



Summer of the Wolves

By Polly Carlson-Voiles

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—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

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This compelling first novel explores themes of searching for family and finding a balance between caring for—and leaving alone—wild animals.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Debut novelist Carlson-Voiles renders Nika's emotional turmoil and moral dilemmas with gentle, compassionate strokes...A little gem of a book for all wild-hearted lovers of the natural world."--*Kirkus*, starred review

About the Author

Polly Carlson-Voiles says this novel, her first, grew out of several things: her longtime love of the wilderness country in northern Minnesota, her experiences with wolves at the International Wolf Center in Ely, Minnesota, and her career of working with lost and found children as a secondary special ed/English teacher in inner city Minneapolis. She lives with her husband and dog near Ely, Minnesota, high on a ridge across the lake from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, where on lucky nights they listen to the music of the wolves.

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When the earth-colored wolf pup first opened her eyes, she looked into the eyes of a woman. The woman's voice was gentle; her hands were strong. The pup couldn't remember her lost pack mates or being pulled from the collapsed den. In the first weeks of the pup's life, the woman fed her from bottles and slept beside her on layers of clean straw spread on the floor of an old wooden shed.

Chapter One

As she walked home from school that perfect California spring day, Nika felt she was on solid ground for the first time in nineteen months, two weeks, and five days. The constant changes for her and her brother had been like Alice down the rabbit hole, a book Nika had never been fond of. You'd have to be in a pretty steady spot in the world to love a book like that.

For Nika, being orphaned at ten and a half had been like standing on a major fault line during an earthquake, watching land slide away in every direction. She'd held tight to her brother's hand and tried to stay on her feet. Being alone was the new normal, but the shaking never completely stopped. Now the shock was to wake up and find she could do something ordinary like go down for breakfast and shout at her brother for spilling on her English essay, then go off to school like everyone else her age. Nika knew that some animals just plain die when they lose a parent. They give up. It was easy to understand how that could happen.

But today was a good day. After school she walked Olivia home and made plans to get together later. Nika ambled along the streets of Pasadena in the flowery air of early spring. In her backpack she had test scores that would make any parent proud. If she had had a parent, that is. Well, Meg would be proud. Red-purple bougainvillea vines massed up the sides of small houses, and she felt the neon color at the backs of her eyes. A rare sense of peace and exhilaration washed over her, and she stopped smack in the middle of the sidewalk to savor the moment. She had her best friends, Olivia and Zack. School was tolerable since the clone-girls with matching outfits and hairstyles had stopped snickering at her behind their hands. Meg was a great foster mom. Life was finally okay, under the circumstances.

On the corner of her street Nika stopped as usual to speak to Rookie, a bear-size St. Bernard/ Great Pyrenees

cross, one of the dogs she walked after school for extra money. He had stolen her heart with his droolly, goldenhearted loving ways. Every day he waited for her, leaning against the gate where she could reach over and rub his ears. She could always tell Rookie about how much she missed her mom, or about the girls who teased her for being too smart. Things she never told anyone else.

When she looked into his heavy-lidded knowing eyes, she remembered how she and Randall had bombarded their mom with dog-acquiring campaigns: hidden notes, pictures, and impossible promises. Their mom would always laugh and say, "Someday . . ."

She rubbed the dog's chest until he collapsed into a giant furry puddle, then knelt down to scratch him through the fence. Dogs love you no matter what.

"Someday . . ." she said softly to the dog, as she rose to walk up the street to Meg's. She had homework to do if she was going to go back to Olivia's later.

When she got home, the house echoed with tiptoe quiet. She found a note under the frog magnet on the fridge that said, "The twins and Josie are with their social workers. Randall is at a game with Newt. I am grocery shopping. Be back soon. Luv, Meg." There was a heart drawn by the signature.

Nika threw her quarter-ton book bag onto the couch, poured some milk, grabbed an apple, and pulled out her math homework, settling in for a bout with pre-algebra. Two minutes on the soft couch in the silent house, and she fell asleep with the book unopened in her hands.

A shrill ringing spiked into Nika's sleep, vibrating inside her head like a dentist's drill. She threw herself sideways off the couch, jumped up, and grabbed the phone before it could ring again.

"Hello," she answered, trying to focus, her heart beating fast from sudden awakening.

"Hello. Is this Nika?" said an unfamiliar nervous-chirpy voice.

"Yes, speaking."

"Well, this is Mrs. Marquita Fish. You remember? Your Pasadena social worker? I have recently been talking to Meg, uh, to your foster mother, and I wanted you both to know the good news right away. Please, would you call Meg to the phone?"

Good news? Good news coming from this social worker? The very one who moved Nika and her brother to a new foster home every two months before placing them at Meg's eleven months ago? At the last foster home before Meg's, the woman in charge had kept the shades drawn and never let anyone open a window, even if it was hot, and an older boy had thrown Nika's pet turtle over the fence. *I can hardly wait*, she thought. But politeness reigned, manners her mother had taught her. "She's not home right now. May I take a message?"

"Yes, well . . ." said Mrs. Fish. There was a questioning silence on the line. "So then, Nika, when do you think Meg will be available?"

Nika always stumbled when she tried to lie. Pausing, she said, "She's coming home late, I think. Really, really late." Something about this call made her want to curl her toes into the nubby tan carpet and hold on.

Suddenly Mrs. Fish spoke more loudly, like people do to the hard of hearing. "Yes, well, I guess I'll tell you the good news first. We've finally found your uncle. He'd been out of the country. But we've found him, and

it's all arranged!" She ended on a high note, as though she had just announced winning a free car on the radio.

"What?" Nika's jumpy feet began propelling her back and forth. *Arranged? Uncle???* Her finger lingered on the phone's "end call" button. Her only uncle had been out of the picture for years.

"Oh, nooooo. I guess Meg hasn't told you yet. Oh, my. I've probably spoiled the surprise. You and Randall are going to Minnesota!" High note again. "Your uncle bought the tickets. It's all set. Week after next!"

Nika wanted to swat at the woman's voice to make it stop. Instead she took a breath and held it. Pushing her words tight together so there wouldn't be room for Mrs. Fish to say more, Nika said, "There must be some mistake because school isn't over for weeks, but thanks." She abruptly pushed the "end call" button. Meg could call her back. Or not. Nika could just forget to mention it. She felt a hot tightening in her stomach. A visit to Minnesota the week after next, before school was even out? Impossible. She was just getting used to living in a foster home she liked. Surely Meg would let Nika and Randall decide.

During the next hour Nika paced so much, she practically wore a pathway in the carpet. Finally Meg struggled in through the back door, breathing heavily, her bag of groceries catching on the doorjamb. Nika rushed to help her with the tearing bag.

She hadn't planned to tell Meg. Especially since she knew Meg hadn't been feeling well lately. But for Nika honesty sometimes just happened, like when your hand shoots out as you're about to fall. Before she had time to stop herself, she said, "Mrs. Fish called about some uncle." Nika lifted the torn bag carefully and heaved it to the counter. Several cans and boxes tumbled out.

Meg gave her a long look while straightening her flowered shirt. They stood staring at each other in the sunny kitchen. It felt as if out of nowhere a dangerous snake had entered the room. The clock in the kitchen ticked out the beats of her heart.

"Something . . . about Minnesota, I think," Nika said, lowering the volume of her voice to near zero.

This was silly, she thought. She already knew what Meg was going to say with a laugh. She would say, *You know you are welcome to stay here as long as you want!*

But instead, in halting tones, her foster mother said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm glad she called. But . . . you should have heard it first from me." After a stiff moment she turned away, then looked back at Nika. No usual smiles. Her foster mom looked sad, as if she was trying not to cry. Nika felt dizzy.

Meg wrapped her in a gentle hug. "Nika, you know I love you and Randall." Her voice quivered. Then she let go and folded into a kitchen chair. "And honestly, I would have kept you as long as you needed to stay."

Would have? Tendrils of dread crept up Nika's body from her toes. There was something else Meg hadn't told her.

"Would have?" Nika asked. A knot was building in her throat.

"Yes, I would have. But I can't. Some problems have developed with my heart. I've been trying to find a way to tell you. I'm scheduled to go into the hospital for some tests. The doctor wants me to give up fostering for a while and to devote myself entirely to getting well. Mrs. Fish found places right away for the younger ones, but I have been so worried about you and Randall, after all you've been through. So Mrs. Fish agreed to try again to locate your father's brother."

Again? Contact him *again*? Right. Nika needed to act. As with the mudslides last spring in the canyon up behind Pasadena, once again she felt as if a whole hill were moving and there was no place to grab hold. "I know. I've got an idea," she said quickly with a fake strong voice. "Let's just figure out a way to stay here in Pasadena with someone else." She took a breath. " Maybe Olivia's? They've got an extra room since her sister went to college. I can walk more dogs and take care of people's cats when they go away. Then after you're better, we'll come back. We could even come over and cook for you, bring magazines and stuff. You know I can clean, and I know which days are for garbage and recycling."

Meg's face crumpled. The woman Nika had grown to love was upbeat and strong. Now here she was, bent in a chair, speaking with a thick, defeated voice. "Oh, Nika, honey, I'm so sorry. I was hoping your uncle would travel here . . ." She paused, shook her head, and then said, "Oh, this is all so hard, but I'm afraid the plans are made. I was just waiting to hear back from Mrs. Fish." She stood and reached out to Nika.

At first Nika stood with her arms clutched in front of her, but who else would comfort her? The two of them collapsed together in a hug. After they had a good cry, Meg reached for the teakettle. She made blueberry tea, and they each had a cup, sitting in the yellow kitchen with the groceries still in bags.

By the time Randall got home, Nika felt light and sharp and closed. Now even Meg couldn't fill the emptiness where family should have been.

In a special babysitting class Nika had taken this year they'd studied child development. The textbook said most of what you learn happens in the early years. So, she figured, however she'd turned out at twelve, she was done, like a baked cake. Randall was only seven. Maybe he was still young enough to want a parent who held the bike seat while he learned to ride. But she didn't need a new family. She'd had a great mom. Meg's had been a loving hand to hold. End of story. She would be the girl in the *Brave Girl Movie* and take care of herself and Randall. If they had to go to another foster home in Pasadena, she could handle it.

But no way was she leaving California for good. Since Mom had moved them across the country, they hadn't even visited Minnesota. Mrs. Fish obsessed about the idea of real blood relatives and must have put out an all points bulletin. If Nika and Randall had to, they would visit this missing-in-action uncle. That was all.

From that phone call on, the days ran together like smearing paint. Saying goodbyes. Packing. Gathering make-up assignments from her teachers. After what happened last year, she wouldn't miss the clone-girls very much, but Olivia and Zack were her friends forever. How would she live without her best friends for six whole weeks? She and Olivia cried and laughed together during one last sleepover. They traded necklaces they made for each other, then said goodbye, promising to write real handwritten letters, stamped and sent through the mail.

Nika spent an extra-long time with Rookie the day before she left. His owner, Glenna, invited her in for a Coke and cookies. Rookie leaned against Nika's leg the entire time, and she wrapped her arms around his immense neck. She thought he looked sad. Maybe he was picking up her feelings. She knew dogs could do that.

When May 10 finally came and they lined up for security in the L.A. airport, Nika hugged Meg so hard, they both stopped breathing for a moment. Over and over Nika kept reassuring herself. *Whatever happens, this is just a visit, and it will be over in six weeks. We are coming back. If Meg gets better, we can maybe even live with her again.*

Users Review

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