

***Must Love  
Dogs***



***A Tragedy of Sorts***

**Chuck Trunks**

Must Love Dogs

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Nampa, Idaho

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Have you noticed the undeniable surge in the number of people owning dogs?

After conducting over ten years of field research for this book, amassing 30,000 bike miles and 10,000-foot miles while doing so, and interviewing hundreds of dog-owning people who trusted me with their personal stories, I developed a theory that attempts to answer the question, “How did America become so obsessed with dogs?”

The often funny, sometimes frightening, and always entertaining observational and experiential stories in the first two parts of the book stem from real events. *Must Love Dogs: A Tragedy of Sorts* offers a rationale that explains why it’s remarkably easy for dog owners to exclaim, “Must Love Dogs!”

I feel a tremendous amount of gratitude and appreciation toward those dog owners who allowed me into their homes, lives, and hearts, making me aware of what it truly costs to live a dog-centric life. Although I spent ten years doing field research for this book, amassing 30,000 bike-miles and 10,000 foot-miles in doing so, and taking six months to write the manuscript, this effort would not have been possible without the hundreds of dog-owning ladies who trusted me with their personal stories. To you, I say, “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

*“This work was written independently by the author without the use of generative AI.”*

—Chuck Trunks

# CONTENTS

	Preface	1
	Introduction	5
<b>Part I</b>	Observational Stories	9
<b>Chapter 1</b>	Strollers and TV Ads	11
<b>Chapter 2</b>	Apartment Life	25
<b>Chapter 3</b>	Maui	46
<b>Chapter 4</b>	Scary Breeds	55
<b>Chapter 5</b>	Social Media	82
<b>Part II</b>	Experiential Stories	92
<b>Chapter 6</b>	Finding Love Again	94
<b>Chapter 7</b>	Barbara and Carrie	116
<b>Chapter 8</b>	Martha and Debbie	126
<b>Chapter 9</b>	Sorry, Not Sorry	148
<b>Part III</b>	Conclusion	158
<b>Chapter 10</b>	External Messaging	161
<b>Chapter 11</b>	Internal Messaging	176
<b>Chapter 12</b>	A Road Less Traveled	192
<b>Chapter 13</b>	Final Thoughts	198

## Preface

This is probably the most important preface I've ever had to write since this book dares to tread upon the sacred ground that's been reserved for unquestionable institutions like God, country, Mom, and apple pie. *Must Love Dogs* ventures into and questions the world of dog owners and their relationship with man's so-called 'best friend.' But before I'm stamped as the Lucifer incarnate and burned at the stake for even suggesting that there can be a less than idyllic viewpoint, please hear me out in these opening words.

I've pitched this book idea for years now, and I've been encouraged to go forward with it from both non-dog owners and actual dog owners who credit my data collection methods, the validity of my data sets, and my commitment to keeping a scientific mindset as the reasons why my book won't be construed as blasphemous, unpatriotic, or offensive. As a lifelong observer, I'm literally compelled to tell someone – anyone – about a discovered pattern that tells me a little bit more about the world I'm living in. Instead of pointing at something and saying, "Can you *believe* that?" Or, "What's up with *that*?" I'd rather be asking, "*Why* am I seeing that?"

or better yet, “Why am I seeing that *over* and *over*?”

Although I’m not a licensed psychologist or sociologist, I do have a natural interest in understanding what makes people behave the way they do and how our societal construct can influence those behaviors. This tendency served me well early in life by helping me navigate the unpleasanties I’d encounter in school, on practice fields, and at home. As an adult with a collegiate education in biology, it helped reinvent my career in the biotech industry, allowing me to trade in my white lab coat for a seat at the conference room table as a business analyst. Thirteen of those nineteen years were spent analyzing processes; but in reality, I was analyzing the people who performed them.

When my corporate career ended unceremoniously due to a company-wide layoff in 2007, I was in a position to say goodbye to the nine-to-five grind and adios to wearing long pants. Reinvention took place yet again; and soon, I found myself working as a freelance artist and writer. Within months, I watched my biking, running, hiking, and walking mileage climb to heights not seen since my marathon and triathlon days. It was clear that newfound freedom and

flexibility ruled the day.

The data that's cited in this book can be divided into two distinct sets. I call the first data set, 'observational,' and it was collected over a ten-year period, beginning around 2012. During this timeframe, an untethered lifestyle allowed me to freely observe dog owners and their dogs in five different cities, across four states. As a person who enjoys being outside and moving, I covered approximately 30,000 bike-miles and 10,000 foot-miles while collecting the observational data from bike paths, hiking trails, city parks, neighborhoods, and downtown areas.

The second data set was collected over the last seven years and involved experiencing dog owners with their dogs. As a single guy relegated to finding relationships on dating apps, most of the data in this category came from women who I met online. Since I don't date men, I can only speculate that there are similarities between male and female dog owners; however, this book will suggest a distinctive difference between the two.

And finally, there's always an inherent risk to be taken by any author who chooses to walk, uninvited, into the spotlight to

assert their thoughts and feelings about *any* subject, let alone those that come with cute faces, wagging tails and funny personalities. I didn't write *Must Love Dogs* to merely poke at the relationships that dog owners have with their canines. I wrote it to offer one man's perspective that attempts to answer the question, "How did America become so obsessed with dogs?"

# Introduction

*Must Love Dogs* will explore the relationship between dog owners and their dogs using quantitative and qualitative data collected through observation and experience over a ten-year time span. To make it easier for the reader to come along with me on this fascinating study, I've divided the book into three parts – one part for each data collection method mentioned above, plus a conclusion. In the first two parts, I will be sharing true stories that best represent the data collected from each method. And, in the conclusion of *Must Love Dogs*, I plan to offer a sobering explanation as to why owning a dog has gone from being a subculture faction to a mainstream staple, joining the laudable ranks of getting married, having kids, and buying a house.

Since no study is without bias, I'd be remiss if I didn't address aspects of my life where preconceptions may have played a role in my analysis. As a kid growing up in suburban Philadelphia, I don't remember seeing many dogs around my neighborhood, just occasional barking from the big back yards of stately, old homes situated underneath the canopies of mature deciduous trees. Some of that barking emanated from

my family's house because my father would come home and surprise us kids with the occasional stray dog. For the most part, these dogs stayed out in the fenced-in yard of our corner lot, sleeping in the attached mud room no matter the season. I don't recall seeing the dogs in the house, taking the dogs for walks, or playing with them very much. To me, they were just dogs; plus, I was pretty busy with schoolwork, yardwork, chores, and sports.

When I was about eleven, one of these adopted stray dogs bit my hand, requiring a trip to the family doctor for bandaging and a tetanus shot. Although I agreed that I had inadvertently provoked the dog by using its favorite blanket to play tug-of-war with it, I concluded that I wasn't nearly as good at predicting dog behavior as I was at predicting the behavior of people. As I write this introduction, I have been chased and scared out of my mind countless times by dogs. I've been bitten no less than a dozen times, with about half of the assaults coming from leashed dogs while I was walking, running, or biking. The last attack occurred in 2018 while I was pushing a large 'For Rent' sign into the front lawn of an apartment building in Boise, Idaho. The leashed dog bit my calf from behind, and as I hopped around on one leg, I watched

the owner attempt to keep on walking with her dog as if nothing had happened.

None of the dozen or so dog bites required stitches – only cleaning, bandaging, and shots. I'll admit that there's a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) element in the works here, but I maintain a healthy rationale that dogs are only doing what their primal instincts tell them to do. And I also believe that anyone with the same amount of dog exposure-hours as me would have a similar track record of frightening moments, attacks, and bites.

Whereas television and other news outlets routinely broadcast stories that involve extreme situations for ratings, I made a conscious effort not to do that, opting instead to using only collected data that could be plotted underneath the wide middle area of the statistical bell curve where one would find the more frequent and common types of owner-dog relationships. Some of the stories in *Must Love Dogs* may be shocking, as if the situations are extreme, but I can assure the reader that they are just one of many, many similar occurrences.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that this book is about the *relationships* between dog owners and their dogs. Some people may recognize their encounter with me, but it is not my intent to shame, discredit, or pass judgment on anyone mentioned in *Must Love Dogs*. That's why all the names, including the names of their dogs, have been changed. My goal is to entertain and intrigue the reader while they're being made aware of an incredible phenomenon that's done nothing but become more and more pronounced over the years. I simply *had* to write about it.

## Part I: Observational Stories

I think it's important to point out that the criteria used to select the following observational stories were based on two things: frequency of similar occurrences and entertainment value. Serving up extreme, one-off instances that seek to shock the reader is not the intention of this book; plus, it would violate my agreement if I presented data that appears more like the *exception* than the *rule*. Edification may be the primary goal of *Must Love Dogs*, but entertainment value is what keeps the pages turning in *any* book. That's why I'll be offering my opinion on what I'm observing in these stories despite not knowing anything about the dog owners or their dogs.

The reader may ask, "How can the author think that way?" or "Why is the author assuming only the worst in these people?" If these questions were posed to me directly, I'd answer them by saying, "I realize that there may be perfectly rational explanations for what I'm seeing and hearing, but where's the fun in writing about that?" As a longtime writer, my voice would be unrecognizable to people who know me if it didn't have that playful callousness, that sarcastic edginess. It's who I am as a person.

The expressed opinions are simply momentary impressions that let the reader know a little bit more about how I think on the fly. The conclusion of this book is also an opinion; however, it is not based on momentary impressions. It's a well-thought-out theory that takes into account the external and internal pressures that make it remarkably easy for dog owners to exclaim, "Must Love Dogs!"

## **Chapter 1: Strollers and TV Ads**

### **Stroller Guy**

It was just your typical afternoon in late September where the leaves were falling even though the mercury level sat above ninety degrees. As my bike careened through the neighborhood known as River Run in Southeast Boise, Idaho, I took notice of the older custom homes that were mostly hidden behind tall trees and landscaping designed for even more privacy. Riding through this exclusive neighborhood was almost a daily occurrence since it was the safest way to reach the bike path that ran alongside the Boise River. Despite the lack of designated bike lanes and intermittent sidewalks, River Run had its fair share of cyclists, runners, and walkers, most of them making their way to and from the river. Many of the walkers were with their dogs, but one walker caught my attention. “There he is again,” I mumbled to myself.

I had been noticing a steady increase in the number of instances where people were pushing their dogs in baby strollers starting around 2014, with sightings doubling each year. More often than not, the strollers would be pushed by

women whose ages were typically north of fifty, the rare instances being men and couples. What struck me about the man pushing the baby stroller containing two small dogs on the sidewalk in front of me was that he looked to be around my age. By all accounts, he seemed healthy, dressed appropriately, lucid, and aware of his surroundings, making me even more curious about ‘Stroller Guy.’ I would see him every so often; and each time I did, I’d wonder why he thought it was okay to be seen pushing two little dogs around in a baby stroller. *Why wouldn’t he sneak out in the evenings, under the shroud of darkness to push his dogs around?* I asked myself. *Or, better yet, wear a disguise?* I chalked it up to a copycat mentality where if one sees it enough, it *must* be okay – sort of like the ubiquitous Croc wearers of the mid-2000s.

As I was confirming the presence of Stroller Guy’s two dogs that looked to be the duplicate and triplicate of Dorothy’s Toto, a fantasy suddenly came to mind. In it, I pretend to be an angel sent by God to deliver a much-needed message to him:

“Hi there. How’s it going? Hot enough for you?” I say while slowing down to a speed that matches his.

Stroller Guy nervously glances at me once or twice before cautiously asking, “Do I know you?”

“Sort of. Can I talk to you for a sec? I promise it’ll be quick.”

After giving me and my bike a suspicious once over, he reluctantly gestures to a shady spot up ahead where a few cottonwood trees stand between a small duck pond and the roadway.

I continue to ride next to him until I need to dismount my bike and push it up over the curb. Once in the shade, I turn toward him and say, “My name is Chuck. What’s yours?”

“Brad.”

“Well, Brad, you’re not going to believe this, but I’m actually an angel from Heaven sent by God to deliver an important message to you.”

“What the . . .?”

“Relax, Brad. I’m disguised as a bike rider who’s dressed like

he's on his way to go play pickup basketball so I'll blend in. It would look pretty weird if I was talking to you while glowing and levitating off the ground with a six-foot wingspan, right? Sort of blows the whole incognito thing."

"Umm . . . I guess."

"What are you? Like 52, now?"

"Yes. How'd you know that?" asks Brad while looking around to see if anyone is watching us.

"Umm . . . you DO remember who my boss is, right?" I tell him while secretly wondering how I'm not employed as a successful age guesser in a traveling carnival act.

"Oh, right," he mumbles.

"What are we doing here, Brad?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean why is a 52-year-old man pushing two little dogs

around in a baby stroller, Brad? Is this what it's come to? Organizing your days and nights around these dogs? What was so catastrophic in your life that made you settle for this? My boss gave you a nurturing and compassionate personality so you can do THIS with it?"

"Yeah, but these are my wife's dogs."

"Okay. Here's what we're going to do, Brad. You're going to push these dogs back to your house while thinking you're never going to push this stroller ever again. Then, you're going to donate the baby stroller to the Idaho Youth Ranch so an *actual* baby can use it. Then, you're going to give these dogs to your wife's sister so you and Mrs. Brad can get reacquainted and figure out how to enjoy life again. If causes are your thing, there's a whole world of people who could use your help like veterans, the elderly, struggling families, and forgotten children. What do you say? Don't you think it's time to refocus your misplaced passion on the people who would benefit from it the most?"

"Man, I could go to the gym again. Maybe go away for the weekend without having to figure out what to do with these

dogs. Ride a bike like you!”

“There you go, buddy! Oh, and Brad?”

“Yeah?”

“When you get back home, check your wallet. That’s right. You got your ‘man card’ back.”

And while savoring the last remnants of the fantasy, I noticed that the entrance to the greenway was coming up on my right. I made the turn, bracing myself for the big jolt that I always felt since the ramp wasn’t level with the street. Soon, I was sneaking peeks at the flowing river when the trees would allow it. Up ahead, I could see a couple of people walking their dogs – one walking toward me and the other walking in my direction. I readied my thumb against the bell that I attached to my bike’s handlebars years earlier, and sighed, “It never ends.”

## **A Word from Our Sponsors**

“Well, there you have it,” I said to no one in particular while

sitting on a kitchen stool in front of a 13-inch black and white TV. Back then, walking in the back door after school and finding a little TV on the counter next to the refrigerator was as life changing as dis-covering someone had replaced the kitchen phone's curly short cord with a super long one. I could watch TV in relative warmth in the winter *and* have a quasi-private phone conversation when I wanted if I was willing to stretch the phone cord into the next room. "Hartz has done the unthinkable," I continued sarcastically. You would've thought the company had reinvented nuclear fusion from the way their commercial ad was touting that its popular flea collar could now protect dogs from fleas AND ticks. *That's right folks. It's the Hartz two-in-one flea and tick collar!* Remember *that* scientific advancement?

Fast forward over forty years from the late '70s and I find myself still watching dog-centric TV commercials, but it's a small price to pay to watch the magic that *is* the morning show, *TODAY with Hoda & Jenna*. Yet instead of seeing products focused on itch relief, I'm watching dogs run in slow motion on sunlit beaches and grassy meadows while voiceovers tell me about supplements that will do things like prevent your dog from vomiting due to motion sickness while a vet-approved

device allows owners to measure the blood sugar levels of their diabetic pets. Still, another commercial ad lauds an FDA approved treatment for dogs that suffer from a serious condition called noise aversion. I think my jaw dropped when I heard the voiceover guy say, “It’s prescribed by your veterinarian to keep your dog calm when he or she hears scary noises.” *Umm . . . am I crazy thinking I’d want a dog to let me know if someone or something is lurking outside instead of it being spaced-out on its dog bed? Kind of one of the main reasons for having a dog in the first place, right?*

Not too long ago, in early 2021, I was mesmerized by a couple of TV commercials that featured owners talking about the noticeable changes in their dogs after only a few weeks of feeding them a new kind of dog food. In one ad, a man around thirty-five years of age could be seen giggling and rolling around on the living room floor while embracing his dog as his voiceover ex-claims, “She’s just more playful, now.” And if that wasn’t shocking enough, the other ad shows a thirty-year-old man sitting in his kitchen and looking both relieved and satisfied while telling the viewing audience that he’s *finally* seeing more “quality poops” from his dog. I don’t want to sound overly dramatic, but I’m pretty sure I actually did spit

my coffee out after hearing that. The first thing that popped in my mind was probably the same thing that popped into the minds of most people across this great land of ours: *How would he know the difference?* As a man who's possibly even more visually driven than the average male mindset, I had trouble *not* imagining the guy from the commercial crouching down to inspect his pet's latest gift to the world. *Does he use a nearby twig to sift through the still-warm pile or does he massage the bagged waste with his hand, feeling for those concerning and pesky poop imperfections?*

## **Back After These Important Messages**

And speaking of dog food, things have changed mightily since I was earning fifteen dollars or so to feed my neighbor's dogs while they vacationed for a week or two on the New Jersey shore, usually any-where between Atlantic City and Cape May. I had quite the little empire back then, starting with the launch of a massively successful pick-up-stick business. At twelve years of age, I figured out how to sell the fallen twigs and branches from one neighbor's yard to *their* next-door neighbors as kindling for fireplaces and woodburning stoves. After watching my father curse and gripe over having to

sharpen the blades of his lawnmower, I remember taking a big chance of becoming the object of his frustration by asking him, “Why do you have to do that?”

“Go pick up all the sticks in the yard. Bundle them up with the twine and put ’em next to the woodpile,” he barked without looking away from the tipped over lawnmower.

*Hmm . . . that must mean that when the mower chops up the sticks, it dulls the blade,* I thought to myself while doing what he said without pressing my luck by seeking further confirmation of my deductive rationale.

The success of my pick-up-stick business soon led to odd jobs throughout the neighborhood that involved weeding flower beds, raking leaves, shoveling snow as well as collecting mail and feeding dogs when the homeowners were away. I can still remember filling dog bowls with dry food from hard-to-manuever fifty-pound sacks, and then topping them off with a spoonful or two of horrible smelling canned wet food for “taste.” I could easily see today’s dogs turning up their wet noses at such uncultured slop when there are dozens of companies that will deliver fresh, human-grade dog food

based on personalized meal plans for them. I even saw one TV ad that shamed the viewer by saying, “Doesn’t your dog’s food deserve to be in the refrigerator next to yours?” while showing a smiling dog owner placing their pet’s individually packaged meals next to a stack of what looks to be the meals of the owner. *Interesting . . . I’m sure they’re both watching the nightly news while they eat dinner together, but the question remains: Whose meal does the owner microwave first?*

I don’t think anyone would argue that what began as a cottage industry many decades ago has become a full-fledged sector of the American economy. Pet products and services went from a single aisle in Kmart to enormous corporations like Petco and PetSmart. In 2021, after seeing a particularly disturbing PetSmart commercial that had people singing, “I’d do anything for you,” to their pets in the weirdest way possible, I went online and learned more about the eight-billion-dollars-per-year company. In 2005, the company changed its name from PETsMART to PetSmart and refocused its branding on “pet parents,” who consider their pets part of their families. Besides selling the usual pet products and in-store services you’d expect, PetSmart also

provides things you wouldn't expect – things like boarding for dogs and cats in temperature-controlled rooms and suites, dental care, doggie day camps, adoption services, clothing, and shoes. . . SHOES! *My God . . . if reincarnation is real, I need to come back as a dog and be able to slide down a wormhole straight into America, 2021. No, wait. Better make it 2022. By then, there might be in-store doggie massages at PetSmart!*

As I stated in the opening of this book, I tend to be the kind of person who often asks, “Why?” Admittedly, I still do my fair share of pointing and gawking at things that seem odd to me, but that gets exceedingly boring to intellectual types who need to go beyond just shaking their heads and chalking it up to the pedestrian conclusion that decrees, “People are just flat out crazy.” So, when I see an inordinate number of dogs in TV commercials, I simply have to wonder what's being said around conference room tables in the sales and marketing departments of companies across America.

If I was participating in one of those commercial pitch meetings, I'd most likely be fired on the spot for even suggesting that we do away with using commercial actors who

look good enough to be soap opera stars, opting instead for people who actually look like they'd be scrubbing baked-on crud from that evening's feast of lasagna. And while we're at it, let's trash the incessant smiling, impossible scenarios, and utopian settings that are more befitting for the bubble of Jim Carrey's *The Truman Show* than what you'd find in real, everyday life.

It's no surprise to anyone that everything you see and hear in a TV commercial is designed to move that product or service into your life as soon as possible. Beautiful people, beautiful smiles, beautiful settings . . . all of it looking to capitalize on our need to feel hopeful and better about ourselves. So why not slide in a dog or two to complete the trifecta of Mom and apple pie regardless if the commercial is promoting products and services for dogs. At this point, I'm expecting ads to start saying, "We prayed about it, and God told us She approves our product!"

The real head-scratcher for me is when companies and organizations choose to have a dog "speak" for them instead of an actual spokesperson – or have a dog as their mascot when their business has nothing to do with animals. But after many

years of hearing, “I trust dogs more than I do people,” I totally get why there’s a McGruff the Crime Dog, Duke of Bush’s Beans, Spuds Mackenzie of Bud Light, and even that little Chihuahua from the Taco Bell ads. *Well played marketers . . . well played.*

## **Chapter 2: Apartment Life**

### **Room With a View**

“Is this a pet-friendly building?” wasn’t a question I had thought to ask when I moved from Los Angeles to Boise, Idaho in the summer of 2015. After all, I didn’t see any dogs around the complex I was leaving; nor did I ever think that people could live like that in such cramped spaces. And, as I expected, there were no dogs to be seen at my new apartment in the city that the locals referred to as ‘The City of Trees’ – but that was going to change the following year.

There were many reasons why my one-bedroom apartment on the top floor of a brand-new building was so awesome. From my bedroom, which doubled as an art and writing studio, I had an unobstructed view of Albertson’s Stadium, home to the Boise State Broncos. One trip into the stadium, and you’d understand why I had a \$65 blue-and-orange sweatshirt hanging on the door that led to the bathroom. The iconic blue turf, as unique as that was, paled in comparison to the collective allegiance of a fan base that other Mountain West Conference schools could only fantasize about. When I didn’t

stroll across Park Boulevard to attend the game, I'd slide open the door to my balcony to listen to the crowd noise because that's all the data I needed to know if the Broncos were winning.

If I walked in the opposite direction of the stadium from my apartment building, I'd reach a Whole Foods in ten minutes, a Trader Joe's in fifteen, and downtown Boise in about twenty-five. Since the newly completed structure I was living in was so close to the Boise River, I only needed to cross Front Street to reach the greenbelt in Municipal Park, a gorgeous plot of earth where sunlight somehow managed to find its way to the ground despite there being a battalion of tall, leafy trees that said otherwise. It was from that park where I launched my bike, almost daily, to explore my new home and, eventually, most of Idaho.

Once my mind had recovered from sensory overload that came from having moved from one biosphere to another, it happily resumed its day job of observing people and looking for patterns. After months of walking and riding throughout the city, I realized that the surge of dog ownership that I had witnessed over the last three years was not unique to the

Angelinos of Southern California. Boise was either full of LA transplants or the capital city was experiencing the same phenomenon. The early numbers were pretty much the same – twenty to forty percent of individuals and groups were accompanied by dogs, the higher percentage going to those who walked alone.

After seeing those percentages increase for over a year, I also began noticing a few dogs around my apartment building. Since I occasionally played tennis with the property manager, I felt comfortable saying, “Hey, I thought pets weren’t allowed in the building,” while we exchanged baseline shots on one of the courts at nearby Ivywild Park.

“We don’t,” replied Kolby. “But, if it’s a service dog or an emotional support animal, we have to.”

“Got it. But I haven’t seen one blind person or Paris Hilton since I’ve been there, dude. Sounds pretty arbitrary,” I said just as I hit the last of our fresh tennis balls into the net.

Even though all three balls were on my side, Kolby walked forward, and from his side of the net sighed, “It’s complicated

because both situations are presented as handicaps. Basically, we *have* to let them in if they qualify.”

“But it’s a brand-new building. Nice touches, too.”

“I know. The owner hates it, but what can you do? You want to serve first?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

In the spring of 2017, it wasn’t the dogs that made me want to move out of the building, it was the ever-increasing presence of the 20-something-year-old millennial hipsters and their girlfriends. A man in his early fifties can only take so many elevator rides with young men sporting nearly the exact same look of long beards, short hair, dress shirts tucked into skinny jeans with pant legs rolled up to show off patterned socks and urban boots. And they came with the same accessories, too – leather shoulder bags worn so the strap crossed their chests, and girlfriends with visible tattoos to complete “the look.” But every now and then, I’d see either the hipster or the girlfriend clutching a small dog as they stepped off the elevator, making me huff under my breath, “Emotional support animal? Yeah,

right.” *That’s it. I’m out.*

## **No Pets Allowed**

The new apartment building was literally ten times smaller than the one I had just moved from and three miles farther away from downtown Boise – or “Bo Do” as the hipsters would say. It was situated in a nifty little neighborhood that included a French café, a craft beer joint, a bike shop, a candy store that sold gelato, and a handful of restaurants that were listed on the Yelp app with a couple or a trio of dollar signs next to their names. The whole area was pretty upscale and that included the people who leased the one, two, or three-bedroom apartments in the brand-new two-story walk-up. This time, I had inquired about the pet policy and was relieved to see it reflected in the lease agreement in capital letters, “NO PETS ALLOWED.”

Within a few months of living there, I felt my inner twelve-year-old kick into gear because I saw another business opportunity unfold before my eyes. The owner of the new building, Mark, was having a hard time keeping up with things; so, I sent him an email with a simple proposal and an

invitation to discuss it at the nearby French café.

“Thanks for agreeing to see me, Mark. So, what do you think about me being your property manager?”

“No problem. I like the idea, Chuck. Have you’ve done this kind of thing before?” he asked.

I hated to lie, but *how hard could it be?* I thought to myself before replying, “Yes, but it’s been a long time. I’m good at developing strong customer relationships.”

“I can see that in you, too. Okay, let’s give it a try.”

And just like that, I was in. We shook hands over empty coffee cups to end the meeting, and to signify the start of a potentially rewarding business relationship. Mark headed toward his car while I walked the short distance back to his apartment building. I was still smiling when I slid the key into the door of my new place. I wasn’t just thinking about the new job, I was thinking about my old pick-up-stick business, too.

I quickly found out that I had a knack for property

management because success was insured by having two things: a crystal-clear rental agreement and empathy for others. Things hummed along during that first year because leases were being renewed left and right. But when availability started being advertised, I soon found out, firsthand, what my former apartment manager, Kolby, was cautioning me about on the tennis court two years earlier. Even though the ads prominently stated, “NO PETS ALLOWED,” I was getting numerous calls and texts asking for exceptions, some going as far as bringing their pets to the appointment so they could show me how well-behaved they were. For the most part, I was able to thwart the insistence of these dog owners by recommending nearby pet-friendly properties and reminding them that there were people living in the building who moved in *because* there was a ‘no pets’ policy. I’d say, “What about the agreement we made with the current residents? That wouldn’t be fair to *them*, right?”

Surprisingly, as I stoically defended the building’s no-pet policy by waving the plain-English lease agreement, I began noticing that a couple of residents were sneaking in their girlfriends’ little dogs. Since an aspect of my personality oscillates between being voyeuristic and nosy like the Mrs.

Kravitz character from the old TV show, *Bewitched*, it wasn't difficult to see the squirming dogs under coats from my balcony or bedroom window. After telling my tennis buddy, Harry, about the situations, he suggested that I confront them and let them know that they're breaking the lease agreement.

“Are you nuts?” I replied. “That’s like telling a parent their kid needs to go. Remember, dude, these are ‘dog daddies’ and ‘fur-baby mommies.’ I don’t need that war.”

“So, you’re not going to warn them?”

“Hell no. I’ll deal with it when they move out. Ready for another set?”

“Sure. It’s your serve.”

Their heated texts chimed in on my phone just as I had predicted they would since I knew Carl and Robert weren't going to be too happy with what remained of their security deposits. Both had moved out and were waiting on mailed checks. I dreaded the confrontations because I didn't need any more enemies. After all, I'd most likely see these two around

town at some point, and Carl looked like he played defensive end for Boise State. Whereas Robert was okay with a phone call, Carl needed to come ‘see me.’ *Here we go . . .*

Not surprisingly, Carl let out a sigh of resignation just like Robert did over the phone when I mentioned that I saw them taking dogs into their respective apartments, but in Robert’s case, he added a barely audible, “Jesus,” at the end of his after I told him that I found twenty poop bags on the other side of his patio wall. *Nice . . .* To put things into perspective, I told them that the costs could’ve been much worse. Instead of being charged for a complete carpet replacement, they only had to pay for a partial replacement, plus deep cleaning and sanitization fees for the entire apartment. By the time they were reporting back to their girlfriends, I was hoping they were bragging about how they haggled a sixty percent discount out of me.

It didn’t take long to find myself reading letters from therapists and physicians addressed to, “Whom It May Concern.” They usually came attached to rental applications and outlined the critical role that ‘Rufus’ played as an emotional support animal for its owner. And when the attachments looked more

official, I knew they were documents pertaining to designated service animals. *I think it's time I talk to the property owner about this . . .*

“Hey, Chuck. Good to see you.”

“You, too. Thanks for making the time,” I said. “I love this café. Perfect morning to sit out on the patio.”

I watched Mark wrap both hands around the steaming coffee mug to stave off the morning chill before asking, “Any thoughts on the email I sent?”

As usual, Mark wanted to hear my opinion first. *Maybe that's one of the reasons why he's so successful*, I thought. “I think it's an uphill battle with a low-winning percentage,” I continued.

“Okay. Go on.”

“It's only a matter of time before someone makes it a legal issue because service and emotional support animals are supported by the Fair Housing Act. If you go to court, I believe

the only way you can win is to prove that the owner only saw the therapist or doctor *just* to get the necessary paperwork to bypass pet restrictions.”

“What would you do, Chuck?”

“I’d make peace with the tsunami of dogs, charge a pet rent and ask for a non-refundable pet security deposit.”

“Hmm . . . interesting. Do you think fifty dollars per pet is too high? Three hundred for the deposit?”

After pretending to spit my coffee out, I told Mark, “I’d double that. It’s a beautiful building; plus, I know they’ll pay it.”

“You’re kidding! Dog owners will pay that much?”

“No, Mark. Dog owners won’t pay that, but ‘doggie daddies’ and ‘fur-baby mommies’ will.”

It helped being an on-site property manager because over the next six months, I was able to monitor the dog owners and their dogs with consistency. The few complaints that I

received were dealt with swiftly and in a way that satisfied all parties – including me. When my role as property manager came to a close in late 2019, I would soon learn that my ability to arbitrate pet annoyances with reason and empathy was a skill that would elude the management of the next place I'd call home.

## **Seven Eleven**

“Good afternoon. I'm calling to see if your property is pet friendly,” I asked the young girl on the other end while preparing myself to immediately hear, “Can I put you on hold?” It seemed like every place I called or visited was stocked with a bevy of cute rental associates, twenty-somethings who sounded and looked more like they sold clubwear at Forever 21 than leases for an upscale apartment complex.

“Absolutely!” she replied as if I had asked her if a couple of Red Bulls could take the edge off of a hangover.

“Okay. Thanks for letting me know. Have a good rest of your day,” I sighed into the phone before hanging up.

Finding an apartment up in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho that *wasn't* pet friendly was turning out to be as frustrating as finding a hotel that didn't allow dogs, something I had started noticing about three years earlier while biking around the Pacific Northwest. No longer was my worry relegated to the cleanliness of the TV remote, bathtub, and drinking glasses; I had to add bedsheets to the list while wondering, *Just how many dogs were under these covers this week?*

Realizing that I wasn't going to find a pet-free property, I settled on a 300-unit apartment complex about four miles north of Coeur d'Alene Lake, a picturesque alpine resort area located 100 miles south of the Canadian border in Northern Idaho, and 500 miles north of Boise. Although I was having to roll the dice on the pet situation, I could still say to myself, "Three out of four ain't bad," after signing a 12-month lease for a brand-new top floor, two-bedroom apartment with a mood-lifting view that included the track and football field of the high school across the street.

My building was one of a dozen identical upscale buildings on the sprawling property. Each one housed twenty-four two and three-bedroom units in three-story walk-ups. Two sets of

stairwells further divided each building into two sides. The stairs that led to my apartment on the top floor served eleven other apartments on my side of the building. Assigned parking was adjacent to the building while the gym, clubhouse, mailroom, and management offices required a three or four-minute walk to the other side of the property.

Other than the apartment below mine, all the units were rented on my side of the building, but that was short-lived after noticing a couple and their dog moving in about two weeks after me. *And that makes seven*, I remember thinking to myself as I lugged a couple of grocery bags up the stairs. Seven of the twelve apartments on my side of the building had dogs in them. *Wow*. While most had only one dog, two of the units had three dogs, bringing the total number to eleven. *Incredible*. As a wannabe social scientist, I was stupefied; but as a new resident staring at twelve months of this, I was disheartened.

Barking, poop, and proximity were my three biggest concerns from the get-go and rightfully so since I had experience living around dogs in an apartment building. A steady diet of sports talk radio via noise-cancelling headphones helped to drown out intermittent and sometimes incessant barking while dog

owners were away at work during the day. I learned that trick ten years earlier back in Los Angeles when my next-door neighbor's dog would howl all day in his absence. I also learned not to confront owners about their dog's barking since John stopped talking to me after I knocked on his door to ask him, "Would you mind if I took Molly on walks while you're at work because she's howling all day in the back yard."

"Umm . . . that's okay. I'll take care of it," he said suspiciously from behind a front door that was only partially open.

To his credit, John did start to come home to spend time with his dog on lunch breaks. I also noticed that Molly wasn't in the back yard that much anymore. And instead of exchanging cordial pleasantries at the mailboxes in front of the community pool when John came home from work, I'd see the garage door closing as soon as his white Mercedes pulled into the garage. *Good talking to you, too!*

## **Keep Off the Grass**

The smell of dog feces was so strong in front of my apartment building in Coeur d'Alene that I had to come back down after

putting groceries away to investigate. *Oh my God* . . . I counted no less than two dozen individual poop piles with some smeared on the sidewalk and stairs, making me quickly inspect my shoes and weirdly wonder if these were ‘quality poops.’ By the time I trudged back up to my apartment, I already knew what I was going to say in the email since confrontation stopped being an option a long time ago; plus, the documentation would be necessary should things escalate. In it, I suggested that they install another dog waste receptacle in front of the building after having maintenance come out to hose everything down. Three days later, I noticed puddles on the side-walks and stairs, and that the poop piles had been replaced with a sign that read, “Please Clean Up After Your Pet.” *Okay, it’s a step in the right direction*, I thought to myself.

It became a habit I couldn’t shake whenever I walked to the other side of the property to retrieve the mail, or get a workout in at the clubhouse gym. Maybe there’s a part of me that’s similar to Dustin Hoffman’s character in *Rain Man* because I kept count of the number of poop piles I’d see. Not only did I notice the unsightly piles, and remnants of piles, I took interest in the green overflowing dog waste receptacles that seemed to

outnumber regular trash containers six to one. During the hotter months, it felt like a donkey kick to the face if you suddenly found yourself downwind of one of those receptacles. In those instances, I was always reminded of the trash trucks I'd momentarily ride my bike next to, or behind, back in Boise. I think it was in 2018 when I started noticing that the wretched smell of garbage, heated to a temperature that would warm dinner rolls, was being replaced by the ten-times-worse smell of steaming, two-week-old dog feces. *I sure hope those sanitation guys get hazard pay.*

One of the few pleasures of my apartment in Coeur d'Alene was the view, a south-facing vista that was evenly divided between blue sky and green grass. It was so nice in the early mornings that I hardly felt the discomfort of the crappy folding chair that I was sitting on or the lameness of needing to use my gas grill as a table for my coffee. If I was looking down, I had a sweeping view of the bike path that bisected the greenbelt between my apartment building and the street. If I was looking straight ahead from my balcony, I could easily see over the visitor stands of the high school football field across the street, a view that practically lined up with the 50-yard line. For the most part, it was a rewarding scene to begin

each day; but every now and then, I'd see a resident from my building, still in their pajamas, letting their unleashed dog poop on the grass between the building and the bike path. Afterward, I'd hear the *swish-swish* of their slippers on the cold cement as they shuffled quickly back into their apartment on the first floor.

And if that wasn't bad enough, the worst was seeing the occasional jogger with one or two dogs on the high school track despite there being a ton of posted signage repeating the same message over and over, "NO DOGS ALLOWED IN THE TRACK AND FIELD AREA." I remember losing my appetite for breakfast along with the hope that the track would remain open to the public when I'd see dogs pooping on the football field while oblivious owners lost themselves to whatever was on their playlists. *What are you thinking, people? Kids play football on that field!* And, sure enough, as predicted, I soon found myself being greeted by closed gates that were once wide open when I walked over to the high school for a morning run. "Unbelievable. Now what am I supposed to do?" I said to myself as I inspected the chain that secured the gate to the fence. Whereas a global pandemic was urging me to be outside, more and more dog owners and their

dogs were pushing me back inside.

I'm not really sure when I became so averse to dog poop. I think it goes as far back as the summer before the start of fifth grade in Philadelphia. It was the worst of scenarios. I was running barefoot across the front lawn of my friend's house, arms outstretched to catch another poorly thrown football from another kid when IT happened. The ball of my left foot sank so deeply into the fresh dog poop that it squished up between my toes, reminding me of what happens when you squeeze Play-Doh too tightly in your hands. When I think back to that moment, the frustrated movie director inside of me always replays the scene in slow-motion, complete with foreboding background music and a facial closeup to pinpoint and accentuate the exact moment when I realized the poop was still warm. To this day, when I watch those disturbing battle scenes in the movie, *Platoon*, I still give the director, Oliver Stone, a mental fist bump for having a cinematography style similar to mine.

Another dog poop scenario that tends to play out occurs when I go to the home of a dog owner for the first time. After showing me the inside of the house, the owner will extend the

tour to include the back yard. This is where things can get uncomfortable and it typically goes something like this:

“Hey, Chuck. Come over here and check out my herb garden,” says the dog owner from a sunny spot in their back yard.

“Looks great. Nice job,” I reply from the edge of the covered patio, my feet parked on the cement pad outlined with distressed brick pavers for effect.

“Thanks, but you can’t see what I want to show you. It’ll just take a sec.”

“It’s okay. I’m good. Say, how’s the biking around here?”

“Chuck, what’s your deal?”

I take notice of the other guests beginning to tune into what’s going on between me and the host. *Let the weirdness begin.* “I don’t want to.”

“Huh? Are you serious?”

*Wow. He won't let this go. You want to get nuts, dude? Then let's get NUTS!* “Because your back yard is the toilet for your two dogs and I'd prefer not to step in anything.”

“What? We pick it up every day!” says the dog owner with palpable acrimony.

To the delight of the onlookers who probably wished there was popcorn to go with the unexpected backyard entertainment, I replied, “Yeah, but maybe you missed some. Sorry, man. I can't take that chance.”

Needless to say, I'd usually end up having time to reflect on the awkwardness of it all while waiting in the queue of a Jimmy John's drive-thru since it wouldn't seem right to eat the barbecued ribs from a guy who forced me to insult him in his own back yard. And despite a clumsy exit where I was met with uncomfortable stares that said, “No wonder he doesn't have anyone,” and “I heard he's like Rain Man,” I still noticed one or two gazes that seemed to plead, “Take me with you.”

## **Chapter 3: Maui**

### **A Star Is Born**

“Oh my god! Do you know who that was? That was freaking Kris Kristofferson!” I gushed to my girlfriend as if I had never seen Hollywood royalty before. Finding an available room at a bed and breakfast in Hana on the island of Maui after driving from Kaanapali the day before was certainly fortuitous, but waving to Mr. Kristofferson as he jogged by the porch while we sipped coffee and munched on homemade Hawaiian bread was pure serendipity.

“I think I’ll go for a run this morning,” I said.

“Yeah? Where to?” she asked from an oversized wicker chair while lazily perusing through a handful of island excursion brochures.

“Just an out-and-back along the frontage road,” I answered before getting up to change into my running gear.

Because it was late morning on a Wednesday, it was the

perfect time to run since noticeably less tourists were seen buzzing around Hana during the weekdays. I could feel my excitement building while I used the porch steps of the bed and breakfast to stretch my calves and hamstrings. I had run the Honolulu Marathon three years earlier on the island of Oahu, but I had yet to run on Maui.

From above, I heard my girlfriend ask, “How long will you be gone?”

“Forty minutes or so,” I said while walking toward the shoulder of the frontage road since there weren’t any sidewalks. “Okay . . . I’m off!”

*How cool is this?* I thought to myself as I started jogging. On my left, when the trees and thick foliage allowed it, I could see the windswept surf of the Pacific Ocean. To my right, I passed bungalow after bungalow – some cute and tidy, others dilapidated and ramshackle. Five minutes into my run, I heard something rustling in the bushes that separated some of the back yards from the quiet roadway. It wasn’t a good sound because I could hear branches as thick as pencils breaking easily when this thing moved. And just as my instincts were

deciding between fight or flight, my worst fear became visible as it emerged from under a particularly beautiful Bougainvillea shrub.

Seeing the stocky gray Pit Bull without a collar made me turn around on a dime and run in a way where I could bolt *and* keep an eye on the unpredictable beast. I remember wishing I had never heard of Kris Kristofferson when I saw the dog start to run in my direction. But instead of coming after me like I'd seen in my worst nightmares, it was running toward one of the other houses. "For the love of god!" I shrieked to myself when I saw that the Pit Bull was heading toward a pack of about six or seven other Pit Bulls. *Twenty minutes ago, I was watching the Sandalwood and Koa trees sway back and forth from the ocean breeze and listening to the porch chimes with my girlfriend – and now I'm running for my life. What the hell!*

As soon as the gray Pit Bull reached the pack, they started moving in my direction but not toward me at this point, buying me precious time to close the distance between me and the bed and breakfast. Later, I would calculate that I had to be running at a pace faster than a six-minute mile. The pack stopped running through the back yards and came onto the frontage

road just as I had reached the porch steps. In one second, I went from trying to open the locked door to our room to banging on it with such spastic urgency that Stacey had a hard time opening it for me.

“What happened?” she asked while I flew into the room and slammed the door shut. “Are you okay?”

“There’s Pit Bulls all over the place!” I labored as I pulled her with me to look outside the window on the other side of our room. “See? See that?”

“Oh my god! There’s a bunch of them. You must have freaked.”

While taking her hand and placing it on my pounding chest, I said, “Feel my heart!”

Once things settled down, I realized I was still in freaking Maui, and that the ‘island life’ must go on. As we walked from the room to our rental car, a compact silver Mazda, I remember bumping into the owner of the bed and breakfast. The day before, we had learned that it took twenty-two years

before the city council would allow him and his wife to open their business in Hana – no small feat by non-Hawaiians from the San Francisco Bay Area.

“Hey, Jim,” I said to the owner as he was painting the trim of a shed that I guessed housed yard tools. “Thanks for the Hawaiian bread. It was awesome.”

“You’re welcome. Kathy has totally perfected it.”

“I’ll say. Can I ask you something, Jim?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“What’s with all the loose Pit Bulls I see around here? I tried going for a run this morning and had to cut it short because I was too freaked out about it.”

“Oh man,” he sighed while he carefully put the brush down on the paint tray. “I can’t stand that either. I’m actually a city council member, and I can’t get them to move forward on a leash law. They love their Pit Bulls around here.”

I could see that he was as bummed about it as me so I got off

the subject by saying, “Well, you’ll get it figured out. We’re going to check out the grave of Charles Lindbergh before stopping at Wailua Falls for some hiking.”

“You’ll love it there. Have a great time!”

Little did Stacey and I realize at the time that the traumatizing pack of Pit Bulls from earlier in the day was only the first half of a frightening double feature.

## **My Little Pony**

“Umm . . . what the hell is that?” I said to Stacey after only driving for about ten minutes along the frontage road. Moving at twenty to twenty-five miles an hour per the posted speed limits, we still weren’t too far away from the bed and breakfast.

“I don’t know. It’s too big to be a dog. A pony, maybe?”

“A pony? Then it’s a pretty mean looking pony,” I said as I slowed down. “And it’s not moving from the middle of the freaking road!”

With no cars coming from either direction, and no nearby houses, it was just us and the thing that looked both prehistoric and like the alpha of whatever species it came from. *I signed up for jungle hikes, swims in pools below waterfalls, and body surfing – not freaking Jurassic Park!* It was so black that it seemed to drain the vibrant, tropical colors that surrounded it like the gravitational pull of a collapsed star; and, although it was standing sideways, it was looking through the windshield, and directly into my eyes.

“Why isn’t this thing moving out of the way?” I asked while slowing down to around ten miles an hour.

From thirty feet away, Stacey said, “It’s a Bullmastiff!”

“Well, we’re going around it!” I announced after deciding we’d most likely lose in a head-on collision with what looked to be a mythological creature from Hell. “Roll up your window!”

The Bullmastiff was so big that half of the car had to be over earth to get around it. And, at five miles an hour, I got a long and disturbing look at the muscular beast whose eyes never

left mine. With the top of its head higher than the roof of the car, it seemed to be looking down on me, my expression of incredulousness being met with contemptuous disregard. So menacingly ominous was this king amongst dogs that at the closest point between it and me, I literally questioned our safety despite being inside a moving locked car with the windows rolled up. But all that quickly disappeared into the rearview mirror with one punch of the gas pedal once all four tires were back on asphalt.

“Jesus! That thing is still in the middle of the road and it’s STILL looking at us!” I reported.

While spun around in the passenger seat and maintaining eye contact with Cujo, Stacey asked, “Could you imagine if you came across that Bullmastiff on your run today?”

“I would’ve immediately climbed the nearest tree,” I said. “And what’s with the name? If you pronounce it in syllables – Bull – Mast – Stiff, it sounds totally phallic.”

“Back to the humor of a high school sophomore already? Okay. Now I know you’re back to normal,” she said while

turning back around in her seat.

“Hey . . . what can I say? I almost died twice today!”

## Chapter 4: Scary Breeds

### The Stuff of Nightmares

I admit that I don't know very much about Pit Bulls, Bullmastiffs, German Shepherds, Doberman Pinschers, Akitas, and Rottweilers, yet I'm scared to death of them. But before I'm quickly labeled as an uninformed sissy, keep in mind that Hollywood has depicted these breeds as terrifying beasts for decades. For me, it started with a couple of Rottweilers portraying Damien's hellhounds from the 1976 movie, *The Omen*. Even one of my favorite TV shows of the '80s, *Magnum P.I.*, showed two Dobermans, Zeus and Apollo, routinely snarling and chasing the private investigator whenever he visited "Rick" at the estate on the island of Oahu. *And HE'S one of the GOOD guys*, I remember thinking to myself as an eleventh grader.

Besides looking pretty damn scary, I listed the six dog breeds above because I believed they were the only ones to have killed human beings. Upon further research, I was shocked to learn in a 2018 report from DogsBite.org that shows 35 of the 190 dog breeds in the U.S. have contributed to 433 deaths in a

13-year period between 2005 and 2017. Pit Bulls contributed to 66% of these deaths, followed by Rottweilers with 10%. Although I wasn't part of the team that collected and qualified the data for this report, I'd be lying if I said I didn't believe that there was some truth to the statistics. For all I know, some of these dogs may have just startled some of the unfortunate souls into having a fatal heart attack or caused them to trip, fall, and lose their lives from heads meeting pavement. And, yet, from what I've seen on TV, social media, newspapers, and with my own eyes still makes me believe that the report has a certain amount of validity.

I think most people would agree that when they hear TV news anchors say, "We must warn you that the content you're about to see is graphic and may be disturbing to some viewers," they stop whatever they're doing to make sure they don't miss it – at least that's what I used to do. When friends learn that I haven't watched network or cable news for years, they always ask me, "Don't you want to know what's going on in the world?" And when they do, I always tell them that anything important will find me no matter how averse I am to what's making headlines. I can still remember being woke up on the lido deck of a cruise ship off the coast of Portugal by fellow

passengers scrambling to get back to their cabins to watch the broadcasts from New York City soon after the first plane hit the World Trade Center's North Tower.

Back when I did watch the news and read newspapers, I was always particularly interested in stories about vicious dog attacks since I couldn't resist the genetic predisposition to become voyeuristic once my eyeballs were tantalized by images of what scared me the most. Despite feeling it was intrinsically unhealthy to indulge myself in that way, I couldn't help it back then. I was too young, too impressionable and too interested in learning how I could avoid a similar fate. Most of these terrifying stories featured Pit Bulls chasing and mauling kids, old ladies, letter carriers, and others, and always ending with the same statement spoken into every news reporter's microphone by shell-shocked dog owners, "We never saw our dogs do anything like that before."

## **Choose Your Weapons**

Thankfully, I've never been bitten by one of these dangerous dog breeds, but that doesn't mean I haven't had my share of close calls. For the past two years, I've had no choice but to

carry an expandable friction baton and dog repellent whenever I go for walks or runs. Although it took a while to feel comfortable carrying these deterrents in each hand, I feel safer knowing I have a fighting chance should something happen; plus, it sends a message to approaching dog owners who insist on not demonstrating that they have control of their dogs as they walk past me.

I wasn't always so brazen. During my marathon training days in the mid-90s, I often wondered why I didn't see newspaper headlines declaring the presence of a trash can lid thief amongst the good people of Camarillo, California. Early morning runs through neighborhoods of a city nestled on the coastal plain between Malibu and the Santa Susana Mountains would sometimes bring unwanted encounters with vicious dogs hellbent on making me pay for running in front of their owner's house. In one of those frantic moments, I happened to be near a couple of trash cans that had been left out by the curb. In the heat of sheer terror, I grabbed one of the metal lids to protect myself from the snarling dog, and then proceeded to run with it á la 'Captain America style' until I was sufficiently far enough away from the terrorizing beast. This move proved so successful in calming me down that I made it a habit to grab

trash can lids in neighborhoods that made me nervous even when there wasn't an active threat. Even though I felt bad when I imagined homeowners saying, "What the hell?" when they noticed a missing lid, or finding one thrown on their front lawn like an oversized forgotten Frisbee, I felt justified in protecting myself by any means possible – especially if I wasn't on anyone's private property.

The idea to carry a baton and repellent came to me while rolling out of a three-foot snowdrift and onto a street in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho in 2020. Although I never made eye contact with them, I could feel the disapproving stares from the 30-something couple in newish-looking ski jackets holding back their two big German Shepherds as I got back on my feet. The barking was so loud and so incessant that I still felt disoriented while I walked away, leaving a trail of white powder on the wet asphalt as I brushed the snow off. Moments earlier, I was just a guy out for an afternoon walk to enjoy the crisp winter air on my face while relishing having finally gotten over a month-long battle with COVID-19.

Understandably, my mind was elsewhere and didn't notice the couple with the two big dogs coming toward me until it was

too late to formulate an escape plan. Normally, I would've crossed the street or double backed out of harm's way. In this case, the situation was even worse because the sidewalk we were on was partially covered by big mounds of shoveled snow on either side, leaving just enough room for walkers to pass one another. As usual, the dog owners didn't put themselves between me and their dogs or gather the slack in their leashes, making me feel stupid for hoping they would and nervous as hell. Sure enough, as soon as I approached them, the lead German Shepherd made a move toward me and let out such a deep, guttural bark that I would know its size and aggressiveness even if I was blind.

Just as the guy pulled the leash to restrain his dog, I launched off the sidewalk at a forty-five-degree angle toward the street. Despite atrophied legs from a month of bed and couch life from the virus, I cleared the snow pile; however, the landing was a different story. Either the ground was uneven underneath the snow or the snow had frozen haphazardly. My legs went out from underneath me and I landed on my back in what had to look like the biggest soccer pitch flop ever attempted. With two huge German Shepherds barking wildly at me, I could barely think while I rolled over to get on my

knees so I could stand up. Shockingly, the couple had stopped to gawk while restraining their menacing dogs without so much as a, “Oh my god! Are you all right? We’re so sorry for scaring you like that!”

The incident happened fairly close to my apartment building so it didn’t take me long to get home. I remember how heavy my heart felt when I was hanging up my jacket in the coat closet near the kitchen. It wasn’t because of the empty stares from the thought-less couple that said, “What a spaz.” It was from their reaction being just like all the others I had encountered over the last several years. Later that afternoon, after I placed my online order for the baton and dog repellent, I felt a little better. Sadly, it wasn’t by much.

## **Close Encounter of the Worst Kind**

At first, it looked like a bush in my peripheral vision as I jogged across Atlas Road in Coeur d’Alene, but that would soon change once I got to the other side to continue toward Prairie Avenue. The mid-sized Chow came at me so fast, I barely had time to cognate what was happening. However, there was enough remaining synapse activity to notice how

sharply its black fur contrasted against the freshly fallen snow while I readied my two-week old baton and repellent. *This is nuts. I'm just a guy out for a freaking late morning run on a Tuesday, and now I'll be fighting for my life. CRAZY!*

As the Chow was quickly closing the gap between its sharp teeth and my flesh, I automatically flicked the wrist of my left hand to deploy the metal baton to its full length of just over two feet. While backing up and never turning away from the dog, I instinctually began dragging the tip of the weapon in a back-and-forth motion against the rough asphalt of the path while my right hand prepared to deliver a heavy dose of capsaicin. Thankfully, the menace stopped running at me once it reached the path, opting instead to stay a few feet behind the sweeping baton while I yelled, "Back. Back. BACK!" I kept walking backward without ever breaking eye contact with the growling hellhound. Strangely, I kept thinking of the people inside the cars that were passing by this intense scene. *Was I being caught on video? Would I be trending on the internet? Would I become a meme?*

The determined Chow followed me until I reached the next cross street. It had been dropping back consistently since being

within a few feet of me. When it finally turned to go back to wherever it came from, I felt tremendous relief, but I continued to walk backward for a while without retracting the baton. By the time I reached Prairie Avenue, I had a lot to think about. For the first time, I had held my ground against a wild animal. It felt like the weapons did give me a fighting chance, and that my willingness to engage was sensed by the snarling canine. I also wondered if dragging the baton helped to deter it since the sound gave an indication of its weight and makeup. Unfortunately, I wouldn't have to wonder about that for very long. Within a month of encountering the black Chow, I found myself in a similar situation. This time, I wasn't by myself and this particular beast made the Chow seem like a rambunctious puppy.

## **Brace Yourself for Impact**

When she told me she was leaving her little dog in the house instead of bringing it with her on our walk, I asked, "Really? Why not?"

"Because Piper gets freaked out by all the big dogs around the neighborhood ever since she was attacked," she answered.

“Hey, where you going?”

“I’ll be right back,” I replied while heading out to my truck which was parked in her driveway.

When I came back through the front door, she immediately looked at what was in my hands and asked, “What’s that?”

“THIS is a friction baton and THIS is a canister of dog repellent. Nasty stuff,” I said right before I flicked open the baton for dramatic effect.

“Whoa! That IS nasty! And you’re bringing that with you?”

“I have to. After you mentioned aggressive dogs in the neighborhood, I’d be a nervous wreck without it.”

Lewiston, Idaho is one of those places where you find yourself saying, “Really? No kidding,” more often than you’d expect. The north central city of about forty thousand citizens bustles with activity that centers around being the farthest inland seaport east of the West Coast, and the only one in all of Idaho. Founded in 1861, and named after Meriwether Lewis, it boasts

of being Idaho's first capital before losing that distinction in 1865 to Boise. The nicer neighborhoods, which appeared to emphasize acreage over ostentatious domiciles, sit atop the steep canyon walls of the Snake River which winds itself around the mostly blue-collar city while serving as the state line between Idaho and Washington.

We began our walk in a modest neighborhood with well-attended yards that gave way to neat and tidy houses, the names of its occupants either stenciled on the mailbox or burned into a piece of wood that hung near the front door. Since Tori had walked this particular four-mile loop for years, I felt like I could relax and enjoy the scenery in the same way when someone else is driving. According to her, the planned route would take us through older neighborhoods before reaching a series of new developments that were somehow carved into such rugged country.

I always like to talk while walking because I seem to be at my most creative when I'm in motion. Walking with Tori was especially enjoyable because she was a down-to-earth local who bounced between teaching me all about Lewiston and making me laugh out loud with her hilarious sarcasm that

would make prudish women demure and prissy men reach for their inhalers. But during this particular walk, our conversation was frequently interrupted by dogs maniacally barking at us from fenced-in yards or from the other side of first-floor windows. And despite the absence of sidewalks, I was surprised to see so many walkers out on the street with their dogs.

“Man . . . what’s up with all these dogs going crazy when we walk by? And how ’bout that last house? Destroyed curtains, totally smudged windows from the dog’s nose and slobber—must be *real* nice inside.”

“People have them for security up here,” she said. “You sure do talk a lot about dogs.”

“How can you NOT when they’re hurling themselves against chain-link fences and glass to get at us? This is crazy!”

“Oh . . . there is ONE house coming up that makes me nervous,” she said while pointing up ahead. “This guy keeps his three Rottweilers penned up on the front porch.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I asked while noticing how pathetically futile my baton and repellent would be against three hellhounds.

When we approached the house, Tori said, “Oh good. They’re not out there today.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” I said while making a permanent mental note to NEVER come down this street again unless I’m in a locked, moving vehicle.

After a while, the frequency of dog interruptions began to wane, and our easy conversation returned amid a pleasant late afternoon that was chilly despite the abundant sunshine. I could tell that we were still making our way through the older neighborhoods because the yards were still big – especially to our right where the oversized lots had an unobstructed view of the Snake River Canyon. Just as Tori was answering my question about the lack of trees, a blurry, gray object in the distance caught my attention. It was near the front door of a ranch house up ahead and it seemed to be moving.

“What do you think that is?” I asked while pointing at the

ranch house and wishing I had worn my glasses.

“It looks like a dog,” she answered while coming to a complete stop.

“What?” I asked with an inflection that sounded like I really didn’t want to know the answer.

While stepping behind me, Tori said the one thing that my ears never wanted to hear, “Oh shit. It’s a Pit Bull!”

Just as Tori confirmed the worst, the Pit Bull began charging at us from across the huge lawn. So many thoughts flooded my mind all at once and running wasn’t one of them. My recent run-in with the Chow was already paying dividends by giving me the tiniest glimmer of hope of surviving the impending attack unscathed. I immediately flicked open the baton and began rubbing the tip back-and-forth on the asphalt while my other hand positioned the repellent. Realistically, I knew I had only one shot at this, and timing would be everything. Weirdly, I remember having to decide between using a homerun swing or a tennis forehand that resulted in arcing topspin. Since baseball ended for me at twelve years

old, my forehand swing was going to have to be the shot of my life, a winner down the line to end this unwanted match.

Because the front yard was so deep, I had a few extra seconds to observe the barreling nightmare that had somehow made it out of my subconscious mind and into my reality. It definitely had the Pit Bull look to it, but it was much scarier looking with its cropped ears and over-the-top muscularity. Its momentum, along with its stocky, compact build made me think that I needed to grip the baton tighter and remember to swing through what would most likely be a sickening impact. I could sense my cognitive and rational thought fading to the background as the dog got closer to us. Replacing it and moving to the forefront of my mind was a mantra that was repeating itself over and over. *Hit it. Spray it. Hit it. Spray it.* Physically, I could only feel the smoothness of the repellent canister, the weight of the extended baton, Tori's hands on my back, and my pounding heart.

As the dog with murderous intentions in its eyes got closer to the street, it slowed down – most likely due to a mixture of not running away, the noise of the sweeping baton against the asphalt, and me yelling, “Back. Back. BACK!” at the top of

my lungs. Miraculously, just before the dog reached the street, a glint of light caught my eye followed by the sound of a woman shouting, “ARLO! ARLO! GET BACK HERE!” It was the dog owner standing behind a partially open glass storm door at the entrance of the home where the beast was first spotted. And just like that, the living nightmare was over because the dog turned around immediately and trotted back toward the house.

“Oh my god. That was crazy! And that lady never even tried to apologize!” Tori said while still looking pale faced and wild-eyed.

“They never do,” I sighed without taking my eyes off the dog. “Now do you understand why I have to carry this stuff with me?”

After gathering ourselves, we continued our walk toward the new housing developments that took advantage of the prairie-like landscape dotted with scenic rock outcroppings. Understandably, it took a while to get back to joking around again. In the meantime, we took in the quiet beauty of this unforgiving terrain since the late afternoon sun was using it as

a canvas to paint its daily abstraction of warm colors across elongating shadows. As much as I wanted to forget about what had happened, I couldn't help but think, *That was nuts! We're just a couple of people out for a freaking walk on a Friday afternoon and we have to worry about being attacked – by DOGS! Crazy!*

## **Going Down**

Before settling into my eventual apartment in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho in 2020, I experienced the unraveling of my first choice of places to rent in a way that seems like it was gifted to me by the universe so it could be written about and included in this book. You may say to yourself, “No way. What are the chances something like that could happen to a guy writing about dogs? It's too perfect!” But if witnesses aren't enough, I can also produce video footage of the whole thing – the same video footage that was used to have my application fee and rental deposit refunded back to me.

The five-story building was the color of redwood trees and situated on the quieter side of Coeur d'Alene Lake. Although the chalet-like design made it look more suited for a ski resort,

the surrounding tall pines seemed to adopt the building as one of its own and soften its uniqueness. The popular and well-maintained Centennial Bike Trail was steps away from the front of the structure. Riding five miles in one direction would take you to Higgins Point, a rocky bluff with panoramic views of the glassy lake. Fifty miles in the other direction would take you to its western terminal at Riverfront Park in Spokane, Washington. And if that wasn't enough to make me want to move in, there was a coffee shop and bakery on the first floor.

*Thank you, biking gods!*

After receiving permission to visit the vacant apartment again in the evening to take measurements and to get an idea of how quiet the building was when most of the residents were home, I invited my friend, Gabriela to come with me. Like every place I called about or visited, the apartment manager, Brian, told me that the building allowed pets. And when my body language revealed my disappointment like a tipped hand during a game of gin rummy, Brian was quick to point out,

“Yeah, but there’s not too many, and I haven’t heard any complaints.”

“Hey, Gabriela, check out this sweet view.”

“Oh, wow. This place is so nice . . . and totally brand new!”

“You don’t mind hanging out here for a while, do you?” I asked. “I want to see if I can hear my neighbors or any barking dogs.”

“Sure. No problem.”

The new construction was totally upscale with upgrades not normally found in apartment buildings. Besides hardwood floors, granite countertops and vaulted ceilings, the northeast view from the balcony practically begged me to go over my rental budget by almost twenty percent. And, although I couldn’t see it despite the unit being on the highest floor, Fernan Lake was just beyond the foothills, less than a bike mile away.

After about thirty minutes of measuring walls while listening like an anxious safecracker for tell-tale signs of inconsiderate neighbors and restless dogs, I asked Gabriela, “Are you ready to go?”

“Sure. Ready when you are.”

As we waited for the elevator to come up from the lobby, I looked at the other five apartment doors in the square shaped hallway and wondered about the occupants living behind them. *Would they be friendly? Are they cyclists like me? Would we sometimes grab a coffee downstairs?* When the door slid open to reveal an empty elevator space, I looked at Gabriela and automatically did that little arm swing that universally signals, “After you.” I was feeling pretty good about the new place and wanted to celebrate this fortuitous find by asking her to join me for dinner in downtown Coeur d’Alene.

“You want to get something to eat at Sweet Lou’s? The patio is open and masks are optional.”

“Sure. I could go for something to eat.”

Within seconds of the elevator door closing behind us, Gabriela watched my face go from looking like a guy who can’t stop pinching himself to one of palpable apprehension when we both heard the deep, guttural barks coming from

beneath us. “Wow. Sounds like it’s coming from a second or third floor apartment,” I said.

“Sounds like a big dog,” she replied.

While performing crude, reverse engineering calculations based solely on the low frequency of each bark that seemed laced with aggression, I agreed, “No doubt about it.”

And when the barking continued to get louder as we descended past the second floor, Gabriela said what I was thinking, “It’s coming from the ground floor lobby.”

“Great. Right where we’re getting off.”

As soon as the door started to slide open, my worst nightmare had somehow figured out how to materialize and end my existence on this planet in the most horrifying way possible. An enormous, long-haired German Shepherd surged forward and was able to get its head and neck into the elevator before the owner pulled on its leash at the last second, sending the beast upward and scaring us even more. Behind the male dog owner, who looked to be around 50 years old, were two 30-

some things, a man and a woman. Each were wearing masks and holding what looked to be carry-out orders from the nearby Mexican restaurant; but it was the sheer terror in their eyes and the fact that their backs were plastered against the back wall of the lobby that caught my attention. They looked like they were trying to back out of the situation but couldn't go any farther since the exit was on the other side of the possessed animal.

“Get control of your dog!” I yelled. “Back up. BACK UP! Let us get off, dude!”

As soon as there was a wide enough opening between the restrained and incessantly barking German Shepherd and us, I grabbed Gabriela's hand and pulled her out of the elevator with me toward the lobby door. Once we stumbled into the parking lot and out of harm's way, I quickly looked back into the lobby and saw the sleight and bespeckled dog owner disappear behind the elevator door while the couple never moved from the back wall.

“Oh my god! That was insane!” Gabriela said as if she just stumbled off of a terrifying amusement ride. “Don't you want

to find out which apartment he lives in?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m out.”

Later that evening, I sent a text to Brian, the apartment manager, explaining what had happened and that I no longer wanted to live there. In particular, I was concerned about having to forfeit my application fee and deposit. Nervousness set in when I didn’t hear from Brian the next morning; and by midafternoon, I was leaving voicemail messages. When my phone rang at around six o’clock with Brian’s name lit up on it, I answered it promptly hoping that he was as reasonable as I was.

“Hey, Chuck. Sorry about not getting back to you sooner. It took me a while to get the video from the lobby security camera. And, you’re right. That looked awful, and I’m sorry you and your friend had to deal with that. That guy is moving out in three or four months. If you’re still up for that apartment, I’ll reduce it by twenty percent for a year.”

“Which apartment does he live in?” I asked while feigning interest in the offer.

After a longer than normal pause, Brian said, “Next door to yours.”

“I’m going to have to pass, but thanks anyway.”

After I hung up the phone, I walked into Gabriela’s kitchen and told her that Brian agreed to give me all my money back.

“I’ll need to stay a few more days to find another place, if that’s okay with you,” I said.

“Sure. No problem at all.”

“Thanks, Gabriela. I’m going for a walk. I’ll be back in a little while.”

As I walked on the sidewalk through the modest working-class neighborhood, my good mood was lifted even more by the sounds of kids playing in front yards that weren’t separated by fences or shrubbery. And while my nose took in the various dinnertime aromas emanating from busy kitchens, my eyes found comfort in watching stars appear in the retreating violet sky. Ripping me away from my quiet meditation was the

sound of a dog barking from inside an open garage. It didn't sound aggressive but it made me think about what happened twenty-four hours earlier. *We were just a couple of people getting off of a freaking elevator, and we have to worry about being attacked by dogs. This is BEYOND crazy!*

## **Relax, Dude. He Won't Bite**

While doing research for this book, it didn't take long for me to realize that for every study and corresponding article that vilified Pit Bulls, Bullmastiffs, German Shepherds, Doberman Pinschers, Akitas, and Rottweilers, I found an equal number that said otherwise. According to the American Kennel Club, in a March 2021 online article, the German Shepherd is the third most popular dog breed in the U.S. while Pit Bulls, despite their popularity, are not listed in the article because they are not recognized by this respected non-profit due to the fact that there are so many different breeds and mixes. Being made aware of that helped me understand the discrepancies I found between various information sources approximating the number of Pit Bulls in the U.S. Some listed them as low as 5% while others put the notorious breed at 20% of the estimated 90 million dogs in America.

What *is* in agreement across these outlets is that the breeds you'd expect to be involved in human attacks and fatalities *are* the reported majority. And, not surprisingly, I'm not alone in feeling anxious and fearful around these breeds. Many information sources, including those seeking to dispel misinformation about the breeds in question, agree that a large number of Americans are intensely afraid of Pit Bulls, Rottweilers, German Shepherds and other types of dogs known to have inflicted great harm to human beings.

From my experience over the last ten years, while putting in well over 30,000 bike-miles and 10,000 foot-miles, I believe *any* dog can have a moment where it feels it needs to go on the attack – not just the breeds written about in this chapter. I routinely read that the brightest scientists know more about how the universe works than the human brain, so I don't think I'm going too far out on a limb when I assume we know even less about what makes a canine behave the way it does at any given moment. This is the prevailing thought that jumps across the synapses of my own brain each and every time I encounter one of these scary looking breeds at the end of a slack leash as I walk past it. *Will it freak out now? How 'bout now? Now?*

Assuming everyone understands that a certain amount of unpredictability comes with owning an animal, I'm more perplexed by the *choice* of dog owners to acquire such questionable breeds than by the frequency in which I encounter these frightening dogs on bike paths, hiking trails, parks, and neighborhood streets. To me, it's like choosing to own a gun that shoots bullets instead of BBs. Whereas a BB gun malfunction might make your mom say, "I told you you'd shoot your eye out with that thing," a similar situation with a real gun would have your mom laying flowers on your casket as it's being lowered into the ground. I've survived more than a dozen dog bites without ever needing stitches or a trip to the emergency room, yet that doesn't put my mind at ease with thoughts like, "I can handle a bite," or "I'll survive an attack." That's because I believe I've been lucky enough to be around less-threatening dogs like Poodles, Border Collies and Cocker Spaniels when they've been spooked into their unpredictable attack moment. Had I been around a loose Pit Bull, Bullmastiff, German Shepherd, Doberman Pinscher, Akita, or Rottweiler when that happened, I know I'd be inside of a speeding ambulance trying to remember my blood type while on the way to the hospital.

## Chapter 5: Social Media

### Buried Alive

Nothing makes you sound older than when you start a sentence with, “When I was a kid,” especially if it pertains to technology, but I’ll do it anyway. When I was a kid, you were considered blessed if you could get decent reception on two UHF channels to go along with the three network channels; however, that wouldn’t be the case if someone messed with the perfectly positioned rabbit ears antenna on top of the TV console. Then, in the early ’80s, the number of channels magically doubled and tripled overnight – all from that featureless, black conundrum that people referred to as the ‘cable box.’ The antenna remained but now shared its prominent perch in the den with what had to feel like an older sibling losing their popularity to the new baby.

Back then, other than the radio, newspapers, and magazines – network TV, cable channels, and the cinema were the only ways to watch your favorite teams, bands, heroes, and celebrities. What I *didn’t* learn from any of those entertainment sources were things like what their meals

looked like before they ate it, what their feet looked like when they sunbathed poolside, or what their daughter's expression looked like at the moment her boyfriend proposed on bended knee in a setting that's predictively similar to every American Eagle ad ever made – complete with the caption you'd expect, "She said, YES!" *Ho hum.* In those days, TV broadcasters featured a tiny fraction of the population who possessed widely recognizable talents that were showcased to impact the bottom lines of commercial manufacturers and service providers through ratings. For their part, those athletes, musicians, and celebrities were not only rewarded with a king's ransom, they could also grow and expand their particular brands. For the most part, that's still true today; but instead of four channels, four dozen channels, or four hundred channels, we now have almost four billion. *Thanks, social media!*

In exchange for all the data generated by your online activity while using their app, social media companies like Meta offer the end user a platform on which a highly unlikely possibility exists for fame and fortune. They also lead you to believe that all your acquired followers are receiving your uploaded material when in reality only a small fraction of them see it

come up in their feeds. So, what are these social media giants doing while you're incessantly posting pictures, comments, and likes? Their software engineers are equally busy collecting all the personal data that emanates from your online activity and using it to strengthen an algorithm that predicts your online behavior. They, in turn, sell that information to commercial manufacturers and service providers at a premium since there's a better chance for hits on the 'click to buy' buttons. The irony of this is particularly bitter tasting. Whereas the end user has been lulled into believing they can be their own brand, their personal information is being sold as a commodity so they can be the consumers of *other* brands. *Pure genius!*

For people like me who are actually trying to launch and sustain an intentional brand based on the belief that there *is* an underlying and recognizable talent, social media has been both a godsend and a curse. I often tell people that before the internet, I was like a forgotten grain of sand at the bottom of the ocean. Then, out of nowhere, an underwater earthquake caused a tsunami wave to form and lift me from the black depths and onto a beach under the welcoming, bright sunshine – only to realize that I'm joined by four billion other grains of

sand. Although social media gives me the impression that my content, my channel, is no longer invisible, I *remain* invisible through sheer burial. With five hundred million photos being uploaded every day along with five hundred million comments every minute, my pictures and commentary are the equivalent of sedimentary rock within minutes of posting. And to make matters worse, no one is watching anyway. That's because the seats are empty. What's that? Where is everyone? From my perspective, it looks like everybody wants to be on stage whether or not they have talent or something truly unique to share. Instead of telling everyone, "Look at me! Look at me!" I wish they'd realize that without an audience, there is no context for stardom.

### **It's All in the Numbers**

Eight percent. That's the figure I came up with over twenty-five years ago after asking myself, "How much of my life is sensational?" Since then, I've seen that number fluctuate between five and nine percent. After telling friends about this calculation, I always find myself secretly hoping for their highly predictable responses. When I hear, "That's terrible," or "I'm sorry you're so depressed," I literally see a green light

that not only allows me to define and derive what constitutes a sensational moment, it gives me a chance to extend the lecture toward what is and isn't worthy of being reported on to others. In the end, after they've had a chance to 'run the numbers' in their own life, they usually agree with my original assessment of eight percent.

One only needs to scroll through their Facebook or Instagram feed for a few minutes before finding themselves wanting to say, "Eight percent is bullshit and Chuck is a pessimistic grouch." That's because social media companies bank on our inherent need to gain self-esteem from seeking to differentiate ourselves from others followed by the less honorable need to display those differences as proof that we're truly winning in the game of life. What does that even look like? It looks like five hundred million daily uploads of photos and commentary trying desperately to make ordinary and mundane moments look sensational and worthy of announcement. And when they run out of pictures that show them partying at the club, fishing with the boys, or vacationing in Costa Rica, they bring us into their homes, relationships, and personal struggles, places that used to be off-limits to those outside of their inner sanctum.

Although I'm convinced my social media posts go directly to the internet equivalent of a landfill as soon as my quivering index finger taps the 'share' button, I'm fairly certain of what's crushing my art, writing, biking, and photography uploads. Besides the hundred million photos of meals in various stages of preparation, presentation, and consumption, I see another hundred million photos and related commentary that should've stayed inside the therapist's office, family photo albums, and Hallmark cards. The next hundred million uploads can be attributed to memes followed by another hundred million posts bragging about everything from six-pack abs to kitchen upgrades to every participation trophy earned by little Timmy, all of it reminding me of the movie, *The Truman Show*, where the whole world tuned in to consume every nuance of Truman Burbank's everyday life. Today, I live in a time where the whole world now competes with each other for the most coveted of all prizes – short attention spans, eyeballs, and likes.

The last hundred million uploads to round out the five hundred million daily deluge of posts on social media belongs to none other than dog owners who find it perfectly normal to document and share every aspect of their dog's life. If you're

a baby boomer like me, you probably remember a time when you were cornered in a living room by a friend holding a large family photo album. *Oh god. Anything but THAT. And it's huge!* Now imagine if it contained picture after picture of the life and times of Rufus. If you're like me, you'll feel like a prisoner in Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp begging for waterboarding.

No matter how many times I read it, I don't think I'll ever stop being blown away by the sheer number of photos, videos, and comments being uploaded to social media every minute of every hour of every day. I often fantasize about what it would be like if the whole world agreed with my assessment that, on average, our lives are really only about eight percent sensational and that only about half of that is worth sharing with others. What would that even look like? My guess is that I'd have an entirely new reason why my posts would still be attracting the sound of crickets. Instead of being buried alive by five hundred million daily uploads of mostly inane and forgettable material, I'd be outshined by twenty million posts more sensational than mine.

## A Love Hate Relationship

As much as I complain about social media, you'd think I would've blown up my Facebook and Instagram accounts by now. Instead, it's just the opposite. Today, the Facebook and Instagram app icons stare back at me from my phone's home screen like tethered ex-spouses who've become unwanted partners in the business of raising the kids since divorcing over broken promises. The old adage, "Can't live with them. Can't live with-out them," is certainly true when it comes to social media. Personally, I don't trust anyone who doesn't have an online presence. *What's up with that? What are they hiding?* Truth be told, social media has and will continue to crush my soul at times, but it has helped more than it has hurt.

To find symbiotic nirvana with social media, all one has to do is care more about content than likes, see it as a tool and realize that people will only find you through the search bar as opposed to the delusion of someone accidentally getting, "their chocolate in your peanut butter." If it wasn't for Facebook and Instagram, I would've thought my findings for this book were regional and sporadic rather than phenomenally persistent across the country. If people are willing to bring a curious and

voyeuristic nation into their homes to share intimate details about how they live and what they live for, how could I turn my back on a chance to corroborate what I had been observing and experiencing with dog owners and their dogs in the real world for years?

If I divided the dog owners that pop up on my Facebook and Instagram feeds into two groups using a single criterion, it would be based on how well I knew them. Studying the photos, videos, and commentary from dog owners that I hardly knew unquestionably confirmed the behavioral data that I had been collecting for this book; but it was from those who I knew best that helped me formulate my theoretical premise that attempts to explain why America is so obsessed with dogs. Meeting people whose lives were already revolving around their pets was eye-opening to say the least; but being in a position to observe and interact with people *as* their lives became more and more dog centric was both fascinating and tragic. In the next section of this book, I will take you into some of those experiences where you can make up your own mind. Have I uncovered an intriguing and troubling wrinkle within our society that's worth discussing? Or have I made an issue out of a nonissue? In either case, I think it's worth your

time to find out.

## Part II: Experiential Stories

If I was sitting on a park bench with you and noticed what looked to be a veteran having a conversation with his dog as if it was talking back to him, I wouldn't lean over and whisper, "Look at that nut over there." I'd assume that the dog serves as a coping mechanism for whatever PTSD-laden nightmares haunt this poor man after he falls asleep at night. And though it may seem contrary to the tone of my seemingly insensitive writing voice, I would feel the same way if an older lady was doing the same thing with her two dogs as she pushed them past our bench in a baby stroller. That's because I believe we've all had to deal with physical and emotional pain at one time or another. To me, everyone I see at the park, with or without dogs, is having to cope with some form of stress. If it isn't PTSD from having served our country during a time of conflict or psychological damage from an abusive marriage, it could be from loneliness, depression, or from simply lacking meaningful purpose.

At times, while reading the chapters in this section of *Must Love Dogs*, you may feel that my prickly commentary wildly contradicts how I conveyed my feelings about the veteran and

older lady with their dogs while sitting on the bench. There are two reasons for this. The first is that my writing voice, aloof and unkind at times, is based on a foundation of lighthearted cynicism. It's simply who I am as a person. The second reason is that owning and being with a dog is not the only choice one has as a coping mechanism for dealing with life's troubles and unpleasanties. I certainly have no right to question a person's need for a coping mechanism since I have at least three that help me get through any given day. But I do have to ask, "Why the dog?"

Like the observational stories before it, entertainment value and the commonality of similar occurrences dictated which experiential stories would be included in this section of *Must Love Dogs*. Although most of the stories are related to online dating experiences with women, I believe that male dog owners have behaviors that are similar to what you'll read about in the following chapters. However, in the conclusion of this book, I will reveal an inherent difference between men and women dog owners that makes me believe women are much more likely than men to demand on their dating profiles, "Must Love Dogs!"

## **Chapter 6: Finding Love Again**

### **Three Strikes You're Out**

“I have a boyfriend,” snapped the lady in the pretty teal dress.

“Gotcha,” I blurted out as quickly as she shot me down while trying to seem unfazed by the blatant rejection.

“Did NOT see that coming,” I mumbled to myself while scrapping the plan and circling back to my table at Starbucks like a passenger plane having to abort its landing at the very last moment due to unforeseen crosswinds.

Moments earlier, I had been admiring how her shoes and handbag matched her dress while she waited with her friend for what had to be pretentious sounding espresso orders since they had been standing by the pickup counter ever since I sat down with my usual, uncomplicated drip coffee. After moving to Boise, Idaho from Los Angeles a few months earlier for a fresh start, I felt ready to try and date again. I remember thinking how much of a boss move it would be to approach her right in front of her friend, giving her something to gush

about for the rest of the day. In the end, I wasn't sure what was worse – the walk of shame back to my table or watching them leave with their drinks like they couldn't get out of the place fast enough.

A couple of weeks later, I approached another lady in the produce section of a Trader Joe's. I probably picked the creepiest moment to make my move because she was in the act of squeezing hothouse tomatoes for ripeness; however, it *did* give me the best view of her left hand. *No ring. Perfect.*

“Hi. I'm new to Boise and don't really know anyone. My name is Chuck. What's yours?” I asked.

“No,” said the forty-something in a white t-shirt and jean shorts.

*No? Really?* I thought to myself as I watched her skedaddle away from me toward the bakery without a single tomato in her cart. *This is nuts. I thought grocery stores were the perfect place to meet women.*

Determined to at least have a coffee date in one of the many

eclectic coffeehouses in downtown Boise before winter forced me to hibernate like all the other California transplants, I set my sights on an attractive teller behind the counter at my new credit union. *This has to work*, I thought to myself while waiting for her to call me up to the counter since I was next in line. I'd seen her a few times before and read her willingness to banter with me as not-so-subtle interest; so, I was feeling pretty confident about my plan. To give myself a chance at success, I needed to separate her from the herd of three Cupid-blocking co-workers whose sour faces reminded me of the old adage, "Misery loves company."

I felt my heart skip a beat when she called me over with a little wave and a smile that made me wonder why she wasn't in soap and bodywash commercials. "Hi! What can I do for you today?" she asked with such sunniness that it made me think of the fictional town of Stepford, Connecticut from the 1975 movie, *The Stepford Wives*.

"Good to see you, Rachel. Would you mind walking over to the ATM machine with me? I think my card is stuck inside," I asked. But from her facial expression, I could tell she wasn't completely sold on a pretext that sounded so much better in

my head.

“Umm . . . sure.”

As I waited for her to come around from behind the counter, I could feel the contemptuous stares of the three ladies she worked with boring holes into my intentions that matched the holes in my plan to ask out Rachel. When she walked with me to the ATM in the corridor, I noticed her arms were folded and her shoulders were slumped forward as if she was trying to hide inside herself. *Looks like the captain will be going down with the ship again.*

“There’s nothing wrong with the ATM, Rachel. I asked you over here to get you away from the other ladies to ask you out. I’m new to Boise, and you seem like a nice person and . . .”

“You seem like a nice guy, too; but I’m focusing on raising my son right now,” she said to cut me off and mercifully put an end to what had become awkward as soon as I asked her to come with me to the ATM.

This time, there wasn’t a humiliating walk of shame because

she darted back toward her comfort zone behind the counter almost before I finished saying, “I totally understand.” I couldn’t blame her since I wanted to leave the crash site as quickly as possible, too; but in my haste, I ended up walking in the wrong direction. Turning around wasn’t an option because Rachel and her three overprotective moms would see me through the glass wall that separated the credit union from the windowless corridor. Although it had been more than five years since I last approached women, my game couldn’t have dropped off *that* significantly, from a respectable four hundred batting average to a big, fat zero. *Three strikeouts in less than a month. Face it, dude. Game no longer recognizes game.*

There were no two ways about it. I was going to have to seek the advice of a Gen Z hipster and his girlfriend, two newly acquired friends from my apartment building near downtown Boise. They were young enough to be my kids; however, they struck me as old souls who seemed savvier about life in the fast lane than a middle-aged guy puttering along in the slow lane. *What am I not seeing?* Up ahead, I was glad to see the sunlight spilling into the empty and cavernous corridor that seemed to epitomize my current love life. And by the time I exited through the double-glass doors at the top of the stairs

and out onto the busy sidewalk, I knew I wouldn't be coming back to this branch any time soon.

## **The Finer Things Club**

“First of all, this phone has to go,” said Francesca.

“What do you mean? What's wrong with it?” I asked.

“She's right, Chuck. Sixth graders don't even carry flip phones anymore,” said Patrick.

While taking my Motorola out of Patrick's hands and looking at it as if it was unearthed from an archeological dig, Francesca said, “You do your art on a Mac, right? Then you totally need an iPhone.”

I liked Patrick and Francesca even before I knew their names. Along with me and a dozen other residents, they were attending a wine tasting event on the ground floor of our apartment building, all of us patiently listening to a wine company representative drone on about grape varietals from wineries local to Boise. Just as I was thinking, *This guy is*

*completely annoying*, I caught noticeable eyerolls from both Patrick and Francesca as they fidgeted on the one and only couch in the room. It seemed like I wasn't the only one dying a slow and torturous death.

From a distance, they appeared to be like any other fun-loving twenty-something couple who knew how to dress for every occasion. Up close, they were hilarious, self-deprecating, and much more worldly than their birthdates would indicate – that is – if you could get past being intimidated by their good looks and respective heights of six-eight and five-eleven. Within weeks of knowing them, they made me feel comfortable enough to assign them their Indian names of ‘Walks Among Treetops,’ and ‘Accessorizes With Taste.’ Without a doubt, these two were from my tribe. Most satisfying was that there seemed to be no movie or television show reference that was too ancient or obscure for them. I can still remember the two of them bursting into laughter after I told them we were like Pam, Oscar, and Toby in the “Finer Things Club” episode of the TV show, *The Office*, while we sipped pinot noir and snacked on a variety of cheeses and olives in their one-bedroom apartment.

While taking my phone from Francesca and handing it back to me, Patrick said, “Then you can start meeting women through dating apps instead of the creeper method.”

“He’s right, Chuck. Women want to see you on their phones first.”

“It’s not like I’m wearing a fake arm cast and asking women to help pull my sailboat out of the water,” I said.

“Ted Bundy, right?” said Francesca while laughing at my serial killer reference.

“*You* know who Ted Bundy is?” I asked. “My god! There’s nothing you two don’t freaking know!”

## **Must Swipe Left**

Prior to getting an iPhone in the fall of 2015, I could cite call waiting and my Keurig coffeemaker as the only technological advances to have significantly improved the quality of my life. I was so excited that I couldn’t wait to call Patrick and let him know.

“Treetops! It’s Chuck. I did it. I got a smart phone.”

“Congrats! But don’t call it a smart phone. People stopped saying that like ten years ago. Where are you?”

“Oh, okay. I’m still in the Verizon parking lot in Nampa.”

“Want to ride bikes with us to Lucky 13 for pizza?”

“Sweet. See you in about 20 minutes.”

Thinking that nothing could be more amazing than a GPS app that talked to you while driving, I was pretty surprised by how quickly it took a back seat to the three newly downloaded dating apps on my phone. *This is like shopping for human beings. Crazy!* As the novelty wore off, it didn’t take long for me to start recognizing patterns in what was written in the profiles and what pictures were shared.

One of the things I noticed right away was that a majority of the women dedicated a significant amount of precious profile real estate to their dating expectations. *I get it. Save time by cutting to the chase.* As much as that made sense to the

rational, analytical side of my brain, it didn't appeal to the emotional side of me. Even if they were subtle about it, it still came off like they were making out a wish list for their dream job when I read things like, “. . . less than a thirty-minute commute,” “. . . at least three to four weeks of vacation time,” and “. . . room for advancement after the first six months.”

And by 2018, when their dating expectations morphed into a list of directives, the profiles of these women started sounding less and less like introductions and more like burger orders that would promptly be sent back to the kitchen if they weren't brought to the table as ordered. To me, “Must have a full-time job,” “Must have your own place,” and “No couch potatoes” sounded more like, “Medium well,” “Extra cheese,” and “Hold the onions.” The most eye-catching and interesting of these directives was something I wouldn't have expected. Not only was the “MUST LOVE DOGS” directive the most common, it gave me the impression that it was the most important since it had a tendency to be written in capital letters. *Okay. Why don't you tell me how you really feel?* Even more interesting was that I never found, “Must love cats” on any of the dating profiles.

As time progressed, I began to notice that the profiles progressed as well, morphing yet again and adding a consequential element to go along with the directives and expectations. So, what started out as, “I’d like to meet a man who likes animals” progressed to “MUST LOVE DOGS.” And by 2020, this directive charmingly became, “SWIPE LEFT IF YOU DON’T LOVE DOGS!” *Wow. The only thing missing was the word, MAGGOT, at the end of it.* And within a year, the use of all capital letters extended to, “NO HOOK UPS,” “NO FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS,” and “NO TRUMPERS.” *Gee. Couldn’t we just meet for coffee and see how it goes?* It seemed like the ladies and I were playing two different games. Whereas they were looking for that last elusive piece to complete the jigsaw puzzle of their lives, I was wanting them to put their fingers next to mine on the plastic planchette, and see where it takes us on the Ouija board.

## **Joined at the Hip**

When I first started participating in online dating in 2015, twenty to thirty percent of the women, between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five, included at least one photo of a dog on their profile. And by 2021, that percentage easily doubled

while the number of dog pictures quadrupled. Since I was seeing similar increases in the frequency of dog-centric posts on social media as well as annual double-digit jumps in the number of people accompanied by dogs, I wasn't scratching my head. Instead, I wanted to learn more about this seemingly unnoticed phenomenon that had piqued my interest and derailed my love life.

What seemed cute at first quickly became tiresome and, ultimately, disturbing. No longer were pictures of Rufus relegated to the back yard. The hundreds of millions of photos being uploaded every day to social media and online dating apps revealed that nothing seems to be off-limits when it comes to dogs. If I didn't think it was true before, I certainly became a believer that dogs were no longer seen as just dogs – they were true companions, travel mates, best friends, and full-fledged family members with standing equal to those of anyone living under the same roof. Inside the house, dogs were not only allowed on couches, chairs, and beds, they seemed to have full access to the entire home, including sinks and bathtubs in kitchens and bathrooms.

Additionally, the maelstrom of images informed me that dogs

weren't pets to be left in the back yard all day. They were in back seats, passenger seats, and on the laps of dog owners while they drove around running errands, a constant companionship that also extended to their nine-to-five grinds outside the home. Whether or not it was a bring-your-dog-to-work day, I was routinely seeing uploaded pictures of dogs inside offices, cubicles, and work spaces of businesses you'd think wouldn't allow dogs on the premises. I can remember walking into the office area of a popular brewery in Boise to drop off some artwork and being totally caught off guard by all the dogs that quickly rushed over to me. Almost immediately, I was surrounded by half a dozen big dogs eager to rub against me, paw at me, jump at me, and put a wet nose print in the crotch area of my pants.

“You must be Chuck,” said the thirty-something hipster who dressed like he just came off the set of *Survivor*.

“I am. Where can I put these prints?” I blurted out while holding the art above my shoulders to protect it from all the rambunctious canine energy that surrounded me.

“Just on that counter over there. You all right?”

*No. I'm not all right. Do I look all right? My heartrate just went from 70 beats per minute to 150. I'm sweating and my face is beet red. What do you think, Einstein? "I'm good. Just surprised by all the dogs in here."*

"I know. Isn't it great?"

Because so many people document and post every single nuance of their life on social media, I wasn't too surprised by the dogs in the brewery since the virtual dog-centric worlds of Facebook and Instagram matched the dog-centric real world that I was living in. Even as recent as a trip to the mall last month in Raleigh, North Carolina, I encountered a forty-something man walking his dog in the middle of the concourse, a thirty-something couple pushing their dog in a baby stroller through the food court, and scooted past people holding their dogs in their arms in three of the four stores that I visited. I kept looking around at other people to see if they, too, were rolling their eyes, shaking their heads, or smirking at this insanity. I was still thinking about how no one looked twice or even seemed to notice the dog owners in the mall when I found my truck on the first level of the crowded parking garage. And as I was taking my keys out of my pocket

to unlock it, explosive loud barking suddenly erupted behind me, making me drop my keys instantly. Inside the Jeep Grand Cherokee beside my truck was an aggressive looking German Shepherd that seemed to want nothing more than to sink its teeth into me. *This is nuts. I'm just a guy doing some shopping on a Saturday and I have to keep an eye out for dogs in the mall, in stores, in the food court, and in the parking lot. CRAZY!*

## **And They Called It Puppy Love**

*This HAS to be a joke.* What started out as a typical weekday morning turned into something unforgettable. I had made my coffee, scanned the news headlines on the *USA Today* app on my phone, checked the TMI levels of posts on Facebook and Instagram, and plunked down at my desk to see if I received any emails on my laptop. Since Valentine's Day was still two weeks away, I expected to find my share of unwanted messages attempting to shame me into spending money on a beloved that didn't exist. "Nothing says it like diamonds!" – *delete*. "Surprise her with flowers!" – *delete*. "Dark chocolate is for lovers!" – *delete*. "28 Days of Puppy Love!" – *Wait a sec. What's this?*

I wasn't surprised to see an email offer from this particular hotel chain since I had stayed at their Portland, Oregon property more than once. But after opening their latest brainstorm of a promotion, I'd have to think twice before booking another reservation at this location, or at any of their other properties. *Dang it. And they're within walking distance to downtown restaurants and the Willamette River greenbelt.*

As my eyes scanned the contents of the email, I felt as if I had been served a smoothie made from ingredients that should never be mixed together, a combination of opportunity, sadness, and revulsion:

“Show your pup some love all month long! Did you know February is Creative Romance Month? And what better way to be creative and show your pup some lovin' than to book a surprise getaway?”

*Seriously? This isn't a joke?*

“We take pride in catering to all dogs and giving them (and you) a unique and extremely comfortable stay. Skip the anxiety about whether or not your furry friend should make

the trip and bring them along so everyone can make new memories.”

*Good because Rufus and I will want to reminisce about our trip to Portland!*

“This February, we’re waiving the daily pet fees when you and your best friend book our Bark and Park Package. You’ll also receive a treats tin because we like to think of it as afternoon delights for your dog.”

*Yep. This is about where the revulsion kicked in.*

“We’ll provide you with walk-friendly waste bags in a yellow holder to show your hotel pride for many walks to come.”

*Finally! A hotel chain that recognizes that the real shame in poop pickup stems from the color of the poop bags and not from the act of picking up the poop of a sub-species.”*

“Use our doggie door hangers to let us know your pup is in the room.”

*That way, we'll be sure to vacuum just outside the door to drive your dog insane while you're away!*

Although the timing of receiving such an email was certainly fortuitous since I was in the middle of writing this book, I couldn't help having mixed feelings about it. I scrolled back up to the top of the email to see the imbedded picture I skipped over earlier. In it, a lady is holding the complimentary tin of treats in front of her expectant dog. I may be lacking a romantic relationship in my life at the moment, but at least I'm not, ". . . booking a surprise getaway" for me and my dog on Valentine's Day.

## **Are We Having Fun Yet?**

When I lived in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, I always enjoyed riding my bike through the section of the Centennial Trail that divided downtown's City Park from the beach area of Coeur d'Alene Lake. Even though the heavy and unpredictable foot traffic forced me to slow down and execute balancing acts normally reserved for circus performers, it was both pleasant and familiar to feel the joy and happiness that emanated from the hordes of people escaping the near one-hundred-degree

temperatures. With a backdrop of low-rising mountains dotted with Douglas fir and Ponderosa Pine trees along with a pleasing lineup of cobalt blue marina awnings that matched the accents on the adjacent seventeen-story resort hotel, the scene couldn't have been more idyllic.

I soon learned that it was best to ride through the waterfront area in the late afternoon hours on weekdays rather than weekends because my bike and I were less of a nuisance to the residents and vacationers who didn't think they needed to watch out for cyclists as they crisscrossed between the park and the lake. On one of those occasions, just as the park was coming up on my right, I found myself needing to stop so I could adjust the wire basket that managed to slide too far forward despite being secured to the rear bike rack by four bungee cords. As I was repositioning the basket, I heard the sound of playful splashing and the voice of a woman. Because overgrown bushes stood between me and the beach area, I was able to seek out the source of the commotion from a position that made me look like a Peeping Tom.

She was wearing a one-piece bathing suit and looked to be in her mid-forties. While knee-deep in the lake, she was

crouching in cadence with her wildly swinging arms, her voice alternating between laughter and unintelligible words. Next to her was a large dog that was not only splashing her back, it mirrored the same unabashed playfulness as its owner. If there was a video clip that defined the word, “frolicking,” this was it. Within five seconds, I went from thinking, That’s so nice. She’s having fun with her dog, to muttering, “That’s so sad. She’s having fun with her dog.” It reminded me of an exchange I had had with Patrick and Francesca years earlier when I returned to Boise after a ten-day bike trip through Central Idaho:

“Hey Chuck! You’re back!” said Patrick and Francesca almost in unison.

“Good to see you guys. Finer Things Club meeting this week?”

“You know it,” replied Francesca.

“So . . . did you have fun on your trip?” asked Patrick.

While locking my bike to one of the poles just outside the

entrance to the apartment building, I said, “God, it never fails.”

“What never fails?” asked Francesca.

“People always ask me that when I get back from one of these trips. It’s literally everything BUT fun. It was exciting, educational, surprising, scary, pleasing, inspiring, troubling, meditative, dicey, transformative, challenging, exhausting, liberating . . . should I go on?”

“Okay, okay, relax, dude. We get it,” replied Patrick.

“To me, fun is something that’s generated when other people are involved,” I continued while making sure that the steel shackle of the padlock couldn’t be pulled out. “Think how weird I’d look if you and Francesca saw me having FUN all by myself. See what I mean? I’d look insane, right?”

“We already think you’re insane, Chuck. We’re doing trivia night at Whole Foods on Wednesday again, right?”

“You know it, Francesca.”

The ding-ding sound of the bell from the approaching bike not only put an end to the flashback of my Boise friends, it immediately caused a wave of guilt to pulse through my body since I realized how creepy I must have appeared to this faceless rider. Since I had moved my bike out of the way while keeping my back turned toward the rider, I had an unobstructed view of him looking to his right as soon as he cleared the bushes. In my mind, I could almost hear him muttering to himself, “So busted.” And after I got back on my bike and started riding, I, too, looked to my right. This time, the dog was on its hind legs while the woman held the dog’s front paws. Both were still in the water and both seemed to be looking at each other adoringly. But that wasn’t the only thing that I found disturbing. As I scanned the faces of the twenty to thirty people in close proximity to the woman and her dog, I noticed that I was the only person gawking at her. And with that, I changed gears, bore down on the pedals and tried convincing myself that women would rather have a man in their life than a dog.

## Chapter 7: Barbara & Carrie

### Sweet Caroline

Despite the graying hair and age difference, Barbara's soft smile, high cheekbones, and easy conversation made her appear much younger than what her driver's license would indicate. We met online and agreed to meet at a coffee shop in Post Falls, Idaho since it was equidistant from Coeur d'Alene and Spokane, Washington. With the pleasantries aside and our coffee cups nearly empty, I felt comfortable asking her a question that was much more interesting than, "How do you like living in Spokane?" or "What do you think about the pandemic?"

"May I ask why you keep looking inside your purse?" I pried.  
"Are you checking your phone?"

"Oh my god. I'm so sorry. You see . . . my daughter gave me something for my birthday a few of days ago and . . . here, let me show you."

Barbara picked up her purse from the floor and placed it on

her seat between her legs. She put one hand inside and quickly found what she was looking for. While looking around to see if anyone was watching, Barbara slowly withdrew her hand as though she was going to produce something that could spill. Instead, it was the tiniest living thing I had ever seen – a Shih Tzu puppy that was asleep in the palm of her hand. It was either brown with white patches or white with brown patches; but that didn't matter since it looked like an angelic toy either way.

“Oh my god. That can't be real. Did you give it a name yet?” I asked.

“I know, right? Her name is Caroline.”

“So, you're going to keep it?”

“What? Are you serious? Of course, I am. She's my little baby!” said Barbara while moving the puppy from her lap to her chest. “Could *you* say goodbye to this sweet face?”

Realizing that I may have disappointed her with my last question, I replied, “Not a chance.” But knowing I'd most

likely never see her again, I pressed on by asking, “Why do you think your daughter surprised you with a puppy?”

“She knew I was feeling pretty lonely since my last relationship ended and thought Caroline could keep me company.”

“Is it working?”

“Oh my god, yes! I love being with her!”

“Is that why you brought her with you this morning?” I asked while thinking that I probably pushed it too far.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Inside my head, I began hearing the wail of sirens, the kind you hear in war films that signal an incoming air raid. I could also hear the sound of a computer-generated voice of a cold and dispassionate woman repeating, “Abort mission. Abort mission.” *I KNEW I had pushed it too far.* “I mean I don’t blame you. She’s adorable.” I replied.

“Totally!” she agreed. And while handing me the puppy, she said, “Could you hold Caroline for me while I go to the restroom? Thanks!”

Within a few seconds of holding the diminutive creature that couldn't have weighed more than a dry kitchen sponge, I imagined that I was experiencing what the giant ape was feeling in the 1933 movie, *King Kong*, when he was holding his delicate female prize played by Fay Wray. One wrong move and this puppy would have a limp for the rest of its life – or worse. Surprisingly, I began feeling an urge to smell it, and when I did, it smelled like a bouquet of Barbara's perfume, peppermint breath mints, rose blossom baby wipes, and whatever else was in her purse. And, when the tiny thing partially woke up and made a peeping sound, I wanted nothing more than to have it live inside my shirt. *Wow! This puppy is like a drug! CRAZY!*

“Good. You're back. I almost bolted out the door with your baby,” I joked while handing her the crack pipe cleverly disguised as a Shih Tzu puppy.

After our goodbyes and tissue paper thin promises to get

together soon, I pulled out of the parking lot and took one last look at her. She was still standing in front of her open driver-side door and looked to be talking to the pocket-sized fur ball. *God . . . this country has more than a pandemic – it has an epidemic, too.* And by the time I crossed the state line at Liberty Lake on Interstate 90 on my way back to Coeur d’Alene, I caught myself humming Neil Diamond’s, “Sweet Caroline.”

## **Nature Versus Nurture**

Even though it had been over an hour since we ate dinner, Carrie and I could still smell the partially burnt Papa Murphy pizza emanating through the screen door of the kitchen while we drank red wine from a box on her backyard deck. It wasn’t a total disaster since I didn’t mind eating the half with the blackened crust; plus, it was my fault.

“I think it’s done,” Carrie had said when we both crouched down in front of the open oven door.

“Definitely ten more minutes,” I replied as if my Philly upbringing in an Irish-Italian neighborhood gave me the right

to overrule pizza baking instructions.

From the sound of Carrie's laughter and slurred words, I could tell she had moved past the oven fiasco a while ago and was enjoying the pleasantness of the summer evening like I was. While sitting on patio chairs that faced the back yard, we watched Bella chase squirrels that seemed to take great pleasure in tormenting the little dog. They'd come down from the trees, make themselves look like sitting ducks and wait for Bella to come charging. Then, at the last possible moment, they'd dash away, cruelly stopping at the top of the fence to watch the frustrated dog leap at them with nary a chance of success. I had to admit; it was pretty entertaining.

Either sheer exhaustion or utter humiliation would cause Bella to throw in the towel and come join us on the deck. When the shows would come to a close, I'd often toss my head back to look high up into the trees and marvel at how Carrie's entire back yard was shaded by a thick canopy of leaves and branches made possible by three majestic trees. I found it interesting that only one of the trees was in Carrie's back yard while the other two sprouted up from the two properties on either side of hers.

While looking down at the dog in front of her, Carrie said, “Bella is so damn funny, isn’t she? Sometimes, I think she’s the only one who really gets me.”

*Oh boy . . . here we go again*, I thought to myself since Carrie had a tendency to get self-reflective in a me-against-the-world sort of way after a few glasses of wine. And, it wasn’t the first time she clumsily transitioned from lightheartedness to proclaiming Bella as her only *true* friend. But, on that particular evening, I was in the mood to go a little bit farther down that path.

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

“People disappear when you need help, but Bella is always there for me.”

“Okay. But what makes you think she gets you?” I continued.

“She can tell when I’m down and does things to cheer me up,” she answered.

“Like what?”

“She lays next to me, puts her head on my lap, licks my tears away . . . stuff like that.”

While wondering if I’d ever be able to erase the image of Bella licking Carrie’s tear-streaked face, I forged ahead and asked her, “So you think Bella understands you? Loves you? Wants you to be happy?”

“I know she does. You certainly don’t,” she replied as she leaned over in her chair to pat the dog’s head for emphasis.

*I knew THAT was coming.* “C’mon Carrie . . . you know that’s not true,” I said. “But maybe there’s another reason why Bella gives you that impression?”

“Let’s hear it. I know you hate dogs.”

“That’s so not true, and you know it! You wouldn’t be hanging out with me if I ever mistreated Bella.”

“All right, all right . . . don’t be so dramatic,” she said.

“I’m not saying that Bella doesn’t do all those things when

you're upset. I'm just thinking that it's possible that she does them out of a survival instinct rather than a desire to comfort you. Think about it. Dogs have been domesticated by humans for tens of thousands of years. You don't think dogs have a DNA sequence that kicks in to help them get food, water, and playtime from an owner who's down and out?"

"Dogs can love, Chuck."

"Hold on. Hold on. Let me finish. Maybe when Bella sits by you, looks up at you from your lap, and licks your tears, she's trying to say, 'Hey! Remember me? Yeah, well, I know you're depressed and all but let's not go too far down the rabbit hole. This dog still has to eat, you know.'"

"I totally disagree."

"The thing is . . . neither of us can prove our theories – you thinking Bella is comforting you and me thinking that she's reminding you of her presence so you'll feed her. But . . . if we had to file supporting evidence with the court should we go to trial over this, I'm thinking my theory would win over yours."

“Oh really?” she said while finishing what was left in her wine glass.

“Yeah, because my evidence would be based on genetic adaptations to improve survival rates while yours would rely on scientists knowing what a dog is thinking. Umm . . . by the way, scientists can tell you where the earth is in relation to the whole universe but they can’t tell you what a human being is thinking. Did you save me some wine?”

“You’re such a nerd.”

I wanted so much to tell her about an even more compelling theory as to why she and other dog owners believe that their dogs understand them, love them, and comfort them. But if I did, I’d be no better than the squirrels waiting for Bella to come chase them.

## Chapter 8: Martha & Debbie

### Tonight's The Night

Although it was only ten o'clock on a Saturday evening, traffic was light as I drove Martha and myself back to her place in Eagle after a fun night at the Western Idaho Fair. I was still thinking of the buttered and salted ear of corn that I had eaten almost two hours earlier when Martha said, "I'm glad you're staying over tonight."

"Oh yeah . . . about that . . . I think . . ."

"I changed the sheets for you, too," she added.

"You did? That was nice of you. Boy, you weren't kidding about that corn. Totally worth the three dollars," I said while doing my best to mask the trepidation I had felt all evening. It was going to be our first night together, and I was worried about having to share the bed with her dog, Max.

Of course, I had met Martha through an online dating app. But instead of the usual total bust, I was genuinely shocked to see

that it was working out. She was my age, active, and enjoyed bike riding as much as me. She was slim, petite, and somehow missed the memo urging her to cut her hair off like most women do when they reach the half century mark. She had friends, a job she enjoyed, and had already been through her Bob Vila stage from *This Old House*, a phenomenon where middle-aged women turn into do-it-yourself home contractors for two to four years soon after buying their first house following the dissolution of a decades-long marriage.

As atypical as she was, Martha exemplified the same characteristics of most women who acquire a dog to temper the loneliness they feel after the last kid or ex-husband leaves the house which was once a bustling family home. She explained how Max was there for her and how the dog helped her climb out of more than a few dark places over the last seven years. Even though Martha was sociable and multifaceted, her life still revolved around Max. And when I was reminded on more than one occasion that Max can do whatever he pleases in the house after she saw how I didn't want the dog jumping on me or on the same furniture as me, I knew our budding relationship had an Achilles' heel.

By most accounts, Martha's beloved dog was typical in almost every way. Max was curious about everything, always following Martha around, checking on my whereabouts from time to time and making good use of the two doggie doors on either side of the cozy house. And, like most dogs, Max liked being wherever Martha and I were in the house – especially in the living room where he would situate himself between us or on top of Martha. That's when I first discovered that Max's penis hangs out from its sheath.

“Holy Shit! I think it touched me!” I had said to Martha soon after Max had walked across my lap while I was seated on the couch in the living room.

“I know . . . I feel bad for him. The vet said he can't do anything about it,” she replied.

*Did you not hear me, woman? IT touched me!* I thought to myself, thinking I'd be sure to set fire to these pants at some point in the very near future. After seeing it for the first time, I wondered how I had not seen it before – especially since the blood-red color of it contrasted mightily against the medium sized dog's curly, jet-black hair. And it became harder and

harder to ignore, causing me to imagine all the invisible wet spots on the furniture, throw pillows, rugs, bed sheets, and clothing. *Yikes!*

After such a romantic night at the fair, I wanted to stay the night with Martha, too, so I went ahead and addressed the elephant in the room by asking, “So where’s Max going to sleep tonight?”

“With us on the bed. He’ll most likely stay at our feet during most of the night,” she replied.

*With US? MOST of the night? This is insane!* “Do you think he could sleep outside the bedroom for the first night?” I pressed.

“I’ll get him to stay off. I don’t even think he’ll want to be on the bed if you’re on it,” she said as if that would be the perfect compromise.

“But if he startles me by jumping on the bed in the middle of the night, I’m liable to flip out, scaring the hell out of you and Max.”

“It’ll be okay, Chuck. You’ll see,” she assured.

She was right about that – but then came morning.

## **Bad Hair Day**

It had been a long time since I watched a woman get ready for work in the morning. Having already showered and dressed, I made myself comfortable in the doorway of her bathroom, leaning against the left side of the doorframe while enjoying a second cup of coffee. Her energetic positivity included a dash of hilarity and spunkiness, making me think to myself, *This woman literally wakes up this way*. Whereas a frenetic, high-speed personality would normally drain my internal battery, I found Martha to be interesting, funny, and entertaining.

She was a good storyteller, too. And from the entrance to her bathroom, I learned then and there that that skill didn’t diminish while she applied makeup and dried her hair. Although her back was toward me, I would catch her eyes looking at mine through the mirror in front of her while she told me a story about a lady she works with. Even while putting on mascara, combing her wet hair, and pulling out the

blow-dryer from the cabinet below the sink, she never missed a beat in the story. *It's like her mind is on autopilot when it came to the bathroom routine.*

The moment after she flipped on the blow-dryer, Martha asked, "Can you still hear me?"

"I can. So, then what happened?" I asked.

After watching her blow-dry her hair and style it for a few minutes with a brush she kept on the counter next to her perfume, I felt something hairy brush up against my lower legs, causing me to take notice of Max making his way into the bathroom. Martha must have felt him brush up against her, too, because she immediately crouched down and pointed the blow-dryer at the dog. While continuing her story, she began brushing Max with the same brush that was in her hand. *Oh my god. Are you kidding me?* This went on for a few minutes as Max cycled through various positions so his owner could brush him everywhere. When he flipped over onto his back, I immediately saw his penis, perpetually wet and matching the color of my hand if I pulled it out of a running garbage disposal.

The brush found every inch of Max's body and despite Martha's commitment to the story, I had completely forgotten what she was talking about. All I could think about was, *Where is that brush going after she's done using it on Max? Into a glass vessel of blue-colored disinfectant you see in barber shops? Out the window? Into an incinerator?* I didn't need to wait long since Max had had enough, his warm fur brushing against my legs as he made his way out of the bathroom. Martha stood up, faced the mirror again, and began styling her hair with the same brush in her left hand while holding the blow-dryer in her right. *Oh god. Say it ain't so!* I assumed my expression didn't tip the hand of what I was feeling inside because she kept on going with the story as if all was right in the world.

## **Wish You the Best**

By the time I pulled into my place twenty minutes later, after having said goodbye to Martha with a peck you'd give to your spinster aunt Harriet and a, "I'll text you later," I already knew what I needed to say to her. I really did like her; so, instead of slowly fading away, I wrote a text that asked if we could sit down and talk about Max since I felt he was a distraction to

the budding courtship. I even went as far as sending the text to two girlfriends before sending it to Martha and asked them if I was being insensitive or presenting an ultimatum. One texted back and said, “Not at all. It actually reads like you’re open to some kind of compromise,” while the other called me later that morning.

“Hey, Chuck. It’s Brittany.”

“Hi, Brittany. Thanks for chiming in. So, what do you think?”

“It sounds like you genuinely want to find a solution. Good job on the write up. More dog ladies, eh?”

“It’s never-ending. I think there’s only one single lady over fifty that doesn’t have a pet, and she lives in Fairbanks, Alaska – but I actually do like Martha. I’d like to see where this goes,” I replied.

“How do you think she’ll respond?” asked Brittany.

“I think she’ll be open to a discussion. She told me she hasn’t dated anyone in almost ten years because she hasn’t been able

to find a guy she's attracted to. I can tell she likes me a lot so I'm not too worried. It sucks that I even have to bring this up, but she's worth it."

"Good luck. Let me know what she says."

"I definitely will. Thanks, Brittany."

I waited until the middle of the afternoon to send the text; and when I did, I received a reply from Martha in less than ten minutes. After reading her response three or four times, I phoned Brittany.

"Hi, Brittany."

"Hey, Chuck. So . . . how did she take it?"

"I'm out," I said.

"What do you mean, 'you're out?'"

"She wrote me back in like ten minutes and told me she's not getting rid of Max and that she wishes me the best."

“Did you write her back?”

“Why would I? When they write, ‘I wish you the best,’ that’s it. You’re done,” I said.

“I’m so sorry, Chuck.”

“Yeah. Me, too. Talk to you later. Thanks, Brittany.”

After ending the call with Brittany, I went outside to sit out on my balcony, disbelief still consuming my every thought. *I didn’t ask her to get rid of the dog.* I didn’t plan on reaching out to Martha again, but my mind kept circling back to the fact that she chose a dog over me – even after not finding someone suitable for nearly a decade. *I don’t understand these women. I really don’t.*

The sound of a car door slamming shut took me out of my thoughts for a moment, making me get up to see who was in the parking lot down below. It was the couple from the corner apartment on the first floor. They were holding hands. When I sat back down on the patio chair, my thoughts went back to the previous night at the fair. Martha and I were people-

watching while sharing a hay bale that was situated a few yards away from the foot traffic, in between the busy concession stands and the blurring neon lights of the rides.

Every now and then, she'd say from her side of the hay bale, "Did I not tell you that would be best corn on the cob you ever tasted?"

And I'd always turn to her and say, "It's unbelievable."

## **Fur-Baby Mommy**

I had only been with Debbie for three hours, and I was already weighing my options on how to cut my losses on the weekend-long first date. Since staying in shape was something we both valued, we decided to go out for a walk-run workout on a section of the Wood River bike trail that passed by the rustic and understated Ernest Hemingway memorial in Ketchum, Idaho. Earlier that morning, I had made the two-and-a-half-hour drive up from Boise to meet her for the first time after having talked on the phone and texted for the last couple of weeks. Her dating profile on Match was both refreshing and predictable. She was five years younger than me, attractive,

fit, and operated two businesses that I found interesting: a studio that combined happy hour with an art class and freelance makeup artistry. *And here I thought makeup artists only existed in Beverly Hills and on Bravo TV.* Actually, it made sense since the city of Ketchum is the most expensive city in Idaho to live in; plus, it shares its city limits with ultra-swanky Sun Valley. *Nice going, Debbie. Make those wealthy retirees faces look fabulous before handing them a paintbrush and a glass of pinot grigio.*

Because she didn't have kids of her own, I wasn't surprised when Debbie told me she had pets – a three-year-old yellow Labrador named Harley and a two-year-old black-and-white cat named Boots. Despite being well aware of the strange need of empty nester women to become surrogate mothers to pets, I forged ahead with Debbie, hoping she wouldn't be like the rest, referring to herself as a fur-baby mommy. Sadly, that hope ended within five minutes of pulling into her driveway.

“Hey! You made good time,” she said after letting the storm door close behind her.

“I love that drive. Wow. You certainly look prettier in person,

Debbie,” I said while stepping around the front of my truck to give her a hug. And as I gave that hug, I felt her dog jump up on me from behind, causing me to lurch forward, pushing Debbie backward as I did so.

“OUCH!” I yelled as I felt the dog’s nails drag down my legs and dig into the back of one of my knees.

“That’s just Harley. He likes you,” she said without inquiring about the scrapes behind my right knee.

“Man . . . that totally caught me off guard. How long have you had him?” I asked while inspecting the damage.

“I’ve been a fur-baby mommy for a little over two years,” she replied from a crouching position so she could put her arms around Harley. “I love this guy!”

*And there it is, I thought to myself. Maybe she makes up for the weird dog obsession by being an awesome cook or by giving great backrubs.* “Do you think you have any Neosporin in the house?” I asked.

“I’ll see what I have.”

## **Abort Mission**

The neat and tidy interior of the house surprised me because the landscaping in the front yard was whimsical and overgrown. Although it was crammed with an eclectic mixture of furniture ranging from an antique hutch in the living room to a postmodern dining set in the kitchen, there was a comfortable breathability about it, most likely aided by the many windows in the cottage-like home. And when I took in the colorful surroundings accented with bright oranges and reds for the first and last time, I knew I was in the dwelling of a true artist.

“So, do you think you’re ready to go on that walk-run with me?” I asked, hoping a change of scenery could get her off the subject of her pets, which had been dominating the conversation for the past ninety minutes.

“Definitely. Let’s do it!” she replied.

“Great. I’ll change and meet you outside.”

When Debbie emerged from the house ten minutes later, she jogged past me to grab her mail from the mailbox at the foot of the driveway and then turned around and jogged back into the house. *Nice legs*, I thought to myself as I stretched my calves using one of the three short steps that connected the driveway to the walkway that led to the front door. When she came out again, she was wearing a bulky fanny pack around her waist and holding a leash connected to Harley.

“Does he have to come this time?” I asked. “Might not be a good workout if he makes us stop a lot.”

While her face had an expression that looked like I just asked if we could take Harley back to the animal shelter, Debbie replied, “Yes, he needs exercise, too. I run with him all the time.”

“Okay. Ready to go?” I said, hoping to end the uncomfortable exchange.

As I predicted, we did much more walking than running because Harley needed to smell most everything, pee on stuff, and empty his colon within three minutes after leaving the

house. I also made the mental error of watching her pick up the steaming pile with a poop bag she dispensed from a green colored roll inside the fanny pack, putting the immediate kibosh on the current backrub fantasy. Because her conversation shifted from telling me all about the incredible personalities of Harley and Boots to what her fur babies meant to her, I was pretty sure my suggestion to leave her dog behind put her on the defensive.

After making up my mind and mentally accepting the inevitable awkwardness that would commence soon after letting her know, “I’m heading back to Boise,” when we returned to the house, I made the best of the situation and listened to her. Much of what she was saying I had heard before over the phone, but now I could see how troubled she was from being estranged from her family, having had two broken engagements and a recent breakup from a guy who gave her the best orgasms of her life.

“Really? The best you’ve ever had?” I inquired.

“Oh my god, yes. We did the friends with benefits thing for about a year after we broke up but that’s over now.”

“Why? What happened?” I continued.

“He got a new girlfriend,” she replied.

I was grateful for having gone down that line of questioning with her because I felt less guilty about cancelling our weekend plans. Besides feeling increasingly uncomfortable watching her talk to and tend to her dog as if she was a first-time mother with her two-year-old child, I was put off by her mentioning the sex life of her previous relationship. *Who DOES that? Oh . . . I know. Somebody who wants to pretend she gave birth to a dog and a cat.*

## **The Twilight Zone**

For a comfortably warm and cloudless Saturday after-noon in early May, I was surprised there weren't more people out on the bike trail, just an occasional biker or runner, mostly fit older folks with tans that could only come from extended winter vacations in the Caribbean. At the agreed upon turnaround spot across from the gun range, about a quarter of a mile past the memorial, Debbie needed to stop so she could remove her wind-breaker. That's when I noticed the curious

tattoos on the undersides of each forearm. It was hard to decipher what they depicted, but I could tell they were newer looking since the dark green color was unfaded and stood out against her alabaster skin. When I still couldn't figure out what her tattoos signified after we started heading back to her place, I simply had to ask.

“Are those new tattoos?”

“Oh . . . these? Kind of. I'd say around a year old,” she replied. And while extending each forearm, she added, “This one is Harley, and this one is Boots.”

“I see. And you have their names, too, and . . . are those their birthdays?” I asked.

“No. I didn't have a way of really knowing those, but these are the dates they became my kids.”

At that point, our first date went from being a total bust to an episode straight out of the *Twilight Zone* TV series. *No, Mr. Serling. The next stop isn't the Twilight Zone because I'm already here!* By the time we reached her place, I had already

calculated that I just needed to grab my overnight bag which I had left on her living room couch. I waited for her to open the storm door and unlock the front door before following her inside. After slinging the bag over my shoulder, I told her that I was heading back to Boise.

“I knew it. You hate my pets, don’t you?”

“I don’t hate pets at all. It’s just not my thing, and it seems to be the central theme around here,” I said.

“Then why did you come up here? You knew that I had pets,” she replied while looking like she was ready to defend Harley and Boots to the bitter end.

“Look . . . I want to get back before dark. I’ll call you later this evening.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I promise,” I said, and quickly exited through the front door, walking across the lawn instead of using the walkway to hasten my departure from this insane asylum disguised as a

quaint alpine bungalow.

Even after having been at home for a few hours, I still needed to take deep breaths before calling Debbie. In the short time that I knew her, I picked up on an intensity about her that I sensed was based more on adamant self-righteousness than raw passion.

“Hi, Debbie. It’s me.”

“Hi,” she said.

“I’m kind of surprised you picked up, but I’m glad you did. I owe you an answer to your question asking me why I came to see you when I knew you had pets,” I said to the sound of nothing. “Are you still there?”

“Yes. Go on.”

“Okay. Well, I can’t seem to find a woman who doesn’t have pets and you have all the other traits I’m looking for. By coming to see you, I’d be able to see what kind of relationship you have with yours. To be honest, you’re pretty far down that

rabbit hole,” I said with a tinge of coldness to match her terse responses.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

After getting Debbie to promise that she wouldn’t hang up on me, I shared my theories that addressed why she had such strong emotional ties to her pets and why they were unhealthy for her.

“You’re just insecure, Chuck. Plus, you don’t know how to love. You can’t love anything!”

“Fair enough, Debbie. Tell you what . . . pass along what I told you to your girlfriends. I bet they’ll agree with me.”

“Oh, I will. Believe me, I will,” she replied.

A few days later, I received a text from Debbie saying, “They all agreed with me. You’re insecure, controlling, and you can’t love anything! Your loss! And you’re a narcissist! Best of luck to you.”

I immediately thumbed out a text reply but thought it best to let her have the last word. Had I sent it instead of deleting it, she would've read, "You have not one, but TWO names tattooed on your body – and not one of them is the name of the guy who gave you the best orgasms of your life. How could I ever compete with that!"

## Chapter 9: Sorry, Not Sorry

### I the Person

For the most part, I've been able to develop theories that attempt to explain why so many dog owners, especially women, form such close bonds with their dogs and why I believe it's emotionally unhealthy; however, there are two behaviors that I haven't been able to wrap my head around. As much as I find these behaviors egregious and reprehensible, they are equally fascinating to me and worth mentioning in this book because they are not only the most frequent behaviors that I experience with both male and female dog owners – they are the most avoidable. Even more interesting is that the second behavior immediately follows the first behavior, both adhering to the logical premise of cause and effect. But before I delve into this any further, I need to put my thoughts into relatable terms. I need to talk about Bill Engvall and COVID-19.

One of my favorite stand-up comedians back in the early 2000s was Bill Engvall, one of four acts in the *Blue-Collar Comedy Tour* starring Jeff Foxworthy. His “Here's Your

Sign” routine was not only the most popular segment of his set, it was literally the punchline and food for thought for an imaginative guy like me. In it, he would describe all kinds of dumb things people would do to earn a sign or t-shirt identifying themselves to others as “not too bright.” When federal and state guidelines ushered in the indoor mask mandates nearly twenty years later in 2020 to help curb the spread of COVID-19, I remember being in a grocery store and thinking to myself, *My god . . . it’s like living in a parallel universe where Bill Engvall’s jokes are a reality.*

Despite obvious signage on all the entrances to wear a mask, along with most people wearing masks in the grocery store, I’d consistently see twenty to thirty percent of the customers walking around maskless. As much as I wanted to imagine them carrying one of Bill Engvall’s signs, I saw them carrying a sign that read, “I the Person” since their choice was the exact inverse of “We the People” from the preamble of The Constitution of the United States. *Is it more important to suit yourself than to make the people in the store feel that you care about their wellbeing?*

Even as I pretended that every maskless person in the grocery

store had doctorates in epidemiology, virology, or immunology – or that they were more informed than the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci – I still saw them as putting themselves above others. It's hard to fathom what's going through the minds of the maskless, but I can imagine they're thinking things like: "Look at all these pathetic, uninformed mask wearers. Can't think on their own? Just blindly following, like the mindless, obedient sheep that they are?" For me, Bill Engvall's comedy premise and the indoor mask mandates go farther than the aisles of a grocery store – they followed me outside to hiking trails, bike paths, and neighborhood sidewalks.

## **What a Weenie**

Although zipping along on a bicycle makes me feel alive, walking on a bike path allows me to think more deeply about whatever is on my mind; however, those meditative jaunts are often disrupted by dog owners. When approaching a person or a group with one or more dogs, I always go through the same routine, a set of checks and balances perfected over many years. The first thing I do from twenty yards away is assess

whether the dog owner exhibits the behavior of considerate grocery store mask wearers who think of others besides themselves or the behavior of non-mask wearers who think only of themselves. To me, dog owners should be demonstrative in showing that they have control over their dog when people who don't know them are approaching. By not cinching the leash to gather slack or orienting themselves so that they are between their dog and passerby, myopic dog owners are showing me that I'm about to encounter someone wearing the dreadful, "I the Person" t-shirt.

Whereas the ratio of grocery store mask wearers to non-mask wearers is approximately five to one, the ratio of dog owners who demonstrate control over their dog to those who don't is not only reversed – it's even worse than that on public greenways, hiking trails, and bike paths. From my experience over the last ten years, I'd put the number of dog owners who demonstrate dog control at one out of every ten dog owner encounters. That statistic alone made me say goodbye to enjoying music while walking years ago since jogging dog owners can approach me from behind. And because half of the dozen or so dog bites that I've been traumatized by have come from dogs on leashes attached to oblivious dog owners, I had

no choice but to trade in my earbuds for the baton and dog repellent I introduced in Chapter 4.

The second thing I do when approaching a dog owner not demonstrating control over their dog is to factor in the size, aggressiveness, and breed of the dog at the end of the leash. Sadly, that only determines how fast my heart will race and how shallow my breathing will become while biking, walking, or running past the dog. Next, I begin to watch the dog starting from approximately fifteen yards away, never taking my eyes off of it until it is a yard or two past me. At ten yards out, I tighten my grip around the baton after positioning it in the hand closest to the dog while the other hand prepares the repellent for accurate dispensation. Depending on the length of my walk, time of day, and the location, this routine is repeated ten to forty times during a single outing.

Most times, I don't think the dog owner even notices me because they're usually focused on what's streaming through their earbuds or phone screens or engrossed in a conversation with someone who's walking with them. But when they do, I can feel them tense up a bit since they can see me eyeballing their dog as well as what I'm holding in my hands. I don't like

giving people this impression of me, but I feel I have no choice but to be steadfast and vigilant at protecting myself since they can't seem to get it through their heads that I don't know who they are or what their dog is like. I often wonder what's going through the mind of the dog owner who won't demonstrate control over their dog as they pass by me. Are they thinking to themselves, *Wow. What an intense psycho? He's worried about MY sweet Rufus? MY dog wouldn't hurt a flea! God . . . what a weenie!*

## **Mind Your Manners**

Even after assuming that all dog owners are experts on the life and times of their beloved dog, even going as far as convincing myself that they've earned advanced degrees in various pet sciences, I still see dog owners who don't demonstrate control over their dogs to approaching strangers as people who put themselves above others – just like the maskless in the grocery store projecting superiority over the so-called masked sheep gathered at the deli counter. It's a behavior that I just can't explain other than it's an, "I the Person" mentality versus the more selfless attitude of "We the People." What's even more confounding than this irritating behavior is the subsequent

behavior that follows after a passing dog suddenly moves toward me. The statistics alone are both mindboggling and disheartening.

To those who know me personally, it wouldn't surprise them to hear that I tend to count things. But just because I do doesn't mean that I'm *on the spectrum* or suffer from an obsessive-compulsive disorder – I just keep track of stuff that I find interesting. When a dog owner doesn't acknowledge me or say that they're sorry after an event where their unprovoked dog has forced me to avoid it, I find that disappointing as well as interesting. To me, an event is qualified as such when the dog owner notices that their dog has forced me to quickly move away from it, obviously startling me both visually and audibly. Moreover, the qualified event is not affected by the aggressive or passive manner in which the dog approaches me – it just has to make me want to avoid it. I assume dog owners would be shocked and horrified if I inexplicably moved toward them uninvited, my gnashing teeth, wet nose, tongue, and hands ready to be on their person. *So why expect me to be okay with your dog moving toward me when I didn't invite the encounter?*

I'll be honest – it always disheartens me when a dog owner doesn't apologize after their dog has startled me into performing a circus act on my bike or a clumsy ballet move to avoid their dog when it suddenly comes at me. *I'm just a guy out for a ride or a walk, and I just defied one or two laws of physics to avoid hurting your dog with my bike or baton and I STILL can't get an acknowledgment? Wow.* I'd understand if at this point, you're saying to yourself, "So what. We all encounter rude people from time to time. What are you? An oversensitive creampuff? Get over it, dude!" What you may not realize is dismissiveness of that nature, in those situations, is more common than you might believe. I'd even go as far as to say it's more the rule than the exception.

Events that force me to suddenly dart out of the way of a leashed dog occur approximately once every three outings, sometimes more frequently in high foot-traffic areas. In those cases, where the dog owner sees and hears that I've been startled by their dog through a sudden approach or explosive barking, very few apologies or acknowledgments come my way. In 2019, I amassed a record of thirty-one consecutive dismissals during a string of qualified events. Even more shocking is that I'm presently amassing a new record which

currently stands at fifty-four consecutive dismissals during the same type of events. *Geez! People are more apt to apologize for pushing their grocery cart too close to your car in the parking lot than they are for scaring the bejesus out of you with their uncontrolled dog. I wonder why that is?*

After those instances, I always walk or ride away shaking my head and reeling at the thought of not registering on that dog owner's radar screen of common decency. *My feelings don't matter to you at all? Really?* Over the years, I've been able to rationalize that it's not something that's inflicted on me personally. I see their lack of courtesy stemming from an amalgam of what's equally observed in the bigger picture of society – an inability to take ownership of having caused a problem, a feeling that they can exit the situation without being identified and a longstanding, general degradation of civilized society beginning with manners and social graces. *Hmm . . . maybe the person who stopped their grocery cart from hitting my truck in the parking lot did so because I could identify them from their license plate? Or, they wanted to avoid the hassle with their car insurance company?*

In late 1999, I watched a television show where the premise

was based on asking hundreds of famous people ranging from renowned authors, decorated astronauts, and sports icons to former political figures, corporation founders, and religious leaders what would matter most in the next millennium. At the end of the program, I was surprised to learn that the most common answer was, “manners.” Manners would matter most in the next millennium. I couldn’t believe I didn’t think of that over twenty-two years ago. Now it’s like a no brainer.

## Part III: Conclusion

Earlier in this book, I mentioned something about the external and internal pressures that make it remarkably easy for dog owners to exclaim, “Must Love Dogs!” Although that sounded like a dramatic and clever way to end the introduction to the observational stories while hinting at the framework of this conclusion, it’s actually based on straightforward, non-earthshattering logic. A good way to put this into perspective is to imagine a scenario that we’ve all experienced.

You’re famished as you drive home from work. During the thirty-five-minute commute, you’ve listened to the same Carl’s Jr. radio ad three times and seen two billboards touting the Western Bacon Cheeseburger. Soon after exiting the freeway, you spot the iconic big yellow star of the popular fast-food chain farther up ahead from where you make a right turn toward your subdivision. As if your mind is on automatic pilot, you flip on the TV as soon as you walk inside the house. To you, it’s calming to hear the background noise while you’re changing clothes and putting your work things away. And just as you’re rinsing out the Tupperware that contained your lunch six hours ago, you hear yet another Carl’s Jr.

commercial describing the irresistible Western Bacon Cheeseburger. The next thing you know, you're back in your car heading to Carl's Jr. At the red light, while idling behind two other cars in the right turning lane, you're pretty sure the guy in the next lane over is eating a Western Bacon Cheeseburger. By the time it's your turn to turn right, you're practically salivating just thinking about how that burger will put a satisfying end to your empty, growling stomach.

Even though the person in this scenario was inundated with external messaging ranging from multiplatform advertisements to visual cues of availability (seeing the nearby restaurant) and choice validation (seeing others choose the same thing), he or she *still* had to have an internal dialog before ultimately choosing the burger over other choices to satisfy their hunger. To me, it matters what we choose to feed our ravenous appetites; but more importantly, it matters most in what we choose to satisfy our starving hearts.

In the remaining chapters, you won't find me comparing the relationship between a dog owner and their dog to a drive-through customer and their Western Bacon Cheeseburger; however, I will be referencing stories from the first two parts

of the book and using carefully selected analogies to explain my theories and emphasize certain points in an attempt to answer, “How did America become so obsessed with dogs?”

## Chapter 10: External Messaging

### Suspicious Minds

It's in my nature to be suspicious of external messages that aren't a direct result of an inquiry that I initiated. Some people call that being distrustful. Others call it being savvy. I'd call it business-as-usual since I began to analyze everything around me while still in elementary school. The perpetual scrutiny most likely stemmed from a tumultuous home life where love and support were both fleeting and conditional. To a lower middle-class kid fortunate enough to have lucked into an enviable and affluent zip code, the external messaging was even more pronounced. Not only was it omnipresent, clear, and consistent – it appeared to be the blueprint for sustainable success. Growing up amongst kids whose parents were doctors, lawyers, and corporate officers in suburban Philadelphia's Main Line was inspiring and motivating for a high school boy who needed to prove himself worthy. By the time I was seventeen, all I wanted was to earn a college degree, land a corporate job, get married, buy a house and have kids. *What could go wrong?*

After an amicable divorce that came before the house and kids popped into the picture, it dawned on me that getting married was an option rather than a duty to appease the god of the success-and-happiness blueprint that was beginning to feel less like a pathway to fulfillment and more like preloaded software. And by the time I got over the shock of losing my corporate job to a company-wide layoff after nineteen years, I felt like Keanu Reeves' character, Neo, at the end of the movie, *The Matrix*. In that scene, Neo realizes that he was mindlessly following a program that he didn't choose or create. Although I wasn't climbing out of an embryonic, goop-filled pod in dramatic fashion like Neo did to signify his new-found awareness and resulting freedom, I did have a special moment of my own. I simply closed my eyes, imagined the blueprint that I had been following for years, dragged it to the trash icon, and pressed, "delete." Neither a red pill nor a blue pill was necessary. *I already knew how far down the rabbit hole went.*

Detaching from a life plan, that had played like a mantra in my mind since the junior prom, was like looking through the window of an airplane for the first time. The new perspective not only confirmed and corrected how I pictured my

community from the ground, it allowed me to see the lay of the land that was both enlightening and troubling. Before I knew it, I went from obsessing over the thought that so many of us follow the exact same life plan to asking myself, *Why is this? Who wins with this life plan? Who loses?* Suddenly, the college degree, the job, the wife, the house, and the kids looked more like an indoctrination into an ideology that keeps the wheels of capitalism churning through instant debt, obligation, and responsibility. What better way to make the masses stay put with their noses to the grindstones? *You give us your dreams, and we'll give you a salary, a career path, and two weeks of paid-time-off.*

Obviously, there are many people who are perfectly happy and successful within this life plan. After all, it offers the two things we all need in order to measure ourselves and build self-esteem – structure and rules. As soon as children realize that the world extends beyond mommy and daddy, they naturally start gravitating toward people and activities that can help them build self-esteem. Like most kids, I wasn't given a choice of structures and rules. Nor did I challenge what was expected of me either since I saw most of my friends and classmates doing the same thing – going to school, attending

church, playing sports, doing chores, and working odd jobs to buy the things your parents wouldn't get for you.

Like the molting cicadas I could hear buzzing outside my bedroom window at night, I, too, was getting ready to shed my skin to make room for an impending metamorphosis. As college admission tests crept into my senior year of high school, I could feel myself beginning to buy into and embrace the more adult life plan of degree, job, wife, house, and kids. This new structure came with a whole new set of rules that would not only provide continued personal measurement and self-esteem – it would go unchallenged for twenty-five years.

## **God, Country, and Dogs**

At forty-two years of age, I no longer had the corporate job or the wife; and by forty-eight, I no longer had the house. I had stopped doing work that had anything to do with math or science so even the degree was no longer a factor. What initially felt like total and utter failure slowly morphed into the best thing that ever happened to me – and I couldn't take credit for any of it. It wasn't like I woke up one day wanting a new life plan. The reality was that I exited unbecomingly, kicking

and screaming as the universe and karma showed me the door.  
*Out with the old, in with the new.*

Establishing a custom life plan that included an entirely new structure with new rules was years in the making. I'd be lying if I said that the road to my redemption wasn't rife with smoldering car wrecks along the way. Besides not including anything from my old life plan, my new structure was no longer influenced by organized religion, a nine-to-five job, a spouse, a school schedule, national observances or holidays. As unorthodox as that sounds, I certainly don't expect my Frankenstein of life plans to win any popularity contests. But at the same time, I wondered why so many people took the more traditional path in life. *Is it because it's too late to change? Because debt and obligation own them? Because they can't think of something else? Because they didn't get the boot like me?*

Like wealth and power, happiness is relative. If your given life plan provides the kind of structure with rules that brings sustainable success, happiness, and high self-esteem, then I believe that's the right approach for you. Still, it brings me back to the original quandary that asks, *Why do most people*

*follow the same approach? It can't work for everybody, right?*

Personally, I believe it's because most people follow the path of least resistance. It's much easier to accept the prevailing traditions, work schedules, marital obligations, school curriculums, parental responsibilities, religious observances, and national holidays. That way, when your boss, spouse and children aren't telling you what to do, your calendar will. No doubt these are strong words, but keep in mind that I am not above this scathing rhetoric. I, too, followed the conventional wisdom up until fate said otherwise sixteen years ago.

Although a discussion about life plans and their corresponding structures and rules is not the purpose of this book, it sets the stage to show where I believe dog ownership fits into the societal construct. Over the last ten years, I've witnessed what seems like an explosion of dog ownership. I see dogs practically everywhere I go. They're on bike paths, hiking trails, neighborhood sidewalks, and furniture. They're in parks, cars, airplanes, malls, stores, businesses, restaurants, hotels, houses, purses, and beds. And when I walked into my previous gym in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho and saw that they installed a dog washing station next to the treadmills, I thought to myself, *And they're in gyms, too! This is crazy!*

As ubiquitous as it had become, dog ownership wasn't fleeting like Crocs, Chia Pets, or The Clapper. To me, the seemingly inescapable nature of it appeared to have put owning a dog right alongside earning a degree, landing a corporate job, getting married, buying a house, and having kids – lauded institutions on the same shelf as God, country, Mom, baseball, and apple pie. I found that to be incredibly interesting and supportive of my theory that robust capitalism requires the majority to be anchored, in debt, obligated, and responsible. In my mind, I believe that owning a dog contributes to that ideology. And when I'm not constantly seeing dogs in the real world, I'm constantly seeing them on my TV and phone. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised to see an ad that uses a talking dog to sell me a Carl's Jr. Western Bacon Cheeseburger.

## **According To My Calculations**

Bolstering the prevailing ideology that it's good to own a dog is an insidious undertone that underscores life in today's America. I'm talking about the don't-need-anyone, don't-trust-anyone mentality that intensified soon after 9/11 and gained momentum through the Great Recession of 2008 and

the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. When I ask people who grew up in the '60s, '70s, and '80s if they think the quality of life has improved in this country, they typically respond with, “No way, dude,” or “Are you being serious right now?” And when I ask them if their self-sufficiency had expanded to the point that they hardly depend on others, I routinely hear, “I hate to say it, but it’s true.” And it’s always the same answer when I ask them if their distrust of people has increased over the years. Although we live in a duplicitous society where the frontend runs PSAs reminding us to love and care for one another while the back end sells us products and services that ensure that we live and work in isolation, people *still* need to trust and depend on others despite the contradictory messaging that says otherwise. But instead of choosing people, they’re acquiring dogs at an alarming rate – especially women.

Dogs are so commonplace at this point that no one really took notice of the lady I described in Chapter 6. She was playing with her dog in Coeur d’Alene Lake with twenty to thirty people in close proximity. Most were on the beach, but some were in the water, too. She was splashing, laughing, and saying things to her dog that I couldn’t make out. She was

having what I didn't think was possible without another person – she appeared to be having fun. What seemed to be uninteresting to others was fascinating to me because I hadn't thought of adding a dog component to my ideas about having fun.

According to previous calculations, I determined that if a person appeared to be having fun all by themselves, they would look insane. *But what about someone having fun with a dog?* After reworking the math, I deduced that that person would have to look odd – and that's just how the splashing forty-something dog owner looked to me. I continued to think about her after I rode away on my bike, the image of her playing with her dog still fresh in my mind. As I began the six-mile, mostly uphill, slog to Higgins Point, I remember focusing on a fantasy that had come to mind. It involved the lady, her dog, onlookers, and the police. Suffice to say, this fantasy played out much differently than the one I described in Chapter 1 when I saw the Stroller Guy.

The fantasy begins with me feeling the warm wind on my face as I approach the busy beach and swim area on the north side of Coeur d'Alene Lake. After dismounting and walking my

bike closer to the water's edge, I notice that only a small number of people are in the water, most appearing content to hang out on the beach to catch the warmth of the sun as it plays a game of hide and seek behind cartoonish clouds that look as if they were painted by a child. My appreciation of the North Idaho summer sky is short-lived as the sound of splashing and laughing make me glance to my right. That's when I take notice of a middle-aged lady in a one-piece bathing suit playing and frolicking with her dog. Her odd-looking behavior inspires me to conduct an impromptu social experiment that sends shivers down my spine due to anticipatory scientific discovery and sheer terror.

After locking my bike to a tree in the adjacent park and jamming my sneakers and socks in the rear basket, I return to the water's edge where six-inch waves from passing boats lazily lap at the shore. I take off my shirt and spread it out like a beach blanket so I can place my shoulder bag on top of it. Even in my fantasies, I need the contents of my shoulder bag doubly protected from the dry sand. As soon as my left foot feels the water, I'm quickly reminded of how averse I had become to water temperatures below eighty degrees. Still, I forge ahead stoically, thinking that it's a small price to pay for

the sake of science.

I situate myself in between the frolicking lady and a couple of teenage lovebirds. Both parties are about twenty-five yards away on either of side of me with the lady and her dog to my right. Once I'm knee-deep in the water like the lady, I take a deep breath and grumble to myself, "Let the humiliation begin." While angled in a way that keeps the lady in my peripheral vision, I begin mimicking her every move, including all the sounds she makes. After thirty seconds of repeated crouching and springing upward out of the water while swinging my arms wildly to create as much splash as possible, I start to notice more than a few onlookers. *Don't cave, bro. You're doing great! You'll write about this someday!*

When I add in the laughing and unintelligible words to what looks like a mirror image of the lady with her dog, I catch the lovebirds to my left leaving the water, their mouths moving while glancing back at me every few steps. *God, I hope nobody recognizes me!* The lady seems oblivious to my antics so I continue to copy her despite the growing number of onlookers, some even pointing at me to help others witness the

madman in the frigid water. *Keep going, dude. It'll be worth it!* I even stop my arms from swinging and put my hands where her hands are when she's holding her dog's forepaws. *Nice touch, if I do say so myself.* Since the lady keeps on frolicking, so must I; and this continues for an excruciating six or seven minutes until I see the flashing blue lights.

### **I Can Explain, Officer**

The all-black uniforms of the two Coeur d'Alene police officers contrasted sharply with the array of summer colors that surrounded them, like the way black licorice would stand out if it was amongst the pastel hues of dyed Easter eggs. The onlookers were either pointing at me, recording me with their phones or standing with their arms folded in a way that projected disapproval rather than expectancy. Waving me in from the water was the larger of the two officers.

“Who? Me?” I communicate by pointing to my chest.

“Yes! Come over here. We need to talk,” shouts the officer, waving me in with one more flurry that tells me to hurry it up.

As I wade through the water toward the beach crowd that seemed only to be missing pitch forks and lighted torches, I cross my arms in front of me like many of the amused and concerned townspeople who were watching me as if I was a captured fugitive from *America's Most Wanted*. But instead of looking guilty, I most likely appeared to be trying to hide. *This is the granddaddy of all walk of shames*, I think to myself as I get closer to the officer who looked a little too eager to confront me.

“I can explain, Officer.”

“Do you have any ID with you, sir?” he asks.

“Yes, I do. It’s in my bag over there,” I reply while gesturing toward my shirt and shoulder bag. The officer nods, giving me the greenlight to retrieve my belongings, and I take the opportunity to put on my t-shirt despite being soaking wet.

While looking at my driver’s license, he asks, “So what’s going on here, sir? Are you feeling all right? Do you think you need medical attention?”

“Officer, I can explain everything. I was just conducting a little social experiment to prove a hypothesis that I have about having fun by yourself and I was mimicking that lady in the water over there and . . . hey! Where did she go?”

“What are you talking about, sir? What lady?” said the officer, mercifully restraining his hand from the grip of his taser.

“She was with her dog and . . . just forget it. Can I leave?”

“I think that would be best since you’re freaking out these people and scaring their kids,” he said while handing my driver’s license back to me.

While avoiding all eye contact, I hastily unlock my bike and put my socks and shoes back on. All I want to do is put distance between me and the gawkers who will most likely be uploading footage of a man with mental problems. *Well, at least that’ll be confirming for family members and former girlfriends who already see me that way.* I streak past the Coeur d’Alene resort hotel, and by the time I cut through McEuen Park on my way to Higgins Point, I silently curse myself for not getting all the sand off my feet.

The view from Higgins Point is always nice – especially since it’s usually devoid of other human beings, making it the perfect spot to either make an important life-changing decision or totally turn your brain off. Even though there’s a quaint pavilion with a few perforated steel picnic tables underneath it, I preferred sitting on one of the two benches that overlook the glassy lake that always appeared blue – even on cloudy, rainy days. The fantasy had preoccupied my mind the entire way, allowing me to climb the hills on autopilot and giving me this bench as a reward. Up above, I could hear the almost constant wind making the tall pine trees sway back and forth. Swooshing and creaking sounds filled the air. Meanwhile, my thoughts were wrapped around the mental experiment where I deduced that I would be seen as the insane one, the odd one, doing the exact same thing as the lady frolicking with her dog.

## **Chapter 8: Internal Messaging**

### **The Coping Store**

In the opening of Part Two of this book, *Experiential Stories*, I introduced a scene where the reader and I are sharing a park bench. In it, I described witnessing a veteran talking to his dog and an older lady pushing a baby stroller containing her two small dogs, both looking like their pets alleviate some sort of emotional distress that resulted from having experienced combat and an abusive marriage, respectively. I went on to say that everyone we see in the park, including the two of us, are dealing with residual trauma stemming from the old adage, “Bad things can happen to good people.” All of us, at some point, were dealt a hand that wasn’t fair. Maybe your mommy and daddy didn’t love or support you. Maybe your significant other walked out on you. Maybe you keep getting turned down at job interviews. Maybe you lost a child. Maybe you’re depressed, lonely, or lack meaningful purpose. Yet, with the help of coping mechanisms that give us a much-needed reprieve from our personal woes, we’re able to continue forward, some better than others since the chosen coping mechanism makes all the difference.

Even though we all employ one or more coping mechanisms to get through any given day, I don't believe people wake up thinking that they need one. I think they naturally gravitate toward one or more coping mechanisms that seem to temporarily quiet their personal suffering. To me, this is just like eating something to silence the hunger pangs in your stomach. Your personal choice is limited to what you choose to eat since you have no real say in whether or not you feel hungry. And, I believe it's similar to feeding a starving heart. Again, your personal choice is limited to what coping mechanisms you choose to fill the void since none of us can decide what does or does not break our hearts.

We all know what our food options are when we're hungry, but what are our choices when it comes to choosing a coping mechanism that fills an empty heart? Where do we find them? To answer those questions and to deliver key points that support my theories behind why America is so obsessed with dogs, I came up with an allegorical premise where it's bring-your-friend-to-work-day at my new job as a sales associate in a business we've all been to at least once. You're invited to join me at . . . The Coping Store.

## Open For Business

“So? What do you think of the place?” I asked after turning on the lights and flipping the sign on the glass door from *Sorry, We’re Closed* to *Open*. “Is it how you imagined it?”

“It reminds me of a Verizon store,” replied my friend.

“Hmm . . . THAT thrilling, huh?”

“It’s definitely utilitarian. Umm . . . what’s with all the dog barking coming from behind that door? Does that connect to a pet groomer or one of those doggie day care centers?” she asked.

“Good guess. It actually leads to an animal rescue center,” I answered while gesturing for her to take a seat at one of the four round tables at the front of the store.

“Okay, but what does that have to do with The Coping Store?” she asked from the table I was hoping she’d choose.

While taking a seat across from her, I said, “Let me explain

how the store works, okay?”

“I’m all ears,” she said.

After getting up to grab a couple of chilled bottled waters from the mini fridge underneath the back side of the checkout counter, I retook my seat and began my explanation by saying that the store was essentially divided into two coping mechanism sections – healthy and unhealthy.

“It’s just like a convenience store,” I said. “You can walk in and buy Hostess cupcakes, a pack of smokes, and a twenty-two-ounce Mountain Dew, or you can grab cheese sticks, raisins, and a bottled water. It’s your choice.”

“I get it; but why even sell that stuff if it’s bad for you?” she asked.

“I totally hear you. It’s just that people want what they want. Basically, my job at The Coping Store is to try and steer customers to the healthy side of the room, helping them to avoid the pitfalls of what’s offered on the unhealthy side of the room.”

“Is the door to the animal rescue center on the unhealthy side? If so, what else is offered on that side?” she pressed.

“You’re right. It is,” I said and got up to walk toward it. “Dogs aren’t necessarily harmful to you but like anything that’s obsessed over, it can become an unhealthy liability, an addiction of sorts – just like the drugs, alcohol, pornography, and social media accounts that we sell on this side as well. All of these are coping mechanisms that offer a momentary escape from whatever is hurting you; however, they’re not only addictive, they mask the very problems you need to deal with, pushing them deep down to fester inside of you.”

“Interesting. What do you sell on the healthy side of the store?” she continued.

“You could probably guess what they are, but I’ll tell you anyway. There’s individual and group therapy, meet-up groups to share common interests, volunteer work, activities like reading and meditating to get to know yourself better, focused nutrition, diet and exercise goals, and spending time alone to figure out what happened and how you can learn from it – stuff like that. Not only is this side of the store better for

you, it's ten times cheaper than the other side.”

“Wow. I get why this side is better; but why the big disparity between price tags?”

“It's because the payoff is immediate on the unhealthy side of the store; but sadly, it's short-lived and ends up costing big time in the long run since the people that rely on unhealthy coping mechanisms typically don't learn from their mistakes. Instead, they remain in the crater that was left behind when their old life imploded, their unhealthy addictions keeping them from crawling out of that crater to build a new life.”

“That's heavy stuff,” she said. “But how do dogs fit into all that?”

“You're going to find out in about five minutes,” I replied.

“How so?”

“You see that lady getting out of her car? She just pulled up,” I replied while pointing toward the parking lot.

“Yes, but how do you know she’ll want to get a dog?” she asked.

“Can’t you see? It’s written all over her face.”

## **They Want What They Want**

Even before Susan reached the door, I could tell she had been crying earlier that morning. There was nothing particularly striking about her except that she seemed to have an eye for style since her shoes, purse, makeup, and accessories went well with her outfit. Her shoulder-length hair, a mixture of gray and blonde, framed a face that looked to be five years younger than the fifty-seven years her driver’s license would indicate.

“Hi. How can I help you?” I asked as she walked into the store.

“Can I get to the animal rescue center from here?” she asked.

“You sure can, but they don’t open for another fifteen-minutes. You’re welcome to wait in here if you’d like.”

“Thanks.”

“While you’re waiting, would you be interested in hearing about the other things we sell in The Coping Store?”

After explaining how the store was laid out and why things were divided as they were on the sales floor, I could tell she was chomping at the bit to ask me a question.

“How can getting a dog be on the same side as all that other terrible stuff?” she asked.

“Let me guess. You’re recently divorced after around twenty-five years of marriage where the last five years felt like you were living with a roommate. You’ve also become an empty nester within the last year and your dog-owning girlfriends have suggested that you get a dog that’ll protect you and keep you company. Am I right? And your name is?”

“Susan. And you pretty much nailed it. How did you know all that?”

“I haven’t worked at The Coping Store for very long but at

least a dozen women in your same predicament come in here every day; plus, I've met hundreds of the same ladies through online dating sites. I don't mean to sound insensitive but your situation is the rule rather than the exception," I said with as much tact as humanly possible.

Intrigued, Susan asked, "And how on earth can getting a dog be a bad thing for me? For anybody?"

"May I ask if you're thinking you'd want to be in another relationship some day? Maybe get married again?"

"I would. But I don't know about getting married again," she answered.

"I certainly don't think having a dog is bad for everybody – just those who are trying to pick up the pieces of what used to be their life, those who need time to process the new circumstances, and especially those who want to someday find and build a new life with someone special. If you get a puppy today, Susan, it won't take long for you to forget about the deep introspection you need to be doing to truly heal yourself. Instead, you'll be masking the issues behind a dog addiction

that'll leave you powerless to stop your life from revolving around Rufus like all the other single, middle-aged ladies that I see everywhere I go.”

“God, you make it sound so depressing.”

“It is,” I said. “And, it gets worse. Before you know it, you and your dog will be watching TV on the couch together, eating together, sleeping in the same bed together, running errands together – even traveling together. Then, at some point, you’ll start to refer to yourself as a fur-baby mommy and be so lost in your relationship with your dog that you won’t notice the strange looks from others while they watch you treat Rufus as if it’s your own two-year-old child. You might even become one of those ladies who carries her dog around in a sling twenty-four-seven or hires a professional photographer to take pictures of you and Rufus on the beach so you have cute pictures to post on Facebook and to make Christmas cards with.”

“What you’re saying is awful, but I have to admit that I have friends like that. There’s no way that’ll happen to me,” she said.

“Oh, and I almost forgot to mention that turning into a fur-baby mommy practically guarantees abject failure when it comes to your dating life,” I added.

“Wow. You must really hate dogs.”

“I don’t hate dogs at all. I simply prefer to have relationships with people and not with pets. I’ve found that it’s really hard to get close to someone who’s addicted to their dog life. Anyway . . . so, what do you think, Susan? Think you’ll want to get something from the healthy side of the store?” I asked.

“I think I’ll stick to getting a puppy today, but I really appreciate your insight, though.”

“You’re totally welcome, Susan. Right this way,” I said while opening the door to the animal rescue center for her. “I wish you the best!”

“Thanks a lot,” said Susan.

And when the door closed behind her, my friend said, “Wow. I can’t believe she’s still going to get a puppy after all that.”

“Like I said before . . . people want what they want,” I replied.

“Do you think she’ll be able to avoid becoming a fur-baby mommy?” she asked.

“Are you kidding? She’s toast.”

## **Full Circle**

I was glad that my friend suggested that I bring a jacket with me since the partly cloudy sky was deceptively chilly for an afternoon in late September. When we weren’t feeling an indecisive wind that couldn’t make up its mind between wanting to be a gentle breeze or blustery gusts, we were watching dry leaves succumb to both. Despite not sharing the same park bench for more than eighteen months, the conversation was easy, both of us appreciating the changing weather and commenting on seeing some of the same people shuffling around the park, including the veteran and the stroller-pushing older lady with their dogs.

“They must come out here every day,” I said.

“I guess people find comfort in their routines,” she replied.

“So true,” I said while leaning forward on the bench and squinting into the distance.

“What are you looking at?”

“That lady walking her dog. See her? She’s across the pond just past the cottonwood trees. She looks familiar.”

“I think it might be Susan – the woman you talked to when I came to The Coping Store with you,” she said.

“No freaking way!”

“She might come this way. If she does, she’ll pass right in front of us,” she continued.

After a few tentative minutes, I said, “You’re right. She’s coming toward us.”

From about twenty yards away, I could tell that it was indeed Susan; but she looked very different from the last time that I

saw her. She had put on some weight and cut her hair down to a choppy, graduated pixie cut. She wasn't wearing any makeup and instead of carrying a purse, she was wearing a bulky fanny pack. Next to Susan was a white, short-haired, medium sized dog wearing what looked to be a pink jumper that matched the color of her hooded sweatshirt. In the hand that wasn't holding the leash, I noticed she was carrying a tied off poop bag that swung in a way that told you she fed her dog more than enough dietary fiber.

“Oh my god. Susan? Is that you?” I asked.

Looking surprised and a bit startled, she replied, “Yes?”

“I met you at The Coping Store almost two years ago. Remember? My friend was there, too.”

“Oh my god. Yes! I do! What a nice surprise,” she said.

“So, is this the dog you picked out that day at the animal rescue center?” I asked.

“Oh, yes . . . this is Lucy, and she's my best friend in the whole

world,” she replied while crouching down to receive wet licks on her face from the Pit Bull mix.

Acting as if it was perfectly normal to see a sub-species slobber all over someone’s face, I cautiously asked, “If you don’t mind me asking . . . how’s the dating going? Met anyone special yet?”

“God no! Men are so disgusting. They only want one thing. Such pigs! No offense,” she offered. “I did meet a few but they turned out to be narcissists.”

“Oh well . . . give it time. The right one will come along,” I said while secretly wishing I had bet my friend that she’d say the word, narcissist, at least once during the exchange about dating.

“Well, I need to get going. Lucy and I have a few errands to run before heading home,” she said. “It was great seeing you two again.”

“Same here. Have a good one,” I said.

While watching Susan and her dog walk away, their matching pink pullovers making it clear that they were on the same team, it was obvious that my friend and I were thinking the same thing.

“I remember what you said after she left The Coping Store that day,” said my friend.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“You said she was toast.”

And as we both watched Susan drop the poop bag in a dog waste receptacle that no longer had any replacement bags in the dispenser, I replied, “Yep . . . burnt to a crisp.”

## Chapter 12: A Road Less Traveled

### Snake Eyes

In Chapter 6, I talked about what was written, and what photos were included in the online dating profiles of single middle-aged women, but I didn't offer my thoughts about the probabilities of success, finding someone you'd like to have a second date with. *What are the odds?* When posing this question to men and women over the years in the form of, "How many first dates does it take to *really* want a second date with someone you've met online?" I would typically hear answers ranging from two to ten. If I throw out the two and the ten and take the average between three and nine, I come up with six, the same odds to roll a six with one die. But since finding love isn't a game of *Chutes and Ladders*, both participants of the first date need to feel the same way in order to move forward to the second date. That means the odds are one in thirty-six, the same odds to roll a twelve with a pair of dice in *Monopoly*, a less than three percent chance to light the fire of romance. *Ouch!*

If I add a dog into the mix and change the first date location

from a Starbucks to a local park where the gentleman is okay with the lady bringing her dog along, the odds get even worse. Now the guy needs to like the lady *and the dog* for the second date to happen, making the probability move from one in thirty-six to one in two hundred and sixteen. And those scant odds don't even factor in the long history of ladies saying to me, "If Rufus doesn't like you, I'm out since my dog can detect who is and isn't a good person." If I did allow Rufus an equal vote in the statistical probability, we'd be moving from a one in two hundred and sixteen to a one in one thousand two hundred and ninety-six. As shocking as that is, can you imagine if the gentleman owned a dog that he was emotionally bonded to as well? Now the odds would be one in seven thousand seven hundred and seventy-six. *Dog owners! What are you doing? You're killing your chances to make a love connection!*

Assuming it takes all six trips to the plate to actually meet someone you would really like to have a second date with, I believe many women with dogs don't find themselves in the batter's box very often. What guy is going to want to meet a lady whose profile photos include pictures of them kissing their dog, lying on the couch with their dog, snuggling in bed

with their dog, hiking and camping with their dog, or car selfies that include their dog in the backseat? And when the profile photos are coupled with red flag, I-won't-change-for-anybody statements like "SWIPE LEFT IF YOU DON'T LOVE DOGS," the chances of sharing your life in a meaningful way are practically nonexistent.

### **An Exercise of Futility**

With all the extra time that comes from not actually getting out of the house to meet someone, I've found that women use that time to establish tremendously deep bonds with their dogs. After interviewing more than a hundred women who've explained that the bond they feel with their dog is similar to the unconditional love they've experienced with the children they've given birth to, I was compelled to explore this further. In an article written by Ana Sandoiu on November 25, 2017 for Medical News Today, I learned that "the love hormone," Oxytocin, which increases our attachment to another person through an embrace, a touch, or a loving gaze into each other's eyes, can occur even if the "other person" is a dog.

Trying to have some semblance of a normal relationship with

dog-owning women is virtually impossible since many of them possess similar behaviors of the people showcased on A&E's two top shows: *Intervention* and *Hoarders*. Not only do they have an addiction to a dog-centric life that masks the underlying root cause behind their dog addiction, they exhibit the same psychological transference phenomena I've seen on *Hoarders* – but instead of redirecting and assigning emotional significance to a broken doll head or some other inanimate object, they project these human qualities onto their dog.

Like most systems on Earth, natural or man-made, online dating has its own feedback loop; and from what I've experienced over the years, it's been a consistent degradation of ethics and manners. Since men can't seem to get between a woman and her dog, they default to a base nature of seeking easy sexual gratification. When dog-owning women receive these kinds of correspondence, they're able to justify their dog-centric life, convincing themselves that they're *really* trying to meet a decent guy while telling their girlfriends at the dog park that men are narcissistic pigs.

So, why do men and women keep their profiles up on dating websites that can't deliver a quality connection? I believe men

leave them up since they're like a fishing rod that's been cast and secured on the back of the boat – enough trolling and you're bound to catch *something* to satisfy your needs. Dog-owning women, on the other hand, keep their profiles active because I believe there's still a small part inside of them that knows they didn't dream of growing old with a dog when they were young girls; however, they don't really want to meet anybody since they're satisfied with their routine that revolves around their dogs. Whereas men are open to the possibility of casual sex through persistent trolling, women simply want to delude themselves into pretending that they actually want a relationship. With both men and women hopelessly texting each other through dating apps from their beds during commercials, new relationships never form, making me recall the insightful words about love from Scott M. Peck's book from 1978, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth*:

“Extension of ourselves or moving out against the inertia of laziness we call work. Moving out in the face of fear we call courage. Love, then, is a form of work or a form of courage. Specifically, it is work or courage directed toward spiritual growth, and for this reason all work and all courage is not love.

But since it requires the extension of ourselves, love is always either work or courage. If an act is not one of work or courage, then it is not an act of love.” (p. 120-121)

## Chapter 13: Final Thoughts

### Humble Pie

As I stated in the preface of this book, any author who chooses to walk, uninvited, into the spotlight to offer an unsolicited opinion cannot be above reproach. I want the reader to know that I do not feel superior to anyone written about in this book. Like most people who want to improve themselves, I've learned much more from my regrettable mistakes and colossal failures than from my meager and spotty successes. When it comes to the allegorical tale of The Coping Store, I'll admit that I've utilized coping mechanisms from both sides of the store and know, firsthand, the benefits and pitfalls of each. As for online dating, I, too, regressed to a base nature that contributed to its poor reputation, blaming it on dog-owning women who presented themselves as wanting a relationship but who also didn't have the time or emotional bandwidth to make it happen.

Other than the creative sequences that involved The Stroller Guy, The Coping Store, and the lady frolicking with her dog in Coeur d'Alene Lake, every story described in this book

originated from true, actual events. That is why I went to great lengths to protect the identities of anyone written about in *Must Love Dogs*. The last thing I want is to shame anyone in this book since I feel a tremendous amount of gratitude and appreciation toward those dog owners who allowed me into their homes, lives, and hearts, making me aware of what it truly costs to live a dog-centric life. Although I spent ten years doing field research for this book, amassing 30,000 bike-miles and 10,000 foot-miles in doing so, and taking six months to write the manuscript, this effort would not have been possible without the hundreds of dog-owning ladies who trusted me with their personal stories. To you, I say, “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

## **I Have a Dream**

When asked by several friends what I hope to get out of writing this book, I was surprised when I heard myself trying to sound altruistic when I knew I had my own self-interests in mind. Personally, I’d be disappointed in myself if I succumbed to playing both sides of the fence to avoid ruffling any feathers. To me, the relationship between a dog owner and their dog is a fascinating societal phenomenon that has

reached a point where I now believe we all see what I'm seeing. As you read the following paragraphs, keep in mind that I do not dislike dog owners or their dogs and that I realize not all relationships between dog owners and dogs are unhealthy. To even have a chance at what I hope to accomplish with this book, I would not only need empathy from every dog owner in America, I'd need open-mindedness from those who own notoriously aggressive dog breeds and self-awareness from those who think they want to find love again while living a dog-centric lifestyle.

To the owners of over 90 million dogs in America who bring their pets around others in public spaces, I ask that you trade the "I the Person" mentality for the mutually beneficial "We the People" mindset by showing control over your dog when strangers are in close proximity. I dream of a future where dog owners consistently control their dog's aggression, teeth, claws, wet noses, barking, and excrement so I could leave my house without having to carry weaponry to protect myself from the unpredictable nature of dogs. I fantasize about being able to walk on grass again without constantly worrying about stepping in dog waste. And, I hope to revisit the joy that comes with sitting on a beach or in a park without the fear of

encountering aggressive or overly rambunctious dogs whose owners decided it's okay to remove their leashes.

If it was up to me, I'd make it illegal to own any of the dog breeds I mentioned in Chapter 4. I'm not sure I'll ever understand why people choose to own a dog that comes with a reputation for having inflicted great harm to human beings. To me, it doesn't make sense unless there's some kind of underlying thrill that comes from seeing how freaked out people like me can get when confronted by Pit Bulls, Bullmastiffs, German Shepherds, Doberman Pinschers, Akitas, and Rottweilers. If it's a matter of having a scary, aggressive-looking dog to intimidate would-be assailants or thieves, I can think of other ways to accomplish that intention without putting innocent passersby and wary neighbors at risk.

And as for the single, middle-aged ladies whose lives revolve around the needs of their dogs, I ask that you delete your online dating profiles and have the courage and conviction to declare your allegiance to your dog-centric life since that is truly what makes you happy. Not only will that be a healthy step toward ending the self-delusion that makes you believe it's possible to have a meaningful relationship with a man

whose needs will always come second to the needs of your dog, you will also stop wasting everybody's time. In all my years of online dating, I've never been able to come between a lady and her dog, nor would I want to since it's an unbreakable bond built on a foundation of unconditional love. That's why I believe it would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible, for a lady to give up the relationship with her dog for a man. Even if she could, it would take at least a year or two to get over the loss of that emotionally addictive partnership and then another few years of therapy and self-discovery to address the underlining personal issues that made her dedicate her life to dogs in the first place.

## **Great Expectations**

The disparity between what I hope to achieve from writing this book and what I'll most likely be handed may sound totally pessimistic on my part, but keep in mind that I've had years of practice debating the contents of this book and watched similar social issues go unresolved for so long that people ultimately became desensitized to what was once deemed outrageous and unacceptable.

There will be kudos from those who'll understand that I'm ultimately wanting to create an emotional space between dog owners and their dogs so there's room for a more befitting, higher-level relationship between two people; however, there will also be insults and personal attacks from readers who will consider the source to be angry at the world, bitter toward women, and incapable of loving anything. Although I tried not to position my-self as a subject matter expert, I will still be approached by those who are and who have amassed an impressive knowledge base that I can only learn from, but successful debate by those individuals will only strengthen the main points of *Must Love Dogs*. Presentations that attempt to defend the grossly misunderstood Pit Bull, the rationale for not demonstrating control over a dog, or the virtues of being a fur-baby parent actually end up supporting my theories behind *why* people choose to own a dog from one of the killer breeds, decide not to show control over their dogs in public, and choose dogs over people for companionship.

Like many of us, I can remember the television images of students being escorted out of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado after the shocking mass shooting in 1999 and wondering to myself, *How could kids have access to guns*

*to do something like that?* And I would keep asking myself that question over the next hundred or so senseless school shootings, up until the heartbreaking massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut in 2012. After learning that twenty of the twenty-eight fatalities were young children, I distinctly remember thinking to myself, *Well, there it is. The worst possible scenario actually happened. NOW, I'm sure the government will finally put the hammer down on gun ownership laws, right?* Wrong. Not only are school shootings still happening, they seem to be accepted as collateral damage, the price for maintaining the “I the Person” freedoms to have anything you want in America, regardless if it poses risks to public safety. According to an article written by Aliza Vigderman and Gabe Turner of Security.org on August 9, 2021, there have been 229 U.S. school shootings since the Columbine tragedy and over 300 deaths.

To me, I believe the lack of strict laws to protect people from being harmed by dogs follows the same tepid and illogical response by our government to not enact stricter gun laws to protect our kids and ourselves from active shooters. After the Sandy Hook tragedy, I stopped watching news reports about school shootings since I, too, have become desensitized to

these predict-table tragedies. And, I have the same response when I'm presented with a story or video clip of some poor soul being mauled by a dog. I quickly turn the page or turn it off knowing it simply never ends. Do I think my book and a hundred just like it will be enough to tip the momentum toward real change? Where people start considering the feelings and well-being of strangers when it comes to their dogs? Put it this way: a few years ago, dog owners would say, "Relax, dude. My dog is friendly," or "Stop being such a weenie" when their dog startled or came at me unprovoked.

Now they don't say anything at all, and their indifference is deafening.

## **In a Nut Shell**

I spent many years pointing and gawking at the curious behaviors of dog owners, but even I grew tired of that, opting instead to analyze and formulate my observations and experiences into a thought-provoking theory that addresses why so many people have become so obsessed with their dogs. There's no doubt that I covered a lot of ground in this book, but did I truly answer the question? I feel that I have, but I'm

also aware of the fact that my theory is complicated. In my previous life as a business analyst in corporate America, I had many different offices over the years since frequent relocation came with that kind of work. Taped to all those office doors and cubicle entrances was always the same quote from Albert Einstein who eloquently summarized that it's easy to complicate and complicated to simplify. In this final section of *Must Love Dogs*, I will attempt to distill and summarize my theory in a way that will hopefully make you believe I was a pretty good business analyst back in the day and worthy of following Einstein's lead.

To set up the framework upon which my theory will be structured against, I ask that you recall the Carl's Jr. Western Bacon Cheeseburger scenario that served as the opening to the third and final part of this book. Like anything that comes to us in life, it begins with an offer of some kind, and the Western Bacon Cheeseburger is no exception since it, too, is pushed toward us through external messaging whether we asked for it or not. This is followed by a decision-making moment where a combination of analytics and emotions determines if we pull the car into the drive-through for a fast-food meal or into the grocery store for produce to make a big salad at home. And

finally, we evaluate how our decision affected us, providing important feedback that will influence future moments of discernment.

Whether we're pressured by the external messaging from companies like Carl's Jr. or from the free market construct of a capitalistic society, we're being targeted by self-serving campaigns designed to tempt you toward a meal option or a life plan that may or may not be particularly good for you. To me, dog ownership fits perfectly into the constant rhetoric of earning a college degree, landing a corporate job, getting married, buying a house, going to church, and having kids since all of it leads to debt, obligation, and responsibility before most people are ready for it. What better way to keep twenty-somethings anchored and focused on keeping up, staying ahead, and believing that they're truly winning in the game of life? *Let's go cogs! Those wheels of commerce aren't going to turn by themselves!*

In their defense, I think it's a difficult life plan to buck since the sales pitch comes from family members, friends, school, church, photo albums, social media, and every other news source. Plus, we're really not taught to think on our own or

given enough time to get to know ourselves, to figure out what really interests us and makes us happy. I've learned in life that the worst choices are the ones that provide instant gratification without an investment of any real work or sacrifice. To me, that's like opting for the drive-thru cheese-burger or agreeing to the life plan that's expected of you. If I asked the chief executive officers of Carl's Jr. and The America Dream if they sleep good at night knowing they're selling products that aren't in the best interest of their customers, I imagine they'd say, "No one is forcing anybody to buy or believe anything. It's up to them to do their own homework and determine what's best for them." *Can't argue with that . . .*

I believe there are several factors that increase the likelihood that someone will opt to bring a dog into their life. Because we live in a don't-trust-anyone, don't-need-anyone culture that's fueled by technology that continues to increase the emotional divide between ourselves and others, more and more sad and lonely people are turning to dogs to mask voids that were once filled by human relationships. Instead of addressing and learning from the emotional pain that follows when bad things happen to good people, they quickly get involved with a dog that immediately remedies their depressed

and aching heart. Whereas the poor choice of eating an unhealthy meal to quiet a ravenous appetite can be reevaluated the next time you feel a hunger pang, acquiring a dog to satisfy a starving heart can last a lifetime. I believe this is a tragedy of sorts, a never-ending addiction to dodging the truth of whatever it is that's holding you back from living your best life.

If you need to rescue something in order to reclaim personal redemption, rescue me, or someone else. There's a long line of people who need compassion, love, and understanding. And, if I'm the last person in line who needs rescuing, then the line for dogs starts behind me.

The End

## **About the Author**

Chuck Trunks is a writer and artist who grew up in suburban Philadelphia. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from North Carolina State University, Chuck had a successful 19-year career in positions ranging from genetic engineer to software developer to business analyst at Amgen, Inc. in Thousand Oaks, California. During his tenure in the biotech industry, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. For inspiration, he bicycles, runs, and reads whatever he can get his hands on.

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## **Additional Books by Chuck Trunks**

(Available on Amazon)

Fiction:

*A Rationale for Being  
Pillars of Society*

Nonfiction:

*Heart Appreciation: Stories of Gratitude*

*Must Love Dogs: A Tragedy of Sorts*

*Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*

*It's Not Your Fault: But it Could Be*

*Physics from the Heart: A Quantum Story*

*Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love*

*Silver Linings: In a Mad World*

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