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Whale Done!

Chapter One

How do they *do* that?

A collective gasp rose from a crowd of over three thousand spectators as they thrilled to the amazing performances of leaping killer whales. It was another show in Shamu Stadium at SeaWorld. All eyes in the grandstand were glued to the huge animals and their trainers, so no one noticed the wide range of emotions reflected in the face of a man in khakis and a blue shirt who sat in their midst. Each time the crowd exploded in applause and cheers as the animals performed one of their spectacular feats, the man's eyes would sparkle with surprise and delight. At other times his face would cloud over and his eyes assume a faraway look.

Wes Kingsley had come to Orlando to attend a business conference. Since the schedule left room for conferees to relax, play golf, or visit one of the area's attractions, he had decided that a visit to the world-famous marine zoological park would help him forget his troubles for a time.

He was glad he had made that decision. Earlier, along with throngs of other people eagerly crowding the huge stadium, he had taken his seat above the blue waters of the large main pool. Following a welcome and a review of safety rules by an animal trainer, a mysterious fog had begun to shroud the surface of the pool. From behind and above them, the crowd heard the scream of a fish eagle. The mighty bird suddenly swooped over their heads, dove toward the pool, and took a lure from the misty waters. As it flew away, huge black dorsal fins broke the surface, and onlookers caught their breath when they saw monstrous black shapes circling deep in the pool. A wet-suit-clad trainer came through the mists paddling a kayak, to be instantly surrounded by the fins of enormous killer whales.

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Following this dramatic opening, the crowd witnessed a series of astonishing acrobatic leaps and dives by a trio of whales -- a 10,000-pound male and two 5,000-pound females. These marine mammals, among the most feared predators in the ocean, waved their pectoral fins to the audience, allowed trainers to "surf" the pool by balancing on their back, and with sweeps of their great tails splashed the first ten rows of spectators with cold water. The roars of laughter, the oohs and aahs, and the thunderous applause attested to the crowd's enjoyment.

Wes Kingsley also found himself entranced by the spectacle unfolding before him. By the finale, when the three finny costars hiked their gleaming black-backed and white-bellied bodies up onto a raised section of the pool to take some well-deserved bows, he had scribbled several entries in a small notebook.

As people exited the stadium, scores of them were still dripping from the soaking they'd happily received sitting in the "splash zone" of the first ten rows. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—their faces sparkled with smiles. Still in his seat in an upper row of the emptying stands, Wes Kingsley remained staring down into the pool. Its blue depths, recently awash with great waves but now still, seemed to echo his mood.

After the crowd had left and the place was quiet, an underwater gate opened and a giant black form moved into the pool and began circling it. A trainer came through a door and strolled out onto the lip of the pool, and the huge killer whale immediately swam over to him. "Nice going, big guy," he said, stroking its head. "Enjoy your playtime. You earned it." As the trainer rose and walked along the pool's edge, the whale moved with him. It seemed to be trying to stay as close to him as possible.

The blue-shirted man in the stands shook his head and thought to himself, *You'd think that after*

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doing a whole show that whale would hoard its free time. But what does it want to do? Play with the trainer! A question was forming in the man's mind, a need to know that had been building up in him ever since the start of the show. He had an impulse to go down there and ask the trainer that question, but fear of embarrassment held him back. Then suddenly he got up off the bench and quickly descended the stairs.

"Excuse me," Wes called as he reached the deck of the pool and started toward the trainer.

The trainer looked up in surprise. Then he gestured toward a door. "Sir, the exit is over there."

"I know. But I need to ask you something." As Wes approached, it was evident that he was not ready to take no for an answer.

"Sure," the trainer said. "What do you want to know?"

Pulling a wallet from his pocket, Wes offered two fifty-dollar bills to the trainer. "I'm willing to pay you for the information. What I want to know is probably what everyone who sees the show wonders: What's your secret? How do you trick these animals into performing for you? Do you starve them?"

The man in the wet suit controlled an impulse to react angrily to his visitor's impertinent attitude. Patiently and quietly he said, "We don't trick them, and we don't starve them. And you can keep your money."

"Well then, what is it? What *do* you do?" Wes demanded. But after a long silence from the other, Wes's manner softened. Realizing he had given offense, he put his money away. "Sorry," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Wes Kingsley. I don't mean to bother you with this, but I really have to

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know how you get such a tremendous performance from these animals."

"Dave Yardley," said the trainer as they shook hands. "I'm in charge of the animal training here, so I guess you might say you've come to the right place. The answer to your question is that we have teachers. Would you like to meet one of them?"

Kingsley looked around to see if they were being joined by someone else. When he looked back, Yardley was pointing to the whale. "This is one of our teachers. His name's Shamu. He and all the other whales here at SeaWorld taught us all we know about working with these wonderful animals."

Wes squinted warily. "Come on. You mean to say you've been trained by an *animal*? I thought it was the other way around."

Dave shook his head. "Shamu is one of the world's largest killer whales living in a zoological park. As far as who trains whom, let me put it this way. When you're dealing with an eleven-thousand-pound animal who doesn't speak English, you do a lot of learning."

Wes glanced down at the rows of enormous, two-inch-long teeth in Shamu's enormous mouth. "I think the only thing he would teach me is to stay on his good side."

"There's plenty of data to back that up," Dave said. "Killer whales are the most feared predators in the ocean. They can kill and eat anything in sight."

"I guess if he's not learning his lessons, you don't make him go and stand in the corner," Wes ventured.

"That's exactly right. One thing we learned quickly was that it doesn't make much sense to punish a killer whale and then ask a trainer to get in the water with him."

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"Not unless you want your career shortened!"
Wes exclaimed. Then, recalling the prodigious
leaps Shamu had performed in the show, he
added, "It's hard to believe a creature that size
could get ten feet out of the water on its own.
How *do* you get him to perform so well?"

"Let's just say it didn't happen overnight," said
Dave. "Shamu taught us patience."

"How so?"

"Shamu wasn't about to do anything for me or any
other trainer until he trusted us. As I worked with
him, it became clear that I couldn't train him until
he was convinced of my intentions. Whenever we
get a new whale, we don't attempt to do any
training for some time. All we do is make sure
they're not hungry; then we jump in the water and
play with them, until we convince them."

"Convince them of what?"

"That we mean them no harm."

Wes said, "You mean you want them to trust
you."

"You're right. That's the key principle we use in
working with all our animals." Wes took out his
notebook and pen and began to write.

"Are you writing an article?" Dave asked. "Or
doing research?"

Wes Kingsley smiled grimly. "I guess you'd call it
research of a personal nature. I've got to learn
some new things myself or else..."

Dave Yardley waited and watched. *It's hard for
this guy to trust anybody*, he thought. *That's what
his bluster act is about.*

After a long pause, Wes spoke, avoiding eye
contact with the trainer. "I live near Atlanta and

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work for a big industrial-supply outfit. I came to Florida to get away for a few days, using a business conference as the excuse. But over there at the hotel with my manager buddies, all I could think of was how I don't want to go back home to face the same old problems."

Dave was listening with evident interest.

"For a long time I've been having a hard time getting my people at work to perform well," Wes continued, then grinned. "Not to mention getting my kids at home to pitch in around the house and do better at school. When I was complaining to a friend of mine about it, he had a nice way of suggesting that since I was having management problems both at work and at home, we might look for the common denominator."

"What was that?" Dave asked.

"My friend said, 'Did you ever notice, when your life isn't working, *who's always around?*'"

Both men chuckled. "I know I'm not managing effectively," Wes went on, "and I might be about to lose my job. Frankly, I'm getting a little desperate."

Dave was aware of Wes's anxious, almost pleading tone of voice and said, "Let me take you on a little backstage tour. Then we can talk more about this."

Dave led Wes through a gate and over to a training pool where a few feet away the huge black backs and fins of two killer whales were gliding through the clear blue water. Their beautiful bodies exuded an air of calmness, and at the same time the promise of explosive power. As the two men walked from one holding pool to another, the trainer identified each whale by name and supplied interesting anecdotes about them.

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"It takes a long time to build trust and friendship with each of the whales," Dave said. "That trust and friendship is the basis of everything you just saw in the show. These animals are not so different from people. They'll show you when they don't like how you're treating them. You're a businessman, so you know that the whole game these days is satisfying the customer—and a key ingredient of that is satisfying your own people. When our killer whales completely lose their fear of us, the positive vibes between them and us are transferred to the audience."

"That's true," said Wes emphatically. "The show creates a lot of happiness in the audience. I could see it on people's faces when they left the stadium. Half of them were soaking wet, yet there were big smiles on their faces."

"You can see it in the whales, too," Dave said, "They all crowd up to the gate when the show is starting. It's plain they want to be in it. They know it's going to be a positive experience."

"Okay, I've got the principle. But what do you actually *do* with the whales to build that trust?"

"You might want to write this down." Dave smiled. "We..."

Accentuate the positive.

"Hm," Wes mused. "I think there's an old song about that." He took out his notebook and began writing again. "So, it goes: *Build trust...Accentuate the positive*. Is that right?"

"Right. We accentuate the positive, not the negative. We pay a lot of attention when the animal does what we ask him to do and performs a task correctly."

"That sounds fine," Wes said insistently. "But what about when he *doesn't* do it, or does it *incorrectly*?"

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"We ignore what he did wrong and immediately redirect his behavior elsewhere."

Wes stopped writing and looked up, obviously bothered. "What exactly do you mean by *ignore*?"

"I mean—"

"If one of my people screws up," Wes interrupted, his voice agitated, "I can't afford to just look the other way. If one of my kids doesn't do her homework, or picks on her sister, my wife and I are certainly not going to *ignore* it!"

"Then I'm guessing," Dave said quietly, "that when people in your shop or your kids at home do something that displeases you, you pay lots of attention to it."

"Darn right I do."

"You probably tell them you didn't like what they did. And you warn them about doing it again."

"Hey," Wes exploded defensively. "Isn't that my job as a manager? Isn't that what any responsible parent does?"

The trainer shrugged. "*You* say it is. But I wonder, is that the way to build a trusting environment at the office or at home?"

That caught Wes by surprise. "Come to think of it," he said, "I guess not. That's more like accentuating the negative."

Dave nodded. "An important concept to remember is that *the more attention you pay to a behavior, the more it will be repeated*. We've learned from the killer whales that when we don't pay a lot of attention to what they do wrong, but instead give lots of attention to what they do *right*, they do the right thing more often."

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"So you're saying it's what you focus on that is the key."

"Exactly. We don't accentuate the positive just to get the animals to perform, though. We do it because it's the right thing to do. We treat our animals as individuals, each of which has unlimited capacities for development and accomplishment. We make every effort to persuade the animals to see us as their friends. After friendship is established, we try to find out just where we and the particular animal can meet on a basis of mutual trust and understanding. We study its behavior patterns to find out what it likes. Then we make everything in the training into a game, injecting easy lessons that the animals learn almost without effort."

Wes was amazed. "You talk about these animals as if they're superintelligent, as if they *want* to be friendly and cooperate with humans."

"They do," Dave said. "But humans must do their part. One of the most harmful practices in animal education is the human habit of mentally limiting animals. What the human thinks about an animal, and expects from an animal, has a direct bearing on that animal's response or lack of response."

"I've never heard these ideas applied to animals before."

"That's because people in general look down on animals," Dave continued. "The conventional approach to animal training is one in which a 'superior' being compels an 'inferior' one to do what he or she wants done. Animals can sense expectations with astonishing accuracy. They can 'live down' to human expectations just like people can. But you should never be surprised when an animal does what you ask, even when you ask the first time. These killer whales have taught us to always expect the impossible. This helps us more than it does the animal. If there is no response,

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that's a sign that we need more educating ourselves. Not the animal."

"I think most people don't accord their fellow humans, let alone their pets and animals, the kind of respect and understanding you're describing," Wes said. "I certainly haven't. No wonder these whales do an outstanding job! It would make a huge turnaround in my career as a manager, and as a husband and father, if I could begin to apply such a thoughtful, respectful philosophy in my relationships. It's a tall order, though."

"You'd better believe it!" Dave said emphatically.

Wes wrote down some more notes. Then he said, "I understand that what you focus on is the key. I still don't get the part about ignoring bad behavior."

Dave nodded. "When I say we ignore undesirable behavior, I don't mean we do nothing. You might have missed what I said about *redirecting*."

"Redirecting, right," Wes murmured, writing another note. "Tell me more about that."

"It's all about energy management. It begins with controlling our own attention. A simple but very powerful rule to remember is, *if you don't want to encourage poor behavior, don't spend a lot of time on it*. Instead we rechannel the energy."

"Rechannel energy," Wes repeated slowly as he wrote down the phrase. "How do you do that?"

"It depends. If the thing we asked the animal to do is integral to the show, we simply direct his attention back to the original task we asked for and give him another chance to do it right. Other times we direct the animal's attention toward something else we want him to do, something he likes and can do well. In either case, following the redirection, we watch to see if we can catch him

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doing something right, so we can accentuate the positive and give him a treat."

"You mean something to eat?"

"Food certainly can be a treat," Dave said. "But we wanted to find other things he liked. Before I worked with him, Shamu had been taught on continuous food reinforcement. Whenever he did anything he was supposed to do, he got a fish. Now, can you see a certain drawback to that?"

"Sure. The only time he'd want to perform for you was when he was hungry. You'd have to keep him hungry all the time!"

"Exactly, and that wasn't a good idea for him or the trainer." Dave smiled. "We had to get him used to other positives, like rubbing his head. The whales like to be touched and rubbed. We wanted him to be very clear that we did not use punishment as a motivator, and also that there were other treats besides food."

"What you're telling me about varying the reward makes sense." Wes looked up from his notes. "But again, I'm trying to apply all this to my back-home situation. I'm thinking that, in a way, money may be to humans like food is to animals—it only provides the basics. If I want to influence the performance of my people using your method, I have to find other motivators besides money." Wes paused, then said, "It's hard to believe, but maybe you and Shamu are the ones to help me find some answers."

Dave smiled, seeing for the first time a likable, childlike spirit that had been hidden behind Wes's brash exterior. Dave turned suddenly and walked over to a nearby office building, reached inside an open window, and came away with a cell phone. Punching in a number, he said to Wes, "Excuse me. I have to make this call."

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Annoyed, Wes walked off a few yards. His face had begun to freeze *into its former mask of invulnerability. I'm a fool, he thought. Who looks for answers to his relationship problems from a bunch of whales?* He glanced at his watch. If he hurried, he could still make it back to the hotel for the lunch meeting.

Dave spoke into the phone. "Anne Marie? Hi, it's Dave Yardley down at SeaWorld. How's it going?" There was a pause, then the trainer said, "Listen, my friend, I've got someone here who needs to talk with you...Yeah, he's standing right here. His name is Wes Kingsley, and he's very interested to know how we train the animals, and whether these principles and techniques could be applied to relationships with people. He says he's particularly interested in applying them to business relationships."

Dave listened for a few moments. Then he said, "I know, isn't that something? And get this: he comes from Atlanta. So, shall I put him on the line?"

Somewhat embarrassed, Wes walked over to Dave, who was holding out the phone to him.

"Forgive me, Wes," Dave said. "I thought you could get some help from my friend, so I called her. Maybe you've heard of her. Her name is Anne Marie Butler. She's quite well-known as a business consultant. She writes books and travels all around the world leading business seminars on leadership and human motivation. She's based in Atlanta."

Wes felt a momentary panic. The name Anne Marie Butler was indeed familiar to him. She was recognized as one of the top women executives in the country. As a young business-school grad she had started a clothing business and had in a few years built it to an internationally recognized fashion line. Her success in hiring and retaining top employees became legendary and led to her

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becoming an in-demand management consultant, the author of several best-selling books, and a star on the human relations speaking circuit. Wes had seen some of her books, but he had never read them. Feeling strange, he took the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Wes," a friendly voice said. "This is Anne Marie Butler. I've known Dave for years, and I'm very happy to be talking with you. What can I do for you?"

"Well, uh...", Wes stammered. "I've been talking to Dave here and trying to figure some ways I can use his animal-training techniques in my job as a manager."

Anne Marie laughed. "It wasn't too many years ago that I was right where you are, watching those whales perform and wondering, 'My gosh, how do they do that?' In my work as a management consultant, I'm always looking for ideas and strategies I can pass on to others that will help them get the best out of their people. When I got to know Dave and the other trainers at SeaWorld, I felt they'd been heaven-sent. And after I found out some of their animal-training secrets, I started incorporating them into my consulting, speeches, and books. More importantly, I began to use them in my own relationships."

Dazed, Wes had the odd feeling that he was in the right place at the right time. Anne Marie's repetition of his own answer-to-a-prayer admission of moments before struck him as dreamlike. "It's very good of you to talk with me," he finally said. "Maybe you can recommend some of your books where you've written about these things."

"Better yet, why don't we get together? When are you flying back to Atlanta?"

"On Friday."

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"Well, it so happens I'm giving a convention speech Monday morning at the downtown Hilton. Why don't you sit in? We could have a talk afterwards."

"Really? That would be great!" Wes exclaimed. "Thanks a lot." He handed the phone back to Dave. After Dave had said good-bye to Anne Marie and hung up, Wes blurted out, "I can't believe I'm going to meet with Anne Marie Butler. I've really got to thank you, Dave."

"My pleasure," the trainer said sincerely, and the two men shook hands.

Wes flipped through the pages of his notebook, hurriedly reviewing what he had written. "Before I go, he said, "do you mind if I summarize some of the key points you've covered this morning?"

"Be my guest."

- **Build trust.**
- **Accentuate the positive.**
- **When mistakes occur, redirect the energy.**

"You've captured the real meat of it there, Wes," Dave said. Then he added, "Just remember, everything you see in the Shamu show is based on and driven by our positive relationships with the animals."

"Seriously," said Wes in a confidential tone, "don't you ever punish them?"

"Nope. There are times when they don't want to cooperate with us. Whales are just like humans. There are days when they get up on the wrong side of the pool. We've been known to stop the show when things just aren't working out, and we tell the audience that Shamu needs some time-out. As the other animals take over, Shamu goes to a backstage pool."

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"Then what happens?"

"He rarely stays there long. These whales love to perform. And the more we accentuate the positive, the more they trust us and the better their performance."

"You know, it's odd, my coming here today," Wes said.

"How do you mean?" Dave asked.

"Well, I come to SeaWorld to get away from thinking about work, and find instead that I'm in management training."

"Strange as it may sound," Dave said, "that's what working with whales is all about."