

THE PUPPY PLACE

CUDDLES



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CHAPTER ONE

“Hi, Misha, hi!” Lizzie Peterson squatted down to pet the wriggly, panting husky. The dog hardly knew her, but like most dogs, he was always happy to see a friendly person. She ruffled the thick white fur around Misha’s neck and gazed into his blue eyes. “How’s my handsome boy?” she asked.

He grinned a doggy grin at her and wriggled some more, wagging his fluffy tail hard. Lizzie could tell that he was about to jump on her, so she distracted him by standing up. “Sit,” she told him as she gave a hand signal.

Misha sat.



Now his tail swept the floor as he wagged, still grinning up at her.

Lizzie laughed. The best thing about her job was the happy dogs. Lizzie and her best friend, Maria, and two other girls—Daphne and Brianna—had a dog-walking business. They took care of dogs for people who wanted their pets to have a little extra attention and exercise. Lizzie loved to help with training, too; she was the one who had taught Misha how to sit, and she was planning to work more on his jumping-up issue.

Every day—at least, every school day—her clients’ dogs waited patiently for her to arrive. And when she did, every single dog behaved as if she was the best thing that had happened all day. She was greeted with wags and wriggles, kisses and excited barks. It always felt great.

“It’s so easy to make you guys happy,” Lizzie



told Misha as she looked for his leash. “A few pats, maybe a treat, and you’ve made a new bestie. Now, where do they keep your stuff?”

Misha was not one of Lizzie’s regular charges. Normally, he was on Daphne’s route. Lizzie was covering for Daphne, who wanted a few afternoons off because her aunt was visiting from Colorado. “Please?” Daphne had asked. “She’s my favorite aunt, and I never get to see her. She wants to take me shopping and to the movies and stuff.”

Lizzie didn’t mind. She liked meeting new dogs and visiting with ones she had met before, like Misha. She just wished Daphne kept better notes on the dogs she walked. Lizzie checked the index card she had pulled out of her pocket. *Misha*, it said. *Husky, six years old. Pulls on leash. Very strong. Likes to chase squirrels.* All of that was

helpful—but pretty predictable, if you knew anything about huskies. Lizzie also really needed to know what commands Misha had been taught, whether he was allowed to eat just any dog treats or if he was allergic to wheat or anything else, and . . . “And where is your leash?” she asked Misha.

Misha pranced to a cabinet near the front door and put a paw on it. Lizzie laughed again. “It’s in there?” she asked. “Are you sure?”

Misha took a few steps back, sat down, and *woo-wood*, throwing his head back to let out a few soft, short howls. Lizzie loved the *woo-woo* huskies did instead of barking. Once she’d even met a husky who had been trained to say “I love you” in howls. It sounded more like “Wyyy wuuuuuvvvv woooooohhh!” and it was hilarious.

Lizzie pulled the cabinet door open. “Yes!” she said. There it was, a handsome red leather leash hanging on a hook. “Good boy. You do know where your leash is, don’t you?” She took the leash out and snapped it onto Misha’s collar. “Great, now we can go.” She knew she had everything else she might need in her backpack: dog treats (she always carried wheat-free ones just in case a client’s dog did turn out to be allergic), a bottle of water, poop clean-up bags, and even a doggy emergency kit with bandages and other supplies.

She had gotten the kit when she took a course on canine first aid at the community center. There Lizzie had learned to bandage paws, clean cuts, and even do doggy CPR, helping an unconscious dog with his breathing. Fortunately, so far she had not had to use anything she’d learned,

except once, when her own puppy, Buddy, cut his foot on a piece of broken glass.

Poor little Buddy. Lizzie pictured her sweet brown puppy looking up at her with the saddest eyes as he held out his bleeding paw. She smiled as she remembered how he'd licked her cheek in thanks when she was done cleaning and bandaging the cut.

Buddy had first come to the Petersons' as a foster puppy. Lizzie's family had fostered many puppies before and after Buddy, keeping each one just long enough to find it the perfect home—but Buddy was the only one who had come to stay. The whole family—Lizzie, her parents, and her two younger brothers, Charles and the Bean—had fallen madly in love with the adorable mixed-breed pup. There was no question that Buddy was their favorite puppy ever.



“But I do like you, too, Misha,” Lizzie told the husky. He was prancing around now, still wearing that silly grin. She knew he was more than ready for his walk. “Let’s go, then,” she said as they headed out the back door together.

“Misha, Misha!” Lizzie heard a girl’s voice. Misha heard the voice, too. He strained at his leash, towing Lizzie toward the sidewalk.

He dragged her straight for a small wiry girl with her bright red hair done in two braids. She looked a little younger than Lizzie—*probably a first-grader*, Lizzie thought. The girl must have been playing in the yard next door, where Lizzie spotted a swing set. Her freckles and those long red braids reminded Lizzie of Pippi Longstocking, the feisty main character in one of Lizzie’s favorite books.

Before Lizzie could even think of the best way to slow him down, Misha pulled her right up to

the girl. The girl laughed and thumped him and petted him and stroked his long, fluffy tail. “Misha, Misha,” she said again. “Good boy, Misha.” She giggled as he licked her face.

Then the girl stopped to stare at Lizzie. “Who are you?” she asked.

Lizzie smiled. “I’m Lizzie. I’m taking over for Daphne this week. Who are you?”

“I’m Poppy,” said the girl. “I know Daphne. I’ve gone with her on her dog walks. Can I come with you?”

“If your mom says yes, sure!” said Lizzie.

The girl grinned. “Really? I live right there,” she said, pointing to the big white house next door to Misha’s.

“Okay, well, let’s ask her,” said Lizzie.

Poppy’s mom came to the door when Poppy called for her. She had red hair, too, but hers was cut short, with bangs.



“Hi,” Lizzie said. “I’m Lizzie Peterson. I’m the president of the dog-walking business your neighbor Daphne works for.”

The woman looked surprised. “Funny, somehow I always thought Daphne was the president,” she said.

Lizzie smiled. “That’s interesting,” she said. “Anyway, is it okay if Poppy walks with me? I’m just going around the block, and I’m used to watching kids.”

“How about if I come along?” The woman stuck out her hand. “I’m Allie. Allie Bauer.”

“Great,” said Lizzie. She checked the list Daphne had left for her. “Next stop is to pick up Ruby.”

Allie shook her head. “Nope, next stop is Cuddles.”

Again Lizzie checked Daphne’s sheet, with all her clients’ names and addresses. “I don’t see a Cuddles on Daphne’s list,” she said.

“Oh, Daphne doesn’t walk her,” said Allie.



“Poppy just loves to visit her. Poor little puppy, left all alone all day.”

Before Lizzie had a chance to ask more, she heard noises. A bark, a whimper, a whine. The puppy was not far off—and she was not happy. “Let’s go,” said Lizzie.