

LILA
AND
HADLEY

Kody Keplinger

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Chapter One

“I really ain’t a dog person.”

Mama always says I shouldn’t say *ain’t*. Says it’s not proper grammar. But then, she’s also the one who taught me that stealing is wrong, and now that’s what she’s in jail for. So as far as I’m concerned, she don’t got a leg to stand on.

“Did you hear me?” I ask Beth as she puts her tiny car into park and shuts off the engine. “I said I ain’t a dog person.”

“That’s all right. You don’t have to touch the dogs. Don’t even have to look at them if you don’t want. We’ll only be here for a few minutes.”

“Then let me stay in the car.”

“No way. It’s ninety degrees!”

“You got air-conditioning.”

Beth shakes her head. “Out of the car, Baby Sister. You’re

coming inside. But I promise, it won't take me long. Then we can go back home."

"Hadley."

"What?"

"My name ain't Baby Sister. It's Hadley."

I don't gotta look at Beth to know I've hurt her feelings. But I don't care. She's got no right to call me her sister. Not after the way she left us five years back. Three days ago, when she picked me up from Mama's house, was the first time I'd seen her since I was seven and she was nineteen. We might share blood, but we sure ain't family.

"Okay, Hadley," she says, her voice quiet. I hear the click as she unbuckles her seat belt. "Let's just go inside."

"But I ain't a dog person."

She ignores me this time and climbs out of the car. For a second, I think about staying put. It's not like she can drag me out of the car if I don't wanna move. Not without making a real big scene.

But June in Kentucky sure ain't nothing to sneeze at, and Beth's already turned off the car and taken the keys with her. My not wanting to melt into the scorching, cracked fake-leather seat wins out over my not wanting to go inside.

“Do you need my arm?” Beth asks as I slam the passenger-side door as hard as I can. “Can you see all right?”

“I’m fine,” I snap. But as soon as the words leave my mouth, my foot collides with the edge of the curb. I start to fall forward, and Beth grabs hold of my elbow and keeps me upright. Once I’ve got my balance again, I yank away from her. “I said I’m fine.”

Beth huffs out a breath, but she don’t argue. “All right. Come on, then.”

I follow close behind her, keeping my eyes down so I can watch for bumps or steps I might miss as we make our way down the sidewalk and onto a path that leads to a large brick building. When I’m looking right at something, I can mostly see all right. But it’s the edges where I get tripped up. Anything out to the sides or below or above a certain point is just . . . gone. It’s not darkness or black spots or anything. It’s like my brain tries to fill in what ought to be there, so sometimes I think I can see but . . . I can’t. And those edges have been creeping in slowly for years. The doctors say I’m already what they call “legally blind.” And one day that tunnel of clear vision will be more like a pinprick.

I don’t like to think about that if I can help it.

Beth reaches the big front door, and I can already hear

a bunch of dogs barking inside before she's even pulled it open. She gestures for me to walk in ahead of her. I do, but I keep my arms crossed tight over my chest so she knows I ain't happy about being here.

Beth walks to the front desk. There's a tall teenage girl with a round, pale face sitting behind it, talking to an older, bearded man who's clutching a fluffy white dog in his arms.

"Thank you so much, Angela," the man says. "Sprinkles is going to have a good home with me."

"I'm sure she will, Mr. Xu," Angela says. "Be sure to post lots of pictures and tag Right Choice Rescue on social media, okay? We love seeing how our dogs do in their forever homes."

"I certainly will. Or, well . . . my granddaughter will. She says I'm bad at taking pictures." He laughs, says goodbye to Angela at the desk, and leaves, his sandals squeaking against the tile. "Let's go, Sprinkles," I hear him say before he's out the door. He's using that squished, goofy voice people use when they talk to pets. "We have to go buy you some new toys, yes we do."

Beth steps up to the desk then. "Hurray for a successful adoption!"

"Thanks to you," Angela replies, tucking her short red

hair behind her ear. “You worked miracles getting Sprinkles housebroken.”

“Some dogs are a little more stubborn than others,” Beth says. “You just have to be patient . . . and have the right dog treats.” She glances over at me, still standing several feet back. “Angela, this is my little sister, Hadley. She’s going to be living with me for a while.”

“Oh, hi there,” Angela says, voice bright and friendly.

All I do is shrug.

“Is Vanessa in her office?” Beth asks.

“She should be.”

“Great. Thanks, Angela.”

Beth walks back over to me as the door opens and a couple comes in pushing a stroller, heading straight for Angela’s desk.

“I’ve just gotta go back to Vanessa’s office and pick up my check,” Beth tells me. “Then look in on a few of the dogs. You can either stay here or walk around if you want. I’ll come find you when I’m done, okay?”

Shrug.

Beth sighs again. I make her sigh an awful lot.

I stand there for a while after she walks off, but eventually watching Angela chatting with the couple—who seem

very particular about the kind of dog they wanna adopt—gets real boring. So I decide I might as well walk around.

To the left of the desk there's a door that opens onto a hallway. I walk down it until I reach an intersection and head right. A second later, I find myself in a large room full of dog pens. The pens are pretty big, too, giving the dogs lots of room to walk around inside. I must've wandered into the large dog section, I realize, because all the dogs I pass seem huge.

There are dogs in every shape and color. Pointy ears, floppy ears. Dogs with curly hair and dogs with sleek straight fur. Black dogs, white dogs, yellow, spotted. Most of them come to the edge of their pens as I pass, wagging their tails all excited, like I'm here to see them. A few even jump up, paws on the bars, barking. Not scary barking, but like they want my attention.

I walk past all of them.

It's not that I dislike dogs. They're fine, I guess. But we never had one, so I don't get all worked up about them the way a lot of people seem to. I ain't got a clue where Beth gets her love of them from, but she likes them enough that she became a dog trainer. I wonder if she was a dog person when she lived with Mama and me or if that happened after she left us.

I walk past pen after pen, ignoring the dogs inside, until something makes me stop.

I'm standing next to one of the kennels, but the dog inside ain't up at the edge, trying to get me to notice it like the others. Nope. For a minute, I don't see a dog at all, and I think this one might be empty. But then I lower my eyes and see a large brown-and-white lump on the floor. It'd been just outside my range of vision before.

It's a pretty big dog. Real broad and stocky-looking, with high set, smallish ears that flop down at the tips. And its head is huge, flat with a big jaw. Its face is mostly white but with a big brown spot covering most of the left side. I don't know dog breeds real well, but I think I've seen dogs like this on TV. Pit bull, I'm pretty sure.

The dog's just lying there, eyes open, and all I can think is that it looks like how I'd look if I were a dog. Downright miserable. Like it'd rather be anywhere else.

I don't know what makes me do it—I sure didn't plan to—but I find myself crouching down in front of the kennel. And then I'm talking to the dog.

“Hey,” I say.

It doesn't move, but I think its eyes are looking my way.

“Bad day?” I ask, as if the dog can answer. And I don't

know, maybe it kinda does. Its face certainly looks like it's saying, "Yes. Terrible day." I nod at it. "Me, too. A whole lot of them lately."

Slowly, I reach my hand through the bars. I know Beth would probably tell me this ain't safe—I don't know this dog or what its temper is like—but I do it anyway. I move my fingers in a beckoning gesture. For a minute, I don't think the dog's gonna come to me. Not like I blame it. I didn't wanna move from my bed today, either.

It takes a second to make up its mind, but it starts to stand. It moves toward me real slow, as if second-guessing every step. I ain't sure what comes over me, but I hear myself cooing to it, softly saying, "Good dog. There we go. Come on." And silly as it might be, it works.

The dog reaches me at last. It stares at my face for a minute. Its eyes are real big and brown and . . . *sad*. That's the only way I know how to describe them. Sad and maybe . . . lonely? Then it lowers its huge head to sniff my palm. Once it's done checking me out, I reach up and scratch behind one of its ears.

And then we both let out this sigh. Right at the same time. Like whatever has just happened has lifted a weight. Like we're both relieved.

That's how I meet Lila.