists tight at his sides. Then he saw Barbara in the stands. *She'd come, after all.*

"You cheat!" Russell had run down from the stands and blurted out, looking surprised as he did it.

"Hey, that boy of yours at least is man enough to speak up. Maybe he should do the ropin," Coyle guffawed, his barely sprouted moustache jiggling. He flirted up from under his wide hat, looking for others to join in.

David moved toward him, then felt Barbara grab his arm. He knew it wasn't worth it. Jealousy was the trademark of a small mind—so said Mark Twain--and he was not small-minded. Coyle was a bitterness to him, but he'd get over it.

"Maybe you better give it up, Hartwig. It'd be better on your con-sti-tution!" Coyle bent over, laughing, while Russell flushed, stared at David, then back at the

cowboy. David grabbed his stepson and they hustled after Barbara, back to the safety of his 30-acres in Quinlan, Texas.

CHAPTER THREE

Quinlan, Texas

If a Dingo-bred dog chose a new home outside ancestral Australia, it would be Texas. If unlucky, it would end up West Texas, needled by cactus, dodging rattlers, pining for a better terrain, even though the hills rolled gently, and Spring brought a carpet of green and more bluebirds than a Disney film. North Texas, Hunt County, close to Quinlan, suffered great heat yet also the relief of rain, given the right time of year. Such rain kept the Sabine river rushing toward its historic outflow in Mexico, bringing with it flowing memories, history, and tales of a Caddoan tribe, the Tawakoni, that sheltered near its banks, fought the Comanche, Apache, and the Osage, and later "molested" any nearby Spanish, as well as later unfortunate U.S. settlers. Finally forced onto a reservation in 1837, all that remains of the tribe today is Tawakoni Lake, the word meaning "River Bend Among Red Sand Hills," but which might also mean, "river built by backhoe and cement mixer." The town of Quinlan naps close by, its lakeside condos offering worry-free lakefront living just a shout away from Burgers & Fries, a popular dining spot. A nearby oil pipeline continues to uphold a clean safety record, a record in itself.

First settled in the 16th century by the Spanish, generations of farmers, ranchers, and buckaroos rolled through the area, followed generations later by David Hartwig, who craved open space as far away from Dallas as he could find. Groomed suburbs depressed him. Cosmopolitan life bored him. In his mind lay the cowboy idyll of free range, wild horses, rodeos, dogs, and adventure. His father, Rudy Hartwig, taught high school math and science, his mother Pat worked as a secretary, and the family lived an orderly if noisy life of four sons and countless dogs, which his father kept in steady supply from the local pound.

Long and lanky, David swam the freestyle as State Champion for two years running, even if he didn't particularly like swimming. But faced with *any* sport, the same kick-start determination he'd had at the rodeo would overwhelm him, dark and aggressive, ready to spring out and *win*. Despite a gawky frame, poor choices, and feeling trapped as a house pet, he knew things about himself that made him both restless and oddly confident. So confident that he turned down college, choosing a profession straight out of the middle ages, a farrier.

"A what?" Some friends were astonished, others, mostly his long-time friends, knew why horseshoeing prevailed over a full swimming scholarship from SMU. A true maverick, David had turned down this bastion of Texas excellence to follow the rodeo, shoe horses, and win the state championship calf roping title. His parents got it, even if they didn't agree.

They'd seen his excitement in the 11th grade, in that Vocational Ag class, when he managed to get a job on a 60-acre ranch and then broke his first horse. How? He'd just

had this *feeling* that when he walked his 200-lb. calf around the field, which he had to do to keep it healthy, that if he walked the unbroken mare along with the calf and kept it to the calf's left, they'd socialize. And slowly, the cow would *teach* the mare how to be a roping horse.

"It's stupid. Why walk the calf around every day by itself when you could be getting them used to each other?" His father could only agree, wondering if the boy could figure out a way to go commercial with such insights.