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# **A TALE OF TWO PATS**

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**A True Story**



**Chuck Trunks**

## When One Door Closes . . .

“I’m sorry for listening in, Chuck, but I might be able to help you out,” whispered Pat. Like the rest of the Sunday morning riding group, she was straddling her bicycle in the crosswalk and waiting for the traffic signal to turn from red to green. Spirits were high that day, but not for me. I was in the throes of a betrayal that rattled me to my core—an out-of-the-blue zig when I was expecting a zag. “Okay, let’s roll!” shouted Thomas when the light turned green. “Remember to ride single file when you get to the greenbelt!” Nobody questioned or challenged Thomas when he’d assume the leadership role during our group outings. Not only was he a highly accomplished cyclist, he was also the owner of the bike shop where our rides started and ended. Plus, he was a friend of mine—someone I could confide in.

“That blows, dude,” he offered while keeping an eye on the group’s frontrunners.

“Tell me about it,” I said. “I’ve never felt more used in my life.”

Thomas surged forward, removing the gap between Pat’s bike and mine, putting us side by side. “Where do you think you’ll move to?” he shouted, looking back. “I hope you’ll stay around here.”

While focusing on the back of Thomas’ orange and blue jersey—colors matching the home uniforms of Boise State’s football team—I answered, “I have no idea. I already gave notice to the two-faced liar that I’m moving out at the end of the month. Now the clock is ticking.”

Despite the relative short distance from Thomas’ bike shop, the 11-mile ride to Lucky Peak State Park isn’t a bike trip I’d attempt alone, as the last three miles involve a steep climb along a winding, two-lane highway, full of trucks towing boats to and from the park’s popular reservoir. With 15 other cyclists

accompanying me on such a fine, crisp morning, I couldn't help but agree with the adage that there's indeed safety in numbers. It wasn't the first time the weekend group grinded up Highway 21 toward the park's entrance on Arrow Rock Road. I always liked riding past the big welcome sign and through the open gates because of the immediate mile-long downhill that led to the park's tree-lined parking lot and adjacent boat ramp. Having been at the park numerous times, I was looking forward to eating my lunch under the swaying Ponderosa pines, enjoying some spirited conversation, and taking in the tranquil setting. For a mid-October day, the weather looked and felt more like summer than autumn with its cloudless blue sky, warm breeze, and more trees *with* leaves than without.

"I overheard you telling Thomas you're moving at the end of the month," said Pat, taking a seat across from me at the picnic table. She was one of those people who ate a handful of nuts and raisins and called it lunch. "I thought you were the property manager of the place you're living at."

"I *was* the property manager."

Pat pulled the tab of a diet Dr. Pepper wrapped in aluminum foil and asked, "Really? What happened?"

"It's a complicated story, but here's the gist of it. The property owner, who pretended to be my friend for the last three years, asked me to write a job description of all the things I did to keep his 12-unit building occupied and running smoothly. When I asked why he needed it, he said it would help him justify giving me a second rental property to manage along with a salary increase. Then he went behind my back and used my eight-page description to shop around for a cheaper property management service."

"That's terrible of him," offered Pat. "How could he do that to you? You've always spoken so highly of him."

“I’m not upset with being replaced. It’s not like he owes me guaranteed work or anything. He’s just your typical greed-driven businessman, putting profit above all else. What bothers me is *how* he went about ending our successful arrangement, acting like our relationship was anything other than transactional. I’ve seen guys like him before. I just didn’t think he’d turn out to be the worst of them, professing we were partners while on the scoring end of the deal, then betraying me when it was his turn to reciprocate. I hate to say it, but this whole episode has made me lose what little faith I had in people.”

“Don’t worry about it, Chuck. It’s his loss.”

“Thanks, Pat. But what makes you think you can help me out? Do you know someone who could rough this guy up? Break his kneecaps, maybe?”

“Oh, in that case, I can help with that, too, since my proposal involves my 240-pound son, Luke,” teased Pat, who understood my sarcastic sense of humor. “Actually, he just moved out, leaving an open bedroom, office, and bathroom on the second floor. My bedroom is on the first floor at the other end of the house. So, you’d have lots of privacy.”

I stopped chewing on a stale Oreo cookie as I listened to Pat, not quite believing what I was hearing. “Are you asking if I’d like to move in with you?”

“I am,” she replied. “If you’re interested, you’re welcome to come check it out tomorrow after I get home from work. Would 7:00 p.m. work for you?”

*Huh? Was the universe wanting to make amends with me, seeking forgiveness for ending a job that made me feel part of the community of Southeast Boise?* “Could I bring my own furniture?” I asked.

Pat suddenly stood up from the picnic table. She gathered her helmet and insulated lunch bag and began walking toward the quiet boat ramp, presumably to use the bathroom. “Yes, you can,” she said, sounding as if a deal had been struck. “Will I see you tomorrow evening?”

“Sure. It can’t hurt to see what kind of setup you have,” I replied. “Can you send me your address?”

She didn’t stop walking toward the water, which was oddly glassy despite the steady breeze. Instead, she waved her arm without turning around. “I already did.”

## **Daniel is Travelin’ Tonight on a Plane**

Having known her for as long as Thomas had been maintaining my bike with twice-a-year tune-ups, I wasn’t surprised to see that Pat lived in a traditional mid-century house at the end of a modest, middleclass cul-de-sac in conservative West Boise. Ours was a friendly relationship based on two mutual interests: group rides and five- to seven-day cycling excursions throughout the Pacific Northwest. To Pat, I was a trusted cycling friend who could be counted on to plan routes, navigate workarounds when bike trails disappeared, and perform MacGyver-like fixes on the fly should someone’s bike start acting up. Admittedly, I wasn’t always as cool as a cowboy hat at a Kenny Chesney concert in moments requiring stoic grace. Whereas I can get somewhat anxious and flustered when the inevitable problem rears its ugly head during a 50- to 70-mile bike leg out in the middle of nowhere, Pat would remain calm and seemingly unfazed, wisely choosing not to heap more drama onto a precarious situation already laden with wild-eyed panic and thoughts of worst-case scenarios.

We had no history of abandoning respectful and cordial discourse, even when challenges arose. Whether participating in group rides around Boise’s Treasure Valley, traversing unforgiving terrain in Idaho and Utah, or slogging up the

coastlines of Washington and Oregon, Pat and I, for lack of better words, simply got along. So it wasn't that much of a stretch to find myself knocking on her door, thinking that this 40-year-old house could be my next home.

"Hey, Chuck. Come on in," she said, stepping back to give me room to walk inside. "Sorry if it smells. I microwaved some bacon about an hour ago, and it still hasn't gone away. I'll have to have my oven vent checked out."

"Oh, it's fine," I replied while walking past her. "It's hardly noticeable."

Already we were off to a good start, exchanging polite conversation as if we had run out of water and daylight on mile 45 of a 60-mile ride on a logging road in southern Oregon. I wasn't too concerned with the layout and condition of the house, opting instead to base more of my decision on the interpersonal dynamic between Pat and me. After all, water heaters and garbage disposals can be replaced, but you're stuck with a housemate's personality. We had a solid history. We had an easy rapport. What could go wrong? Sexual attraction—that's what could go wrong.

Thankfully, Pat wasn't my type at all. At five-eight, she was too tall for my liking. And as far as feminine curves go, Pat was on the heavy side and built like a slab of marbled beef carrying more fat than muscle. She looked less like a long-distance cyclist and more like a defensive end who led the team in tackles and portion sizes. If Pat were a candle, she'd look half-melted as gravity was clearly winning the war against skin elasticity. And speaking of skin, Pat's ashen pallor matched the color of her pale-blond hair, which she wore in a less-than-enthusiastic bob cut. In addition to preferring to wear frumpy earth-toned clothing, Pat seemed to blend into the background wherever she went.

Other than a quasi-alarming number of knickknacks and framed placards paying misplaced homage to her deceased pets, Pat's home was quite comfortable

looking with dark wood floors, bulky furniture, and spaciousness, giving it a more masculine feel than feminine. Any concerns about privacy, sunlight, and storage quickly evaporated as soon as the tour reached the second floor. The upstairs space was just as she described—a perfect place to settle into and start a new art series I had planned on doing at my soon-to-be-vacated apartment. When I mentioned that to Pat, she responded, “So, you’re an artist, too. Let’s go back downstairs. I want to show you my crafts room.”

While descending the stairs, I couldn’t help but think the worst. *A crafts room? An entire room dedicated to crafting? I thought only cat ladies made crafts. Did I miss seeing a litter box somewhere? I made it a habit to never look directly into the eyes of a craftsperson, so how was I going to live with one?* As we sailed through the tidy L-shaped kitchen with teal-colored accents, I teased Pat by saying, “So what kinds of crafts are we talking about? Crystal passage bracelets? Sock puppets? Soda can airplanes? Wait! Don’t tell me! Painted rocks with glued-on googly eyes?”

“Actually, it’s way better,” laughed Pat, leading me into a 10-by-12-foot room between the kitchen and the enclosed backyard patio. She awkwardly gestured like a showroom model and announced, “Say hello to the world of scrapbooking!”

Immediately, the industrial-grade worktable in the center of the room caught my attention. *Was she scrapbooking or shaping sheet metal with a hammer on that thing? God knows she was strong enough to be an ironworker.* A heat press, glue gun, and two die-cutting machines dominated the bulk of its surface area. Surrounding the table were six tall cabinets with a dizzying number of little drawers, each with some kind of cryptic label that only hardcore scrapbookers could decipher. I later learned they were filled with nifty little things like shims, die wafers, scoring tips, and rubber embossing stamps. This wasn’t grandma’s little scrapbooking nook; this was a freaking cottage industry!

“Holy Crap, Pat! Where do the elves sleep?” I joked. “Wow! I had no idea that scrapbooking had a North American headquarters! I remember putting a few scrapbooks together back in the day and only needing double-sided tape and a pair of scissors. But this place is on a whole different level. This isn’t just a hobby for you, is it?”

“You’re funny, Chuck. I actually have online stores on e-commerce sites like Etsy, eBay, and a few others,” answered Pat, pulling a padded swivel shop chair out from under the worktable.

I walked toward a towering stack of colorful cardstock on top of what looked to be a repurposed night table between two of the cabinets. “No offense, but who buys premade scrapbooks?”

Pat sat down on the chair and swiveled until she was facing me. “You’d be surprised, Chuck. I sell mine for as low as 50 dollars and as high as 95, and I still can’t keep enough scrapbooks in stock.”

“Huh? Oh my god! I’m in the wrong business! Way to go, Pat!”

She turned her gaze from me to her hands. While rubbing the armrests of her chair, she asked, “So, what do you think? Can you see yourself living here?”

At first, I thought it was a shadow on her upper lip. But after a few more glances, I was certain that Pat had a mustache. It was one of those faint blonde ones that didn’t always catch the light, which explained why it didn’t draw my attention until that moment. Now my decision was clear: I was going to move in. Not only was she organized, easygoing, and a neatnik like me, Pat didn’t attract me in the least—with or without a lady mustache. “Would you be willing to commit to 12 months?” I asked. “I’ll need that much time to find a new gig and a permanent place to live.”



“Absolutely!” she beamed, getting up from her chair. “I’ve never done anything like this before either, but I can tell this is going to work out.”

“Me, too, Pat.”

I felt especially hopeful as I drove back to my apartment that evening, opting to take slower surface streets instead of the interstate so I could relish my good fortune a little bit longer. To make the moment more memorable, I drove with the radio on and all four windows rolled down, making my hair and music swirl in every direction. I reveled in the unseasonably warm air—evidence that Boise was indeed in the midst of an Indian summer—unaware of the message the setting sun had left behind in the darkening sky. Had I noticed the crimson streaks against menacing shades of black, blue, and purple, I would have interpreted the ominous scene as a warning: blood spilling across something hurt and badly bruised. Instead, I was too busy planning a move and singing “Daniel” with Elton John. When the omen finally delivered on its promise with a global pandemic a few months later in the spring of 2020, it wasn’t an incurable virus that turned my life upside down; it was a dating app called Tinder.

## **We Need to Talk**

“Good morning,” I announced as I came downstairs. Pat was sitting at the dining room table, facing me from behind her laptop and an insulated coffee tumbler. Stacks of curled and dogeared papers covered the rest of the table, making me think that she’d be working from home today. “It looks like the COVID thing finally caught up with your school.”

“I’m in a meeting right now,” she whispered.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I whispered back, walking past her and into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee.

“Who are you talking to?” purred a female voice from Pat’s computer.

“Yeah, what’s going on over there?” teased a second female voice. “Inquiring minds want to know!”

“No. It’s not what you think,” replied Pat. “That was my son, Luke.”

“I thought he moved out,” said the first voice.

“He did. He came over this morning to do his laundry,” lied Pat, stealing a glance in my direction and catching my eye.

Without saying a word, Pat slid a note across the table as I walked out of the kitchen and through the dining room, coffee in hand. In penmanship one would expect from a primary school teacher, the note read, “I’ll be done in five minutes. We need to talk.” As foreboding as the last sentence sounded, I wasn’t worried in the least. Pat and I had been getting along splendidly ever since I moved in. We were well into our second month of cohabitation—both of us feeling relaxed and productive. Whereas Pat was churning out more scrapbooks than she had in the last few years, I was already starting to work on the fourth of 12 art compositions centered around the most mind-boggling principles of theoretical physics.

I replied to her note while continuing to head upstairs. Using hand gestures and a series of exaggerated facial expressions, I conveyed to Pat that I’d come back down after I finish my coffee and change into my cycling clothes. With the slightest of nods, she correctly interpreted and acknowledged my wordless response. But I wasn’t surprised. From the beginning, things were simpatico between Pat and me. Not even an overhyped viral contagion could stop us from riding our bikes together, sharing an occasional meal, or walking to a local restaurant. On Wednesday evenings, we watched *Survivor* from two recliners, discussing team strategy and making fun of the show’s shameless participants.

Outside, the world was rapidly descending into pandemic madness; inside, Pat and I were in sync, immersed in platonic harmony.

Pat was still sitting where I left her when I came into the dining room with my shoes in one hand and an empty coffee cup in the other. I put my shoes down and set the cup on the table. I pulled out one of the heavy chairs and asked, “So, what did you want to tell me?”

“Actually, it’s two things,” she replied from behind her laptop. “My school has opted to close the classrooms, and they want me to teach online from home until there’s a vaccine.”

I reached down and started putting on my shoes. “I’m not surprised. It seems like you’ve been working more from home than at school.”

“Yeah, but now it’s official.”

I felt certain Pat was going to ask me about going on a long ride this weekend. “What else did you want to tell me?” I pried.

“I met someone on Tinder, and I’d like to invite him over for dinner this weekend if it’s okay with you. There’s really nowhere else for us to get together. I know you already know this, but most restaurants are only offering takeout options, while the ones that still provide inside seating have too many weird COVID restrictions,” explained Pat before closing the lid of her laptop.

“What? Really? I have to admit; I didn’t see that coming,” I stammered. “Can you tell me a little bit about him? What’s his name? Have you already met him in person?”

Pat leaned forward and put her folded arms on the table in front of her, making her look both serious and invested in our conversation. “So, you won’t mind if he comes over? Aren’t you worried about getting the virus? If you are, I won’t bring him here.”

“C’mon, Pat. You know me better than that. I stopped believing anything the news media had to say about COVID-19 a long time ago. They’d report that 3,000 people died from the virus yesterday without mentioning that about 8,000 people die every single day in America from things like car accidents, heart attacks, cancer, old age, and the flu. I read that if someone drowned but was later found to be infected with the virus, they’d classify the victim as having died from COVID. Our government is only concerned with controlling the masses through fear-based propaganda. That’s why news reports always begin with the number of COVID-related deaths. And to maintain the desired level of mass hysteria, those numbers need to keep going up and up. So, yeah, I don’t mind if he comes over.”

“Gee, Chuck, why don’t you tell me how you really feel?” joked Pat. “I’ve known Brian for almost two weeks now and met him for the first time last weekend at his place. Since then, he brings me a coffee and a breakfast sandwich almost every morning—either that or a bouquet of flowers.”

Thinking I didn’t hear her correctly, I repeated, “He actually shows up at your school with food and flowers.”

“Yes, but he’s come here, too.”

Immediately, I sensed Pat’s new love interest might be one of those guys who bombards women with over-the-top attention way too soon after meeting them—an obvious smokescreen attempting to conceal insecurities or ulterior motives. Despite the unhealthy vibe I felt, I tried keeping an open mind while continuing to

ask more questions. “Why haven’t you mentioned him before? And how did I miss seeing or hearing him when he was over here?”

“You were still in bed,” she replied. “I haven’t told anyone about Brian, but he knows about you living here.”

“And...?”

“He wants to meet you,” said Pat, pushing her chair back and getting up from the table.

*Oh, I bet he does,* I thought. After looking at my watch, I stood up and pushed my chair under the table. If my instincts were correct—and they usually are—Brian most likely viewed my presence as a hindrance to whatever it was he had planned for an unattractive woman in her late 50s who would do just about anything for a chance at love.

“Sure, I’ll be around this weekend,” I said. “Right now, I’m going to ride over to Thomas’ shop and pick up some extra tubes and a patch kit.”

From the kitchen, I heard Pat say, “Okay, I’ll let Brian know.”

Like storm clouds, the 2020 pandemic had its own silver lining—at least for cyclists. Roads typically choked with cars and trucks were mostly empty, giving riders who could remember a chance to revisit and relive childhood memories when the world was much less frenetic. Instead of hiding behind tinted car windows, the people of Boise hid from each other in their homes. Vehicles lined either side of quiet neighborhood streets, occupied driveways, and filled lots in apartment complexes. Once again, the streets were mine. I could ride my bike in the middle of the pavement without worry, like I was nine years old again, when stingrays with banana seats, ape hangers, and sissy bars were cool. But on that

particular morning, I wasn't feeling the usual nostalgia. Even before I turned right out of the cul-de-sac onto Five Mile Road, I knew my days at Pat's place were numbered.

## Candy Crushed

From my bedroom, I heard the distinctive chime of my phone. *Ding!* I walked down the short hallway and into the office already knowing who the text was from. Pat had said she'd let me know when Brian arrived and that I should wait 15 to 20 minutes before coming downstairs to meet him. When I asked her why, her response was, "Brian isn't all that comfortable with you living here, so I want to ease him into the situation, okay?" *Okay? How can you expect me to give a flying you-know-what about the insecurities of a random dude you've only known for a few weeks? No! It's not okay!* But instead of telling Pat I didn't want to meet him or know anything about their budding relationship, I played the role of the supportive friend: "Sure. It's not a problem. I can do that."

Brian looked similar to what I had imagined. He was a little taller and heavier than me, but still appeared to be in decent shape for a guy who just turned 60. He wore what all mid-level managers seem to wear in Corporate America: a light-blue long-sleeve button-down shirt neatly tucked into a pair of tan khakis. His belt matched his shoes, and his hairstyle matched his outfit—a salt and pepper fade cut cropped close to the scalp. He was clean-shaven and—if I had to guess—probably smelled like Aqua Velva and Listerine. He had the right mannerisms, said the right things, and asked the right questions, yet I got the impression he was executing a performance for Pat's benefit, never venturing too far from her side. I could tell he wanted me to like him. He smiled with his mouth, but not with his eyes. He was quick-witted, self-deprecating, and eager to please, all of which probably helped him become a senior manager at Hewlett-Packard—and most likely the reasons why he didn't advance any further at the iconic company.

“Hi, Brian,” I said while extending my right hand. “I’m Chuck. It’s nice to meet you.”

Brian let go of Pat’s hand and got up from the couch. His handshake, though firm, was negated by a sweaty palm. “Nice to meet you as well, Chuck. I hear you’re an artist. What kind of art do you do?”

Normally, I’d jump at the chance to talk about my creative work, an increasingly rare pleasure in a society fractured by rampant phone addiction, but Brian seemed as interested in the arts as I was in watching Fox’s *The Masked Singer*. So instead of boring him with an explanation about how my current art project connects theories like gravity, entropy, and time with consciousness and enlightenment, I simply replied, “Graphic art.”

I’ve often thought about the nature of politeness between strangers. To me, it’s a universal set of actions and dialogue chosen by those who want to assess unfamiliar people without revealing anything about themselves. The exchange between Brian and I reminded me of a conversational French class I attended in my junior year of high school, where the script was both predictable and unsatisfying. “Bonjour, comment vas-tu?” said Monsieur Thibaut. “Je vais très bien!” replied Monsieur Laurent. Thankfully, Pat excused herself and went to the kitchen to check on their dinner, giving the two of us a welcomed opportunity to end the forced pleasantries and go our separate ways.

Over the next month, Pat and Brian spent more and more time together. They hiked, biked, and went on picnics. On weekends, they’d fill an ice chest, put it in Pat’s RV, and explore Idaho’s backcountry. If Brian wasn’t having dinner at the house with Pat, they’d be at his place, which meant there was a fifty-fifty chance I wouldn’t see my housemate until the next day. When I asked Pat about the overnights, predictably, she said, “Brian’s not comfortable staying over when you’re here.” And when I asked her if he was still delivering breakfast and

flowers, she shook her head and made excuses for him. But it wasn't until I came downstairs for coffee one morning that I knew things weren't going to end well for me or the happy couple. I found her curled up on her recliner, still wearing pajamas—like she'd been there for hours. She was playing a game of Candy Crush on her phone, tears streaming down her face. Sniffles mixed with the sound of casino floor slot machines made the scene appear even more pathetic and alarming.

“Hey, Pat. What's going on?” I asked. “Everything okay?”

“No. I hardly slept last night,” she replied, setting her phone down on her lap. “Brian and I had a fight. I don't know if I can see him anymore.”

I walked into the living room from the kitchen and sat down on the couch, trying my best to act like I didn't care whether or not they stayed together. Deep inside, buried beneath feigned empathy, I was secretly elated. “What happened?” I asked.

“He doesn't want me socializing with my teacher friends outside of school hours or continuing to bike with you.”

“Wow,” I said sarcastically. “Is that all?”

“No. He also wants you to move out,” added Pat, avoiding my eyes.

I leaned back on the couch, wishing this conversation wasn't happening, especially before my morning coffee. “I don't care what this guy wants or doesn't want, Pat. Like a lot of men, Brian is insecure, but instead of dealing with his insecurities in a healthy way, he's opting to go the other direction: he needs to control you. And his controlling nature won't stop after he's removed all the men from your life. It'll extend to things like your wardrobe, diet, weight, and hairstyle. Haven't you watched NBC's *Dateline* before? Who cares what this guy



wants? I'm only interested in knowing what *you* want. Do you want me to move out?"

"No, I don't," she answered, whimpering as she did so. "I told him we agreed to a 12-month lease and that you'll be moving out in seven months."

I couldn't believe what I just heard. Pat had already counted the months until I was moving out. I stood up from the couch, albeit a little too abruptly, and said, "Tell Brian you'll stop biking with me and that I'll move out at the end of August, two months early, okay? That ought to make him happy and smooth things over for a while. Right now, I need to make some coffee."

"Thank you for understanding, Chuck. I'll let him know when I see him tonight. It's all for the best, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," I lied. "I really do understand."

I went into the kitchen and grabbed my favorite coffee mug from the dishwasher. I slid it underneath the Keurig's dispenser and pushed the button to begin brewing the life-giving elixir. As the machine began heating up, I could hear the sounds of Candy Crush emanating from the other room.

## **Let Me Be Perfectly Clear**

The dynamic between Pat and me had changed drastically. Gone were the bike rides, shared meals, and walks to a favorite Vietnamese restaurant. I still kept up with *Survivor*, but I watched it alone, upstairs in my bedroom. What was once comfortable and relaxing had become heavy and burdensome. Now I sensed sharp edges in our exchanges. Civility, in the form of over-the-top courtesy and politeness—resurrected behaviors we previously said goodbye to a month after meeting years ago—softened those edges in the house and made it less obvious

that a deadly cancer was killing our friendship. Brian still came over to the house, but not as often. If I happened to run into him—usually in the kitchen or dining room—we'd both pretend that he wasn't a textbook sociopath disguised as a mild-mannered guy who was simply looking for love.

I was practically giddy as I zipped up my tattered but still-functional suitcase. I turned off all the upstairs lights and headed down the steps, taking two at a time. I had never been to Coeur d'Alene in northern Idaho before and figured 10 days of cycling would be more than enough to explore the mountain city and surrounding areas. Plus, it would give me a much-needed break from Pat's and Brian's doomed and off-putting relationship. Maybe I'd get lucky and she'd send Brian packing while I was away. It wouldn't save the friendship between Pat and me, but at least I could move out when I wanted to. Like most weekday mornings, Pat was sitting in the dining room behind her open laptop. I acknowledged her by forcing a smile and nodding my head before going into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee and pack a few snacks and drinks for the 8-hour drive. I couldn't even pop a coffee pod into the Keurig before hearing Pat whine from around the corner, "Chuck, can we talk?"

Her eyes were red and swollen, like she had been crying for hours. She was hugging her lower legs, her feet on the chair, her knees crushing her chest. If Pat were playing Candy Crush on her phone, it would've been a repeat performance from a month ago. I had to think quickly since I was about to spend an entire day in my truck. Pat's continuing drama was the last thing I needed to accompany me on the trip. "Is this about Brian?" I asked. "If it is, I really don't want to hear about it. Don't you have a girlfriend you can talk to? I'm about to drive up to Coeur d'Alene."

"He wants you to move out now," she blurted, pulling her legs even tighter against her, like she was trying to hide behind them.

“Are you serious right now? We already talked about this,” I huffed, not believing what I just heard. “I don’t have time for this, Pat. If you want to discuss throwing me out of the house, then you’re going to have to wait until I get back from my cycling trip—a trip your so-called boyfriend banned you from going on.”

Never having heard me speak harshly toward her, Pat unwrapped her arms from her legs and placed her feet on the floor. She closed her laptop and leaned forward on her chair. “I don’t want you to go. I just don’t know what to do. Do you think I should break up with him?”

“Can I be blunt? I mean, really blunt?” I asked. “I’ll understand if you say no, but if you say yes, you’re not going to like what I have to say. In fact, it’s going to make you feel awful about yourself.”

“I think I know what you’re going to say, but I need to hear it,” she said, looking as if she was bracing herself for 20 lashes across her back.

“I thought I knew you, Pat, but I don’t. You’re so desperate for attention that you’re willing to abide by and enable the insecurities of a grown man with boyhood problems. At this point, your head is so far up your backside you can’t even see the harm your low self-esteem is doing to yourself and me. Oh, and by the way, thanks for doing something I’d never do to you in a million years—put you in harm’s way by bringing a psychopath into the house. Thanks a lot, Pat!”

A fresh set of tears escaped Pat’s eyes. “I’m so sorry, Chuck.”

“Personally, I don’t think you have what it takes to walk away from a guy like that. Eventually, you will—when he’s finished with you—after he’s hollowed you out. Remember, Pat, your lack of self-worth made this mess for all of us. When I get back in a week and a half, I’ll start looking for a new place. Hopefully, I’ll

find someone who won't dump me in the trash as soon as I become an inconvenience. Later, Pat."

I didn't wait for a response, especially when I was talking over the sobs of a grown woman. "How ironic," I mumbled while climbing into my truck. "Pat had rescued me from a betrayal only to betray me herself."

## **How Could You Do This to Me?**

When I saw Brian standing in Pat's driveway, any thoughts of discussing what had transpired prior to leaving the house 10 days earlier quickly vaporized. He looked agitated when he saw my truck rolling up just before the sun dropped behind the Owyhee Mountains. Instinctually, I reached for my two-foot-long ice scraper should Brian succumb to his inner demons and attack his imagined adversary. Thankfully, I didn't see the problematic drama queen while I was unloading my bike gear. For the time being—until I went inside to put a few things away in the kitchen—I wouldn't feel his menacing presence or watchful eyes.

He was beginning to show signs of an impending meltdown. His practiced and polished mannerisms could no longer conceal what was behind the mask: a man so opposed to forgiving and accepting himself that he'd choose to fight the world instead. I had already eaten dinner on the road, so there wasn't a reason for me to hang around downstairs, stomaching forced small talk laced with mutual resentment. Again, I got lucky when I walked into the house. Pat and Brian were behind the closed door of her bedroom, giving me precious time to finish what I needed to do before retreating to the relative safety of my upstairs sanctuary.

Hours later, I switched off the TV, grateful for having watched a fascinating documentary about the Hubble Space Telescope. Not only did it give me an idea for a new art piece, but it also made me forget about the two selfish people

downstairs. When I was about to get into bed, I took one last look outside to see if Brian's car was still in the driveway. Surprisingly, it was. "Oh, no," I muttered. "He's staying the night? He never stays over." Once again, my instincts kicked in. I reached into one of the tubs I brought in from my truck and retrieved a weighted military-grade baton and a can of pepper spray. I couldn't shake the feeling that Brian was close to unhinging, and I needed to be ready if tonight was the night.

I tossed and turned in the dark, thinking about where I was going to move to and wondering if a showdown with Brian would happen sooner rather than later. The guy was far from rational, so it was hard to predict when he'd finally decide to take matters into his own hands. I woke up earlier than usual, eager to start looking for the equivalent of a halfway house to serve as a temporary layover between the asylum I was currently living in and a permanent address in the Boise area. His car was still in the driveway, but he'd most likely leave soon since both he and Pat had jobs to report to. With no sound emanating from downstairs, I figured I'd have enough time to make a cup of coffee, toast a bagel, and bring it back upstairs before the couple from hell made their way into the kitchen to resume making each other miserable.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw in the dining room as I descended the stairs wearing nothing but a robe. Brian was sitting at the head of the table, his back turned toward me. Pat had pulled a chair out from the middle of the table and positioned it so that she was facing Brian, her face lit up with dawn's early light. Her face was red and puffy, and she looked like she had been crying for hours. Both wore the same clothes I saw them in the day before. While Brian sat upright and stiff, Pat slumped back in her chair, staring at a stuffed animal on her lap. It was in the shape of a dog, and she wasn't just holding it; she was petting it, lost in thoughts only she could understand. Whereas my soon-to-be ex-friend's hands stroked an inanimate object for comfort, Brian's rested on top of the table—clenched into fists of fury. If they were holding a knife and fork, he'd look hungry for breakfast instead of a fight.

“When are you moving out?” he barked, never taking his eyes off Pat.

“What? No, ‘good morning?’” I joked, hoping levity would calm the uncomfortable situation.

When Brian repeated his question in an even more authoritative voice, I was less inclined to humor him. “Ask my landlord,” I deadpanned while adding water to my Keurig’s horseshoe-shaped reservoir.

Brian’s mood went from brooding control freak to antagonizing bully. “I’m your landlord now. We got engaged last night.”

“Congratulations,” I lied, adding a yawn to make sure they knew I couldn’t care less. “I guess you need to read up on Idaho’s landlord and tenant rights. It sounds like Pat didn’t tell you I was a property manager in Boise for the past four years.”

Brian pushed his chair back, making a high-pitched screech nobody wants to hear early in the morning. “Tell him to move out!” he yelled, leaning toward Pat, who continued to pet her stuffed animal, looking as if she wanted to run away with it. “You need to choose between me and him!” he continued, pushing his chair back further and standing up.

I replaced the Keurig’s reservoir, waiting to hear what Pat would say to Brian’s childish ultimatum. Not only did she not have an answer, she also didn’t have an engagement ring on her finger. “Brian, I think it’s best if you leave and cool down,” I said. “This is heading in a direction that we’re all going to regret.”

In two big strides, Brian put himself directly in front of me, intensifying an already bizarre scene. “Is that so?” he sneered while gesturing like he was about to strike me—making me flinch and step back.

Oddly, I felt calm. Brian had overplayed his hand. Now I had him. While tightening the belt of my robe, I said, “I’m going upstairs to change. Then I’m going to come back down to finish making my coffee. If you still want to attack me in my own home unprovoked, be assured that I will involve the police and lawyers. I know where you live, where you work, and the legal problems you’ve had in the past. It’s your choice.”

I stepped past Brian, his posture still on the cusp of starting World War III, and into the dining room, where Pat showed every sign of someone who not only couldn’t deal with reality but who also looked ready for men in white coats to come take her away to a place called Shady Acres Mental Institution. Surprisingly, she met my gaze. Could she tell what my eyes were saying—that I was asking, “How could you do this to me?” She must have because her eyes quickly left mine, dropping down to her lap, where her hands never stopped stroking her stuffed animal.

### **Alone Again, Naturally**

While changing into clothes I wouldn’t miss if torn or bloodied, I could hear distinctive noises coming from downstairs: heavy chairs sliding across the dining room’s wood floor, a kitchen cabinet slammed shut, a utensil thrown into the sink, and the sound of the front door opening and closing. From my bedroom window, I watched Brian throw his jacket and a small canvas bag into the backseat of his car. He hopped inside and closed the door with a swift yank. I held my breath as he rocketed out of the driveway, his car nearly hitting the pad-mounted transformer on the sidewalk, which would’ve left the cul-de-sac neighborhood without power for much of the upcoming July Fourth weekend. I finished dressing feeling relieved that the immediate crisis had driven away, but the source of the insanity was still downstairs, no doubt whimpering in some corner.

Somewhere between the top of the staircase and halfway down, I came up with a plan that would put this toxic drama behind me once and for all. I found Pat in her recliner, her feet tucked underneath her, her stuffed animal on the floor. Having grown weary of seeing her weepy face, I was glad she didn't look at me when I came into the living room. I took two deep breaths to get my adrenaline under control and approached her.

“Okay, Pat. This is how it's going to go,” I began. “Over the next three days, I will pack up all my belongings and store them upstairs. On Tuesday, I will drive back up to Coeur d'Alene to find a place to move to. It could take me a few weeks, but I will be back with movers no later than the end of the month. However, if your psycho boyfriend comes over here—anywhere on the property while I'm packing—I will call the police as soon as I see him. When they arrive, I'll tell them what happened this morning before they ask him to leave the premises. That way, I'll have a documented record detailing his stalking and menacing nature and how you allow it. It'll come in handy if I need to take legal action against the both of you.”

Miraculously, as if she suddenly came out of a month-long catatonic state, Pat said, quite lucidly, “But, Chuck. I can't control what he does. Brian is the type of person who—”

“We're done, Pat,” I interrupted. “End of discussion. Oh, and by the way, don't expect a July rent check.”

It wasn't long before I heard the rumblings of the garage door, causing me to drop a pile of folded t-shirts on my bed. Outside, I saw Pat backing out of the driveway—not as wildly as Brian, but still with urgency. Was she going to warn him? Or egg him on? It didn't matter to me. Nine months ago, I was a successful property manager awaiting a promotion. Three months ago, I was cohabitating with a cycling friend who enjoyed watching *Survivor* with me and who'd laugh at



all my jokes. Now I was packing to move to a city I had been to only once before, where I had no friends, family, or history. Somehow, instead of feeling sad and lonely at the idea of living among strangers eight hours north of Boise, I felt oddly comforted by the thought. Before all this happened, I would've dreaded becoming the next invisible man shuffling around Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, swept aside and deemed irrelevant. Now, I wouldn't have it any other way in a mad, mad world.

The End