

girls just
wanna
have
pugs

j.j. howard

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Missing Meatball

Early Friday morning, I was in my apartment, getting ready for school, when I heard my neighbor's voice in the hallway.

“Meatballlllllll!” she was calling.

My neighbors Sarah and Dan Thompson had the cutest dog in our entire building: a small—and very round—black pug named Meatball. And Sarah's calling for him loudly could only mean one thing: Meatball had gotten out and was on the loose.

After I finished lacing up my sneakers, I opened the door to peek out into the hall. “Sarah? What's going on?” I asked.

“Oh, Kat!” Sarah said when she saw me. “Maybe you could

help? I was getting the twins dressed and Dan Jr. must have opened the door . . . Anyway, Meatball ran out and now I can't find him!"

I had to remind myself not to roll my eyes at the mention of Dan Jr. Sarah and Dan were very nice people, but if you asked me, their oldest child was an absolute terror. I even caught him pulling poor little Meatball's tail once. Sarah and her husband always seemed frazzled, and I sometimes helped them out by walking Meatball. I never minded; Meatball was the best.

"I'm worried he ran to the stairs," Sarah said. She pointed down the hall to the door that led to the stairwell; our maintenance person had left the door propped open. "What if he goes down to the lobby and runs outside?"

"I'm sure he won't do that," I told her. "After all, it's four floors down. And Marcel wouldn't let him out," I added, thinking of our kindhearted doorman. "I'll help you look," I offered. "You go down and I'll go up. Okay?"

"Great! But . . . I don't want to make you late for school . . ."

"It's still really early," I said, stepping outside the apartment. "Besides, I want to find Meatball, too."

I liked to wake up early so I didn't have to rush getting ready for school. Meanwhile, my little sister, Micki, was probably still sleeping in her room. I was always antsy waiting for her in the mornings. Our mom had already left for work (she's an early bird, too), and our dad was, as usual, away on a business trip.

"Okay, do you have your phone?" Sarah asked. I nodded, patting my jeans pocket. "I can text you if I find him—and vice versa."

"Got it," I said, and headed for the stairwell.

I climbed up to the sixth floor and called for Meatball. But there was no sign of him anywhere. I pulled out my phone. No text from Sarah.

It seemed unlikely to me that Meatball would go too far up or down. He wasn't that fond of stairs, or any sort of exercise, really. He must have gotten himself turned around and now he was probably scared and hiding in a corner somewhere. Our building, the Burgundy, was big and old, with lots of little nooks and crannies.

Then an idea hit me: What Meatball *did* love was food. Whenever I walked him, he always perked up if I had a treat

with me. And I knew that his absolute favorite food was hot dogs. If Meatball was hiding and he smelled hot dogs, he would definitely come running.

I ran back downstairs and into my apartment. I found some hot dogs in the freezer, quickly microwaved two of them, and then cut them up and shoved them in a ziplock baggie.

As soon as I stepped back into the hallway with the hot dogs, I heard the telltale snuffling sound of a hungry Meatball. The little pug emerged from the nook he'd been hiding in at the west end of the hall and came barreling toward me on his short little legs.

“Hey, boy,” I told him, petting his back and giving him small bites of hot dog.

I wiped my hands on my pants—whoops, forgot to grab a paper towel or a napkin—and texted Sarah.

I gave Meatball a few more bites of his unearned treat and then sat down on the floor beside him. He curled against my legs, looking up at me adoringly. Well, he knew I had another whole hot dog in a baggie, so maybe that explained *some* of his adoration. But his fur was so soft, and his little face was so darn cute—I couldn't help but give him a thorough petting while we waited.

When Sarah reached us, she was crying a little in relief. “Kat, thank you. I just don’t know what I would have done without your quick thinking.”

I felt a warm glow knowing I’d been able to help. “Anything for Meatball,” I said, giving the pug one last pat before Sarah scooped him up and brought him back into her apartment.

I went into my apartment and put the leftover hot dog bites in the fridge. I was washing my hands when Micki appeared in the kitchen, fully dressed, thankfully. Micki and I look almost exactly alike: We both have medium-brown, shoulder-length, straight hair; pale skin; and hazel eyes. We’re only three years apart, but I’d always felt much more grown-up.

“What were you doing?” Micki asked, yawning. “I heard you coming in and out the door.”

“I had to help Sarah find Meatball,” I explained. “He got loose.”

“Did he drool on you?” Micki asked, pulling a Pop-Tart out of the cabinet. Micki didn’t like dogs as much as I did.

“No, he did not!” I said. “Anyway, can you grab me a Pop-Tart, too, please? And not one of the blueberry ones.”

Micki made a sheepish face and put back the one she'd grabbed before handing me one of her favorites, a Frosted Brown Sugar Cinnamon. I love my little sister, but she will fully hoard the best snacks if she thinks she can get away with it.

As I went to toast my Pop-Tart, I noticed the folded note Mom had left propped up against the toaster for me. I sighed as I scooped up the note and put it in my backpack. I had a feeling I knew what it said.

"What's that?" Micki asked as she wolfed down her Pop-Tart (she likes hers untoasted).

"Don't worry about it," I told her. I pulled my freshly toasted breakfast out of the toaster and took a big bite. "We should get going."

We grabbed our backpacks and headed out into the hallway. I texted my best friends, Lucy and Taz, who also live in our building, to ask if they wanted to walk to school with us. Lucy wrote back that she'd gone in early for something with Drama Club. Taz didn't text back, but that was pretty typical Taz. She'd see the text sometime later, after it didn't matter anymore.