**A quick warning. This podcast contains audio of Alaskan Huskies barking, whining, and woo-wooing.**

**If you have pets of your own, consider using headphones when listening. They may freak out.**

**Also, there are a few curse words.**

***Mux***

*Jodi Bailey: I kept trying to make sense of it and my husband was like, ‘you can’t make sense out of crazy. You don’t make sense out of crazy.*

*And to this day, I would still like to understand what happened. And I just don’t know if that will ever happen.*

***Mux***

**A few months ago I got a tip.  
  
It was the kind of wild story that makes you immediately call up your editor.**

**The kind of tip that lands you on a flight to Fairbanks, Alaska.**

*SFX: Beep.*

*Flight attendant: Nathaniel, thank you very much.*

*Nate Hegyi: Thank you.*

**Alaska is more than twice the size of Texas. But its entire population is only *half* the size of San Antonio.**

**And most of those people live on the Alaska coast, in cities like Anchorage and Juneau.**

**There were only 6 other people on my flight. No crying kids. Nobody kicking the seat behind you.**

*Nate: Full flight, huh?*

*Flight Attendant: Well, be careful. There’s a lot of people! Don’t lose your luggage.*

**We flew over rows of craggly snow-covered mountains and into these white foothills braided with frozen rivers… a subarctic biome known as a boreal forest.**

**That’s where Fairbanks is. Deep in Alaska’s interior.**

*[Landing sounds]*

**When I landed it was negative 10 degrees. So cold I had to sneak into the airport bathroom to put on my long johns, two coats and a beanie before stepping outside.**

Nate Hegyi: Oooh, cold, cold cold cold. \*coughs\* It’s the kind of cold that when you breathe in, it makes you cough. It’s that kind of cold. But beautiful sunset. My snot’s freezing.

**People have been surviving winters in the Fairbanks area for thousands of years.**

**The Athabascan people hunted moose and caribou here. Later American settlers came searching for gold.**

**And *DOGS* have ALWAYS been a part of that history.**

**They were the horses of the Great White North. Transported people, medicine, food.**

**There’s even an eighteen foot tall statue downtown called the unknown first family. It’s of a family bundled up in warm, fur-lined parkas.**

**And by their side?**

**Two Alaskan huskies.**

[mux cue]

**People don’t use dogs to get around much anymore - snowmobiles changed that.**

**But Fairbanks IS still one of the world’s epicenters for competitive mushing.**

**It’s the starting line of the Yukon Quest - the second most famous dogsledding race in the world.**

*[sound from the Yukon Quest starting line]*

**And here are more than twenty dogsledding kennels scattered across the area.  
  
The one I came to see is named after that little claw on the inside of a dog’s paw.**

**It’s called Dew Claw Kennel.**

*Nate: Hey*

*Austin: How’s it going man?*

*Nate: Good, I’m nate.*

**When I got there, I was greeted by this guy with a blond mustache named Austin Sorem.**

*Nate: So how often do you take him out, is it just one run a day, or…?*

*Austin: Uh, yeah! Sometimes we’ll stack runs. So we might go out to a cabin and go camp for a couple hours, simulate an actual race experince, lay down some straw, snack ‘em, feed ‘em…*

**Austin works as a handler here. It’s kind of like a musher’s apprentice. He helps run the dogs, does chores and soaks up every bit of knowledge on mushing that he can.**

*Austin: About 40 miles or so is kind of standard setup right now.*

*Nate: Wow, 40 miles.*

**And when I visited, his boss, a guy named Dan Kaduce, was deep in training for dogsledding’s most famous race: The 2023 Iditarod.**

*Austin: Don't talk about it. Don't talk about it. Don't jinx it. I haven't even been saying anything about it because I'm like, I know this is like if there was a year, but.*

*Nate:This could be the year.*

*Austin:Just just don't don't jinx it.*

**In case you’ve never heard of it, the Iditarod is like the super bowl of competitive mushing.**

**A grueling, roughly one-thousand mile race over some of Alaska’s harshest terrain.**

**Imagine traveling the distance between New York City, to Jacksonville, Florida… on an oversized toboggan.**

**And the conditionals are brutal.**

**In 1973, windchill temperatures on the racecourse supposedly hit negative 130 degrees. Dogsled teams have been charged by moose.**

**There’s even a provision in the rules that, if a racer is forced to kill a big game animal in self-defense, then quote - “the musher must gut the animal and report the incident to a race official at the next checkpoint.”**

**The race – really, the whole sport – is a little controversial.**

**The humans have to contend with frostbite and broken bones. The dogs can tear their shoulders, sprain their wrists… and very occasionally… die.**

**But regardless of the ethics, which we’ll talk more about later, the Iditarod is arguably one of the toughest, most extreme sporting competitions in the world.**

**Back in the ‘70s, it used to take over two weeks to finish. Today, mushers do it in under 10 days.**

**1,000 miles. On a sled. In *ten days.***

[SFX from the Iditarod]

*Austin: THis is the race yeard, this is the Iditarod team this year.*

*Nate: So how many dogs will Dan take out?*

*Austin: Fourteen. Fourteen, yup.*

**Austin’s boss, Dan Kaduce, has run the Iditarod five times. In 2022, he came in fourth place. That makes him one of the top ranked dogsledders in the world.**

**Not that you’ll ever hear him say it like that.**

**He’s a quiet guy. His wife Jodi on the other hand was a different story.**

*Austin: Jodi has songs for the dogs.*

*Nate: Oh I want to hear all the songs.*

*Jodi: No, I have a song for mushing.*

*Nate: For mushing? I want to hear. What's the mushing song?*

*Jodi: [singing] Puffy pants and neos,*

*parks with the fur (with the fur)*

*The whole team was looking at her (looking at her)*

*She hit the snow*

*Next thing you know,*

*Jodi got low, low, low, low, low…*

**She’s the theater kid you knew in high school all grown up. Jodi sings songs, howls at the dogs…**

*[Jodi howling with the dogs]*

**But she’s also a certified badass. She’s actually competed in the Iditarod more times than Dan. She was the first rookie to race both the Iditarod and the Yukon Quest in the same year.**

**THat’s like running two ultra marathons when you are just starting to jog.**

*[Jodi howling with the dogs]*

**She and Dan own about 40 huskies here. Some are racers… some are retirees. They all have pretty… odd… names.**

**Ok, so mushers will often name their litters after a theme. And some of the dogs on their racing team are named after asian foods:**

*Jodi: You know, wonton, kimchi*

**Others are named after serial killers like Dahlmer and Holmes:**

*Jodi: Actually. Hey, Dan. Will you do one line for the radio story about the serial killers that might not even get used?*

*Dan Kaduce: No.*

*Jodi Bailey: Come on. You know what? The one I want you to say is?*

*Dan Kaduce: I do not know.*

*Jodi Bailey:So he's at the end of the first race that he won with the serial killers. And he had the serial killers in the Asian foods. And the announcer was asking him about, Well, you have some interesting dog names there, Dahmer and Holmes and Manson. How'd they do?*

*Dan Kaduce: You led up to it too much.*

*Jodi Bailey: Well, you least tell them what the line is.*

*Dan Kaduce: I think. I think you can do that.*

*Jodi Bailey: They killed it.*

*Dan Kaduce: See? Not that funny.*

*Nate Hegyi: I laughed.*

**The kennel itself is sort of like a farm, or a commune. Dan built all of it by hand.**

**There’s a big house, an art studio, a cabin for their handlers. There’s an aura of barely controlled chaos everywhere.**

**The dogs live either in pens or in rows of wooden houses, with chain leashes that stand next to them like little flagpoles.**

**But when I was driving I noticed that one of the little dog villages was mostly empty. Like a little dogsledding ghost town.**

**That is where our story really begins.**

***Mux***

*Jodi: Alright, it will warm up in here pretty quick. Do I have to sit still?   
  
Nate: No, is it more comfortable if you walk around?*

*Jodi: Usually, yeah. I’m pretty kinesthetic. That thing has to be a certain amount in front of my face, kinda?*

*Nate: I just gotta stand close about this far away.*

*Jodi: Ah, I’ll sit down. It’ll be weird to have you standing there like that.*

*Nate: Thanks again for walking through this, I know this can be kind of tough to talk about.*

*Jodi: it caused me a lot of stress and anger. So it's not something that I want to think about. Yeah. Although I will admit the biggest reason for wanting to get involved is just this nothing about this situation made sense.*

*And I’m kind of hoping that through the process of asking thes questions of all the people you’re asking of, that maybe something can make sense.*

*[Sound from 2019 Yukon Quest finishing video]*

**It was February of 2019. The Yukon Quest – the other big race that starts in Fairbanks – had just wrapped up.**

**And right around then, Jodi got a message from a woman named Fleur Perano.**

*Jodi Bailey: Fleur reached out to me, I believe it was on Facebook Messenger*

**Now, Jodi had known this woman for a few years. Fleur’s husband, Curt Perano, was an up-and coming sled dog racer.**

*Jodi Bailey: We attended the same mushing banquets, we attended the same races, we had the same friends.*

**And keep in mind, less than one-hundred people run the Iditarod every year. So the competitive mushing community is elite… but it’s small.**

*Jodi Bailey: In spite of the competition, everybody's relatively, you know, friendly and supportive of each other. Because what we do is sort of unique, and a lot of people don't get it. So when you're around a group of people who get it, you have that built in. So it's sort of an established friendship that way, you know?*

**Plus, Curt and Fleur were from New Zealand - the first and ONLY team from that country to have ever completed the Iditarod.**

**That makes them pretty hard to miss.**

**In her message, Fluer asked if Jodi knew anyone who could watch their 24 Alaskan Huskies until the fall.**

**It wasn’t a super unusual ask.**

**Dan and Jodi talked it over and figured… hey… we could do it.**

*Jodi Bailey: It'd be a nice way to, you know, earn a little extra income and a couple of months. This would be great. Why not do it?*

**So Jodi and Fleur hammered out an agreement. Some of it over the phone… some of it was over Facebook messenger.**

**The dogs would stay at Dew Claw kennel until the end of summer. Jodi and Dan would charge the New Zealand couple roughly three-thousand dollars a month.**

**There was no reason to think they didn’t have the money.**

*Jodi Bailey: They present themselves as reputable people who have a thriving business in New Zealand.*

**You’re not going to hear directly from the Peranos in this episode. Thus far, they’ve declined multiple requests to be interviewed for this series.**

**But from what I’ve been able to find online, Jodi’s right.**

**Fluer and Curt Perano own a *thriving* kennel back home on the South Island of New Zealand.**

**This is the part of the country with huge, snowcapped mountains - those sweeping shots that people remember from the Lord of the Rings movies.**

**Nestled in those mountains, the Peranos run mushing bootcamps, take tourists on rides. And what’s more, their dogs are featured in TV commercials and Hollywood movies.**

**That giant wolf that the Hulk fights in *Thor: Ragnarok?***

*Thor clip: [Fenris* [*wolf growls and attacks*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRTyArPzE1w) *people]*

**That was one of the their dogs.  
  
That Taylor Swift music video, where she’s running in the woods with a bunch of wolves?**

*[Taylor Swift, “Out of the Woods” clip]*

**Those were Curt and Fleur’s huskies.**

**They’ve been in Volkswagon and North Face commercials, and worked with New Zealand’s official tourism department.**

*Fleur:* *This is a great feeling being out here by ourselves, out here with the dogs, enjoying this environment. We’d all love to see you out here sometime!*

**That was Fleur Perano’s voice, by the way. In this video, she’s talking from the back of a dogsled as it speeds across some fresh powder.**

*Curt: We had dreamed of running dogs in North America, and we gave everything away to do it.*

**And this is Curt. Curt moved around a lot growing up, so he’s got the hint of an American accent. This is from a promotional video they made way back in 2012.**

*Curt: Today, we have 42 dogs.*

**But the real STARS of Curt and Fleur’s operation is their U.S. based racing team. There’s Bow and Arrow… Sam, Sail, and Scout.**

**Each one even has it’s own bio on the Underdog website.**

**One of the Team Leaders, Smudge, is described as a “pretty cool little girl… that’s proving to be a little star.”**

**Koal - who has a coat of jet black fur - is “built like a bulldozer” but “loves to nibble on your chin when you are cuddling him.”**

**Together, the Underdogs US team have completed more than a dozen long-distance races.**

**You can even sponsor the dogs online. $500 a pop.**

*Jodi Bailey: Flora made it very clear that money was not an option. She wanted her dogs taken well care of. And that impressed me that that's the kind of thing you would expect to hear. You would want to hear from somebody.*

**Jodi remembers Fleur and her handler showing up with the dogs on a cloudy afternoon that February.**

*Jodi Bailey: They brought groceries from town for us for dinner. Super thankful. Oh, this is so awesome. You guys are great. Oh, you're going to have to come visit us in New Zealand. Blah, blah, blah.*

**They got the dogs settled in and then Fleur hopped back into her pickup truck. The sky was darkening as they drove down the highway and disappeared.**

*Jodi Bailey: There was there really were no red flags until there were red flags and then there were red flags. The way you have dandelions like everywhere and you can't stop pulling the heads off them.*

*MUX*

**The tip that brought me to Alaska… this is what it was all about. People in the dogsledding community here are saying that Curt and Fleur Perano are not what they seem.**

*Jamie Nelson: What happened? What made them turn into evil people?*

**And for Jodi and Dan in particular, this business deal – a favor, really – turned into a three year nightmare that they’re still trying to understand.**

*Jodi Bailey: what kind of fucking person does that?*

**I’m Nate Hegyi, and welcome to Outside/In presents… The Underdogs.**

*Jodi Bailey: We’re just one dead body away from Tiger King.*

**This is chapter one: Honey… and Vinegar.**

**#### BREAK ####**

*Nate Hegyi: I have to say, my toes and hands are freezing right now. Very, very cold.*

**It was my second morning at Dew Claw Kennel and temperatures were well below zero.**

**The huskies had spent the night outside with only a small doghouse to keep them warm… but they seemed just fine.**

**The handler Austin Sorem was stuffing some hay into one house.**

*Austin: all these guys are great in the cold weather. A couple of them. If it gets down to -30, -40, we'll bring them in to the shop. You know, your older ones, your Bluebarbs, your Carrots. But everybody else does just fine.*

**Alaskan huskies don’t look much like the Huskies you see on Instagram.**

**They have short, dense coats. They come in all different colors and patterns, and they’re not actually that big: Anything over 70 pounds would make for a husky husky.**

**But they’re also kind of like the superheroes of the dog world.**

**Like, that coat? it traps body heat so well that when snow falls on them… it doesn’t melt.**

**Their paws have an extra layer of fat and these incredible, tightly-wound vascular systems so their feet keep warm and toasty when they run.**

**Running in cold weather is what these dogs are bred to do.**

**They can easily cover more than 100 miles a day. During a race they’ll burn around 12,000 calories. That’s more than Michael Phelps ate every day when he was in peak Olympic form.**

**But here’s the coolest thing:**

**They don’t wear out. At least not like we do.**

**Like, if I ran a marathon I would be super exhausted because my muscles would break down and fatigue.**

**But sled dogs have this mysterious alchemy that allows them to burn energy way more efficiently than humans, or even horses… allowing them to go further and faster.**

**All these superpowers make sled dogs some of the world’s greatest athletes.**

**But just like Olympians they the right training, nutrition, physical therapy to perform their best - sled dogs need a lot of time-consuming, expensive care.**

**It starts with diet.**

*[Wood stove, soup mixing]*

**Every morning Jodi or one of the other helpers, they start cooking dinner for the dogs. It’s a very stinky soup that simmers all day over a wood stove.**

**It’s got cod, fat…**

*Jodi Bailey: We cook rice and cabbage just to add some carbs. And it brings more of like a soupy, nice stew texture and gets more water into them because they like to eat it.*

**They also get kibble in the morning and doggo energy bars. These are frozen bricks of ground beef or cod that Jodi cuts into Snickers bar size chunks.**

*[Band saw sound, segue into…]*

*Jodi Bailey: Feeding is like an art and a science. If it's colder, dogs need more fat. If they're running longer runs, they'll get more snacks along the way.*

**Of course what goes in… goes out.**

*[Shovel sound. ]*

*Marine: I’m, uh, shoveling*

**That’s Marine Kuhn. She’s one of the helpers here.**

*Marine: like, every day, Every morning and every night. We shovel the poop so that they have a clean space.*

**They also have to clean the doghouses. Which can be tough because the males will often pee on them… creating these glaciers of frozen piss that the helpers have to then knock off with a shovel.**

*Nate: That is a lot of pee, a lot of frozen pee. Holy crap.*

**Doesn’t help that sometimes the dogs try to eat the frozen pee.**

*Marine: Oh, no, no, no. Come, come, Come here.*

**This isn’t even the most time consuming part of the job. That would be the training runs.**

*[Dogs barking and howling]*

**The dogs get so… excited before their runs. They’re hooked up on the guyline… leaping in the air… banging on their harness. It’s like this chaotic symphony rising to a crescendo.**

**And then… the release…**

*Austin: Alright Dahmer, Dahmer!*

*[sled goes past, the dogs howls disappear into the forest.]*

**When they’re training for a big race like the Iditarod, a musher will run their dogs for 40, 50, 60 miles. Sometimes they are out all day or even overnight.**

**But even when they aren’t training for a race, sled dogs still crave exercise. That could be dogsledding, skijoring – which is when a dog pulls you on cross-country skis – even chasing a four wheeler around.**

**All to make sure these dogs are in top shape and not just sitting in a crate… losing their minds.**

***MUX***

**So when the New Zealanders dropped their two dozen huskies off in February of 2019… Dan and Jodi had a lot on their plate. Not only were they taking care of their own crew, but now they had the Underdogs as well.**

**And those dogs were kind of aggressive.**

*Jodi Bailey: When we initially got them, there was a lot of fighting in the team and bickering and and, you know, jockeying for position. And we didn't feel like it would be safe or responsible to put them in pens together. We felt like, you know, they needed to be arranged in such a way that we could take care of them safely,*

**So they built a brand new dog yard. They also had to build new dog houses for the team AND they paid a handler to help out more. And… after a few weeks the underdogs settled down and everyone got into a rhythm.**

*Jodi Bailey: It was just kind of fun. It's spring in Alaska. It's beautiful. The weather's nice. We had all these dogs. We're out mushing every day. You know?*

**Jodi is starting to get to know their personalities. Just like any good dog sitter, she’d send Fleur little updates.**

*Jodi Bailey: Quill was one of the sweet females that people were really attracted to. So the handler would bring Quill in the cabin and I'd text Fleur and be like, Oh, Quill came in the cabin tonight. They're super happy. Or, you know, the dogs, the one that had had surgery and the one that had pneumonia. I sent her some updates on Finn and Smudge, who had the surgery, I believe. So I send her little updates on that. And sometimes we'd get a thank you, sometimes we wouldn't. But eventually she stopped responding to any updates on the dogs, and that was kind of one of the first red flags. I'm like, Does she not care? But then I thought about how busy our lives can be, and it was the start of their season.*

**Remember… Fleur and Curt ran a dog sledding tourism business in New Zealand and winter was just starting there. So yeah, maybe they were just busy.**

**But then the weeks started turning into months and soon it was late April. And Jodi hadn’t yet gotten a single *payment* from Fleur. So she sent her a message:**

*Jodi Bailey: Hey, Fleur, I hate to be pushy, but wondering when we can expect a payment.*

**Taking care of these dogs wasn’t cheap. More than $3,000 dollars a month. And the Peranos were already behind.**

*Jodi Bailey: I'm upset, but in general, you get more flies with honey than dinner, you know, And later on, I just go full vinegar on her. But at the beginning, I'm like, Oh, God, bitch, just please do the right thing. Don't make me be that person.*

**Now… Fleur did get back to her with an excuse. She said that Curt’s dad had gotten very sick and was in critical condition at the hospital. But she’d have the payment sorted out.**

**A few days go by… no money.. So Jodi bugged her again…**

*[Facebook messenger sound]*

**And fleur responded.**

*Jodi Bailey: She started out really blaming the bank.*

**Said there was some sort of problem with the transfer. A missing code. Said she’ll get it fixed and sure enough, over the next few weeks she sent three payments totalling more than $11,000 dollars. They were squared up.**

**But then Fleur missed payments for June, July, and August. The debt was racking up and Jodi was getting worried again.**

*Jodi Bailey: I'm trying to explain to them that, like we are not a wealthy kennel. We did this to help you and now you're hurting us.*

**Dogsledding isn’t a moneymaker. There aren’t that many races to enter, and the cash prizes don’t even cover expenses.**

**For his 4th place Iditarod finish last year, Dan got just a little over 35,000 dollars.**

**By comparison, golfers who place 4th in the Masters tournament get a cash prize that’s just shy of three-quarters of a *million*.**

**To carve out a living, Dan and Jodi have other jobs.**

**He’s a carpenter. She does catering for a coffee shop in the summers.**

*Jodi Bailey: People need to understand that most mushers care about dogs more than they care about their truck or their clothes. You know, most mushers don't have health insurance, don't take vacations, don't have savings accounts because the only thing they care about is their dogs.*

**As fellow mushers, Curt and Fleur must have known this already.**

**Meanwhile, Jodi and Dan were digging into their savings accounts and using credit cards to care for the Underdogs. To pay for their food. And take them for runs. And clean the frozen piss off their houses.**

**What choice did Jodi and Dan have?**

*Jodi Bailey: This is my life. I have to feel good about it. And I couldn’t do anything to those dogs that I wouldn’t feel good about.*

**At the end of summer – when the original deal was supposed to come to an end – Curt and Fleur still owed nearly 10,000 dollars in back payments.**

**But worse? They never showed up to pick up the dogs.**

**Instead, Fleur reached out via Facebook messenger. They wanted an extension. Six more months.**

*Nate: Do you remember what you were feeling when you found out that these dogs that you were taking care of all summer were going to be there for another season.*

*Jodi Bailey: I was really angry. I was super, super angry.*

**Six more months. It’s a long time to care for two dozen dogs.**

**I wonder how angry Jodi would have been if she’d known that she’d wind up watching them for nearly. Three. Years.**

**Long enough that one of them would die. For another to have puppies. For a few others to reach retirement age.**

**Long enough for Jodi to discover that this wasn’t the first time the Peranos had gone back on a deal.**

*Jamie Nelson: She said until you can prove that those dogs are yours, I won’t let them off the place.*

*Jodi Bailey: They screwed a mom pop kennel, then they went ahead and screwed a small family-owned business.*

**That’s Coming up… on the next episode of The Underdogs.**

**Outside/In’s The Underdogs, was reported and produced by me Nate Hegyi.**

**It was edited and mixed by Taylor Quimby.**

**Additional editing help from Justine Paradis, Felix Poon, Jessica Hunt, and from our Executive Producer, Rebecca Lavoie.**

**A quick update - as we release this episode, the 2023 Iditarod is just wrapping up… and I hope we didn’t jinx it, because this was not Dan Kaduce’s year. He came in 12th.**

**Special thanks to Phylicia Cicilio and Tony Zambito for housing me up in Fairbanks. Also thanks to veterinarian Kim Henneman for helping me understanding the physiology of huskies.**

**Speaking of which… If you want to learn more there’s a great Ted Talk we’ll link to in the show notes. I also want to hype Blair Braverman’s dogsledding memoir, Welcome to the Goddamn Ice Cube. Great name. We’ll also link to that.**

**Music in this episode from Blue Dot Sessions, Dylan Sitts, Rand Aldo, and Amaranth Cove.**

**The Outside/In Theme is by Breakmaster Cylinder.**

**Outside/In presents The Underdogs is a production of New Hampshire Public Radio.**