

An Excerpt from *Love Like a Dog*

Chapter 1

I started first grade with the house keys on a shoelace around my neck. When the bell rang, I plodded home in a stream of kids, some with moms, dissolving as we veered onto different streets. Crossing guards in orange vests guided us with gigantic red stop signs through traffic lights and across Ridge Avenue. Six houses east, I climbed the seven stairs up to the porch of our narrow white stucco house. The porch was flanked by a drab stretch of bare yard. A driveway funneled into the unused one-car garage.

The house was so quiet it felt sharp, like it might carve into me and eat me alive. I reheated pizza in the toaster oven. I pulled my homework sheets from my backpack, and sharpened my pencils. When I finished, I set the dinner table. Then I watched cartoons, and waited. Dad's firm order was: "You stay *inside*, buddy. Streets aren't safe." He'd lifted my chin to make sure we were eye to eye and repeated, "Stay *inside*."

Dad was the manager at Happy Mart five blocks away. One late evening, he went out back to toss the day's spoiled

produce into the Dumpsters. One lid wasn't closed, as it was supposed to be, to keep out varmints and smell. That angered Dad. He flung in the box of produce and slammed down the lid. The Dumpster started rocking. He thought he'd caught a raccoon. But when he looked in, a half-grown dog stared back. Dad called the produce man, Jim. "Can a dog jump this high?" The Dumpster was as tall as a man's armpits.

Jim said, well, it looked like a pit bull, and he had heard some of them were jumpers, but he'd also heard some people dumped their dogs, even purebreds, when they tired of them. "Poor thing's starving. Ugly, too."

The unfortunate pup was splattered with coffee grounds and wilted greens, but he tilted his head cockily at Dad. "That cracked me up," Dad said, "covered with rot, still trying to look charming. Anyway, it was too late to drop him off at an animal shelter." Dad made a leash out of rope, and hosed him down in the alley. He put him in our garage with an old blanket and a bowl of water, which is where I found him the next morning, before I left for school, after reading Dad's note: *Look in the garage*. Barely slitting the door open, I peered in. I saw this dog with big paws, his black nose going up and down, trying to smell me. He gave a tiny whine that seemed to want to reach me.

I put two fingers in. He licked them. A new kind of joy thudded in me before I closed the door and ran to school. The dog was white with black spots, with a particularly big spot centered on his right eye. I named him Bull's Eye. He didn't crap or pee once in that garage. Someone had thought to train him.

Or so we thought, until we brought him inside, where we discovered he had a hankering for chair legs. He'd lie down, all calm-like, under a kitchen chair; we'd almost forget him. Pretty soon his jaw would be wrapped around a leg, quietly, fiercely, chewing. Even after Dad yanked the chair high like he might land it on Bull's Eye, Bull's Eye just backed away bewildered. The next day he started in again on a new tasty leg, concentrated on his pleasure. He was stubborn.

I selected a couple of chair-leg thick old branches on the way back from school, but he just lay down on those, guarding them. He was drawn to chairs.

Dad shook his head, "Sorry, bud, he's got to go. He's eating us out of our damn furniture."

"Please Daddy, he doesn't know."

"You buying us new chairs, are you? I worked for those."

Dad brought a big ham hock bone from Happy Mart, and that helped. Except for, when we weren't looking, he buried it between the couch pillows. Dad sat down and just as suddenly jumped up, his fist curled around the moist pink bone, before he threw it on the floor. "Now he's ruining the couch. He's too much damn trouble."

When Dad came home from work, Bull's Eye licked him like he was homemade gravy, showing Dad he was all genuine crazy love. He got to stay a little longer.

"Oh, you begged to keep him," Dad told me later. "You had that kid's dream of a dog sleeping at the foot of your bed. Got to me, too, how he'd been thrown out same as garbage." Mom left us when I was three, so I guess Dad felt an obstinate kind of kinship.

Dad lay down the conditions. "Feed him when you get home. Wash the bowls. Tie him up outside to crap, then you throw his business into the big garbage can. Get back inside." He couldn't sleep on my bed. "Dirk, he's lying around all day, wiping up the floor."

A couple of months later, I was shooting hoops alone in the driveway. Which I shouldn't have been, but it was the first really warm sunny day. And I was allowed to step out

to pet Bull's Eye who was now usually tied between the laundry line poles outside. He couldn't run loose in our yard because it was still only half fenced. He slid back and forth along his chain, following my bouncing basketball, occasionally barking. I noticed how he was getting broader, growing nice and big. I was practicing some moves, when a car drove up our cracked driveway. It was spring, the ground was muddy, didn't have much grass. I grabbed my ball and moved over, my sneakers squishing. In Chicago, with all the apartment buildings and congestion, people use the few available driveways to turn around. But this guy stopped and parked. It was quiet, most everyone gone in the early afternoon, and no kids on our block. He struggled to climb out, his butt weighing like ten sacks of potatoes. He smiled, "We're all going to be wearing shorts soon, aren't we?"

I tried to remember if I knew him, but I couldn't think from where. Dad didn't socialize much. "You want a Coke? I got a six-pack." I shrugged. Leaning against his car, he handed me a can, "I love this stuff," he said. "So are you on a basketball team?"

I shook my head. Bull's Eye lay flat with his head on his paws, staring at us. "You want to go for a drive to the Lake and run around in the sand? You look like you have good

strong legs.” I stared down at my scrawny knees, startled by what he saw.

“No thanks.”

“I can see you’re bored. Me, too. Come on, I won’t tell on you. We can keep a secret, right?” “No.”

“Really?” He lifted his heavy self straight up and walked over. He put his hand under my chin, lifted it and looked at me funny. Then he glanced around us, where there was nothing happening but the quiet of the street. Suddenly, he yanked me by my free arm and, dragging me, pulled me toward his trunk, which he’d all at once popped open. I tried to yell but his fist pushed into my mouth, and I could taste my blood choking me. He lifted me up, my basketball fell, and must have rolled between his feet because this set him off-balance, and one of his arms flew loose. I started kicking and screaming and biting his fingers. That’s when Bull’s Eye came, yanking one of the poles out of the ground, leaping for that guy’s neck. He ripped the whole laundry line out, and clamped on this guy. It was like Bull’s Eye could fly. The guy let go of me and grabbed Bull’s Eye, trying to yank him off, but Bull’s Eye’s body and teeth grabbed him. Like Bull’s Eye was half tarantula. I was screaming and throwing my ball at the man, so he’d let go of Bull’s Eye. I thought the man might pull out a gun and

shoot him. So I grabbed Bull's Eye's back legs and I pulled. I clutched him so hard, still screaming at the man, when Bull's Eye popped loose. That creep ran to his car and screeched away, leaving blood all over our driveway.

I phoned Dad half out of my mind, and he came home immediately. He walked right to the kitchen counter and filled a bowl for Bull's Eye with a lump of fresh ground sirloin. He ruffled my hair and his eyes actually got wet. He muttered, "I'm sorry, buddy. Somebody should be here looking out for you." He stared out the kitchen window, looking far off. "Damn your mother."

At the police station, based on the license plate color, they suggested the guy came from out of state. They promised to put out a notice to all Chicago hospitals for a man with dog bites on his face. "That's a hell of a loyal dog you got," they complimented Bull's Eye. My gift from the God of Lonely Boys.

Now Bull's Eye could sleep at the foot of my bed on a blue blanket from Goodwill. He'd never go away now, because I needed a bodyguard. Dad started practicing commands: "Sit!" "Stay!" "Gimme paw!" He cut the fat off his steak for Bull's Eye. Bull's Eye began to change us.

When Mom walked out, I was three and a half. Dad was thirty-four. Dad said the police searched grimly with flashlights and dogs. She had vanished without a note. A few days later, Mom had telephoned, "Call off the police, Russ," she said, "I won't be coming back. Let me go." The line went dead.

Dad couldn't speak. He locked himself in the bedroom, didn't relent when I sobbed and banged frantically on his door. Says I fell asleep curled against the door; made him feel like shit. I clung to him any chance I got. He patted my fingers, muttering, "Don't say her name. Just don't."

The nights continued to pass without her hands returning to tuck me in or to wash my hair or to tickle me under my shirt. I missed her soft cheeks I used to pat between my hands.

Dad began dropping me off at Mrs. Morrissey's home day care every morning at seven-thirty. Eight other kids, aged two to five, ran around Mrs. M.'s basement, where a neon carpet glared the alphabet, and a slide the shape of an elephant absorbed our energy. She disliked tattle-tales: "If I didn't see it, I don't want to hear about it." Sitting cross-legged in a big blue dress, she yelled out colors and numbers we repeated, surrounding her in a circle. Then she ran around, preparing snacks and lunches, applying band-

aids, wiping her sweaty forehead. Many days, I let her busy basement spin around me. Until the mothers came to pick up their children – it was always mothers rushing over to their precious children.

I was almost always last to be picked up, and, on occasion, ate my supper with Mrs. Morrissey and her two plump high school girls who alternately doted on and ignored me. Dad was tired when he arrived. “I’ve worked all day. I can’t do it all night, too, Dirk. Soon as we’re home, get on your pajamas.”

It was a sign of Dad’s healing that he went back to talking. First, he furiously threw out every single remaining sign of Mom. In the evening, before supper, a can of beer in hand, Dad turned the TV to wrestling, boxing, baseball, or car racing, “Been pandering to customers all day. I need a jolt of real men.” He propped his sock-covered feet on the shiny coffee table, and settled into our saggy plaid couch, which he’d recently covered with a green blanket for appearance’s sake, the blanket tightly tucked under every pillow. He pulled me down on the couch next to him, and tousled my hair; “You know I have to be tough on you because we’re two men alone, right? I can’t risk you screwing up.” He laughed, “You look too damn much like me!”

I nodded, safe in his grip. I was big for my age, but small inside his thick hug.

Flinging mashed potatoes at my dinner plate, burying the fish sticks and peas, slamming down a greasy burger or ladling lumpy stew, Dad talked. “People told me to put you in foster care. How many men’d raise a three-year-old? But I don’t like quitters. I do what has to be done.

“It’s you and me, buddy. I never could stand my family. Bunch of alcoholics, repeating the same sad stories to each other and anyone. Lucky great-Uncle Terence couldn’t stand most of them either. Which is why he willed this house to me when he passed. You would think your mom would’ve at least appreciated the house.”

“She didn’t?”

Dad put down his knife and fork and surveyed our narrow wood-paneled kitchen. “Hell, who knows?” His broad forearms flexed as he pushed against the table’s edge. His eyes tightened like fists, “I always fell for quiet girls. They LISTENED. Your mama, Estelle, had big wide watching eyes. But I didn’t predict how she would catch a grain of sand inside her. Thinking she surrounded some secret pearl. She got bigger and bigger. I thought she was just big

with you, Dirk. But you – turns out – you weren't the pearl she was after. She was unnatural for a woman."

"Why, Daddy?"

"Most times a woman runs away, she brings her kid." Dad let that hang in the air, then smacked both hands on the table, standing up. "But that's the way our cookie crumbled, bud." He left his plate for me to clear. He sat in the living room, flicking the TV remote until he caught a sports channel. It was at this point, when there was a sudden pause to everything, that his hands sometimes rose, covering his face. He'd sit a long time, the volume blaring, clutching his own face. At times, his shoulders shook. Then my feet all but stuck to the floor, my heart pounding. Dad claims I necessitated a huge labor of love, but I know I wasn't even in school yet, maybe five, when I started putting myself to bed. I was scared stiff to do anything but sleep through the night. If I had woken at an ungodly hour facing the jaws of darkness, I would have let myself be devoured rather than wake Dad.

Now Bull's Eye took to plopping himself on the floor between us in the evenings, watching the TV intently, in between chewing his old bone. Dad shook his head, "This pooch understands wrestling! I thought their eyes were different and they couldn't see like us. Amazing."

What Dad did not know about dogs – and pit bulls in particular – irked and intrigued him. One Saturday early, Dad said, “We’re going to the library. That one on Clark Street.” Where we’d never been. He held my hand all the way there, giving it a happy squeeze now and again. I concentrated hard on this, our public connection, warm sweat building in my hand, as we maneuvered our way through stoplights, around curbside vendors in the parking lots, and people riding bikes on sidewalks. The local library was cramped, gray and sad. You stared through dusty windows at the jammed traffic outside. Dad got us a library card. I watched him speak to the skinny librarian. She grew enthusiastic and he walked off with her to a long shelf devoted to dog books. He gestured for me. Dad finally settled on three volumes crammed with photos and drawings of dogs. We walked home energetically. At the kitchen table Dad plopped down the books, and began his research, reading aloud, almost forgetting to leave for his Saturday shift. I never wanted the morning to end.

“Listen here: *The American pit bull terrier can jump a six-foot fence if motivated.* Maybe that’s how Bull’s Eye got into the Dumpster. *It’s rarely a good idea to have two males play together.* What should I do about you two?” Dad poked me in the ribs. “*Contrary to popular belief, the pit bull is very human-friendly, and is not naturally aggressive toward humans. It is a very athletic*

breed, strong, quick, agile, never willing to quit, very loyal and eager to please.” Dad loved that the American pit bull terrier came to the U.S. as the dog of the common man, of farmers and miners. Furthermore, most writers called pit bulls “working” dogs, and hard work was exactly what Dad defined himself by.

“Look at this! There’s a picture of Helen Keller with her pit-bull. They’re even good with the handicapped.” Dad did not generally appreciate injured or impaired people. He’d been furious when Happy Mart was required to re-build its entrance to accommodate wheelchairs. But he seemed to think Helen Keller reflected well on Bull’s Eye.

Bull’s Eye watched us grow excited. His head turned from me to Dad and back, then finally rested on his paws. “They like to play with something called spring-poles. If you hang a tire or an animal hide high on a tree branch they’ll leap at it for hours. Listen to this: *A disproportionately large number of pit bulls are able to climb trees.*” He slapped his palm on his knee, and laughed out loud. “I’ll be damned.”

We brought Bull’s Eye to a vet named Dr. Lance for a check-up and shots. Eager to make a new acquaintance, Bull’s Eye bounced side to side. We ordered: “Sit! Made the vet laugh, as Bull’s Eye tried to solve the predicament of plopping his butt down on his out-of-control wagging tail.

“I’d say, he’s ten, maybe eleven months old. Young,” Dr. Lance told us. “Put aluminum foil around the chair legs. They hate chewing that. Or hot pepper sauce.” I chose a red bone shaped tag for his new collar.

Before, the loneliness had been like an ice pick landing on me.

Now, when Dad got home, we had something important between us. As time passed, he assigned me more tasks. And the more we did, the better Bull’s Eye behaved at home. Mostly, I had to walk Bull’s Eye. Dad showed me how to grab up his poop with a grocery bag, which was gross but city law. Dad said, “Hey, love is sticking around someone else’s shit.” He jabbed his finger into my shoulder, “Believe me, I know.” Back at home, I brushed Bull’s Eye short fur, though he hardly shed. Just that he liked it so much, going still as a marble statue with concentration. I couldn’t wait to get home from school.

Would Mom have liked a dog? She might not have, what with all the extra responsibility entailed. Perhaps all situations had checks and balances. With her, I might not have had Bull’s Eye. How I wished to show him to her. He always cocked his head when he looked at you, as if you were puzzling and he was trying hard to find the right

answer. I felt fearless with him. True, I had to be on total alert in the streets, because he could leap off the line like a muscle car if he saw a squirrel. He *could* pull me right across the street, if I didn't tighten his leash right fast. Mom would not like that.

After supper, Dad liked to read aloud: "*Pit bulls fulfill their natures through demanding tasks, challenges of skill.*" Dad grinned: "*Meek and mild potential owners should forget this breed. Damn straight!*" Neither of us knew exactly what kind of challenges Bull's Eye was supposed to experience. Dad patted a spot on the couch next to him for me. He put his arm around me, and tickled me hard and quick. I squirmed, moaning, "Stop it!" Dad laughed.

Dad paused, "When your mom was pregnant, we used to sit here like this. She'd roll up her shirt and we'd watch you kick. Free entertainment! Little Jonah in that whale belly. Every day, I brought home fresh cut red steaks. Got her all the ice cream in the world. Thought things were going good." He stared at the floor. "Dirk, grab the bull by the horns. You got to wrestle your way through life."

I could hardly remember Mom and Dad together. Watching me somersault in her belly, had Mom been happy? I try to believe she really had to leave us. Otherwise, she's a monster.