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— Jack Canfield, Co-author *Chicken Soup for the Soul*

A touching portrait of a remarkable dog.  
If you're looking for a feel-good story, this is it.  
—Jamie Hall, *the Edmonton Journal*

# On TOBY'S Terms

CHARMAINE HAMMOND



Winner, CHIMO Reese Award

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Disclaimer: This is a true story, and the characters and events are real. However, in some cases, the names, descriptions, and locations have been changed, and some events have been altered, combined, or condensed for storytelling purposes, but the overall chronology is an accurate depiction of the author's experience.

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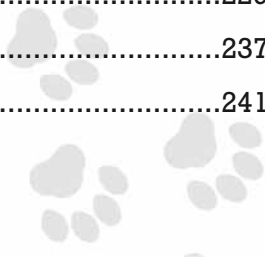
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One

## Oh, Toby!

You never know when your life is going to change.

“Hi, honey,” I said into my cell phone as I unlocked my car. “I gave my presentation; it went great, and I’m on my way home. How was your day?”

“My day was wonderful . . . until I walked into the house.”

“Uh-oh . . .”

“The place is a total disaster. *Your* dog knocked over all four dining room chairs, the lamp in the living room, and that little table your mom gave you.”

“*My* dog?” I sank into the driver’s seat, clutching my cell phone, suddenly dreading the three-hour drive from Calgary back to Edmonton because of what I envisioned I’d find when I got home.

## 2 On Toby's Terms

"I'm at my wits' end, Char. There's mud and blood everywhere."

I froze in the act of turning the ignition key. "Blood?"

"That darned dog climbed on the kitchen counter, knocked over the knife block, and cut two of his feet. Then he tracked blood all over the kitchen, the living room, the hallways, the basement . . ."

"Is he okay?"

"Is *he* okay? What about *me*?"

I cringed at the volume of his voice. "I'm sorry, honey," I said, visualizing our eighty-five pound Chesapeake Bay retriever walking across the kitchen counter, the sink, and stove, tracking blood. "How bad are his cuts?"

"Not too bad, but I had to pin him down to get his feet cleaned up and bandage his two front paws. He'll live." Christopher didn't sound altogether pleased at the prospect.

Under other circumstances, a vision of my normally mild-mannered and easygoing husband chasing our dog through the house might have been amusing. But not now. Apart from the cut feet, which was a new twist, this was not the first—or the second, or the third—disaster we'd faced since bringing Toby into our home a few months earlier. It was peculiar, because for the first few weeks after we got him, things had been quite uneventful. But now one incident led to another.

"There's more," Chris said. "He knocked the books and candles off the coffee table and tipped the wooden table in the foyer over so it was blocking the door. I could barely get in. The flower planters were knocked over and so was the water cooler, which had a full canister of water in it this

morning. Not now. Now the water's all over our nice hardwood floor. That damn dog tore the boot racks from the closet wall and emptied the contents into the front entrance. He tracked bloody footprints all over the downstairs carpet. The house looks like a crime scene."

"It can't be that bad."

"It can't? You wouldn't recognize the kitchen or living room. Char, when I assess all the damage caused by this unruly, incorrigible, untrained, ill-mannered, and soon-to-have-another-home dog . . ."

"Don't say that. I know there have been some problems, but Toby's a great dog in so many ways. He's just got a little problem and we'll fix it."

"A *little* problem? You should see the phone in the kitchen. It's bloody, too. Maybe he was trying to call 9-1-1."

"That's funny, Chris!" I laughed. "Just hang on, honey. I'll be home soon."

"*Not* funny," my dear husband replied. "I've had it this time. I'm done with that dog!"

"Please, just hang on. When I get home, I'll help you clean up after my . . . after *our* dog."

I heard him release a deep breath. "We can't keep living on Toby's terms."

But lately we were.

911?





## Adopting and Adapting

Things hadn't always been this way, of course. Originally, Toby had seemed to be the fulfillment of Chris's and my dreams. I thought about that as I drove north from Calgary back toward Edmonton. How could things have gone so bad so fast?

Ironically, it had been Chris who first showed Toby to me, or rather called me to the computer to look at Toby's big, grinning mug on a website dedicated to rescue animals. At that point, a year had passed since the death of our previous dog, Dooks. Chris and I had gotten past the grief and were feeling the hollow place in our lives where our beloved German shepherd had lived. We were ready for another dog, but because we both worked jobs that took us away from home,

we wanted a mature animal, not a puppy. The last thing we needed was chewed furniture and messes on the carpet.

“Look, it’s a Chesapeake Bay retriever,” Chris said, “just like the one we saw at the SPCA. His name is Toby, he’s five years old, and he’s in a rescue agency in Sherwood Park, so he’s a local.”

I looked at the picture of a big, dark-brown dog with floppy ears and a white spot on his chest and felt drawn to him instantly. Who could resist a dog who smiled for the camera?

According to the website, Toby had been in foster care for the last three months, and for some reason I felt a strong sense of urgency about him. “Let’s call,” I said. “Right now. Let’s do it.”

We left a message with the local rescue agency, and I filled out the online application form.

Then we waited.

Days passed.

Nothing.

“Perhaps something was wrong with the computer system or the application,” Christopher said. “Maybe we should call.”

As I picked up the phone, he asked me what I’d written on the application form.

“I just answered the questions.”

“Did you tell them that because of all we can offer a dog, why we’d be great parents?”

“Well, I hope so. I zeroed in on supplying the information they requested, like this one, which asks about what our plans are to take care of a dog. I put that we have time to exercise it, take it to the off-leash park so it can run free

# Book Club

## Discussion Questions

1. What were the most poignant lessons that Toby taught his owners, Charmaine and Christopher? What is the most profound lesson you learned from your own pet?
2. Clearly this dog is a handful—and on occasion, the couple come close to surrendering him to the local shelter. But they stick it out and then fall in love with him. How did this couple grow, both individually and in their marriage, as a result of their life with Toby? In what way did this couple enhance Toby's emotional and physical health? How would you have dealt with a dog like Toby?
3. Charmaine discusses her tendency toward being a perfectionist and all-or-nothing thinking—a trait that is also shared to some degree by her husband, Chris. How did this trait affect their relationship and marriage? How did it impact their relationship with Toby? Do you think that you are a perfectionist? Why or why not?
4. The author and her husband survive a life-threatening experience. How did this incident impact them, and in what ways did it change their lives? In what way did bringing Toby into their lives allow them to relive the

- lessons learned that day? Do you think you would have responded the same way or differently?
5. The couple are told by a behaviorist that Toby “lacks purpose” and clarity on his role in the family. In what ways did helping Toby discover his purpose modify his behavior? How would you define your “purpose” and in what way do you deem it necessary to living with passion?
  6. “Letting go” is a theme throughout the story. What is the relevance of “letting go” and in what way does doing so change the author’s life? Have you ever had to “let go” of something? How did that affect you?
  7. In what way is Toby an inspiration? In this story, who inspired you the most and for what reason? Who or what inspires you?
  8. Charmaine alludes to the axiom, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” Who was the teacher—the author or Toby? Of the lessons each learned, what was the most significant? Are you a teacher, student, or both? Explain.
  9. When Toby tips over the keepsake box, what hidden treasures surprise Charmaine? How do these discoveries impact Chris and Charmaine’s future with Toby? Do you have a box of “hidden treasures”? What memories do they evoke?
  10. What kept Christopher from all but giving up on Toby? How did this decision affect the couple’s marriage and their plans for their future? Facing the same sort of situation, would you have given up or stuck with it? Why?
  11. Charmaine comes off as an optimist, seeing the good in situations. How does this mindset both help and hinder her? Do you consider yourself optimistic or pes-

simistic? How does this view affect your life? Do you think you should change?

12. As Charmaine and Chris became the “pack leaders” in Toby’s life, his behavior improved. Had they accepted this sooner, would the outcome have been different? What qualities do pack leaders emulate? When have you been a pack leader in your life? How did being a pack leader change a situation for you?