

THE PUPPY PLACE

CHAMP



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For K-9 teams everywhere, with much gratitude for all they do

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CHAPTER ONE

“No batter, no batter!”

Charles Peterson glared at the guy sitting next to him in the stands. Why was he yelling that? The man standing at the plate, waving a bat around as he waited for a pitch, happened to be Charles’s father. Dad might not be the best soft-ball player in the world, but Charles knew that he could hit: they played all the time in the backyard and even went to the batting cages together sometimes. “Home run, Dad!” he shouted over the guy’s heckling. “Go for it!”

The man next to Charles grinned and shrugged.



“All in good fun,” he said. “My brother’s a cop, so I have to root for them.”

The softball game was an annual spring event in Littleton: firefighters against police. Charles went every year, and of course he always rooted for the firefighters, since his dad was part of the Littleton Fire Department.

Unfortunately, the firefighters always lost.

So far.

Maybe, thought Charles, *this would be their year*. “My dad’s a firefighter,” he told the man.

The man nodded. “Good for him,” he said. “And hey, it looks like they have a chance this time.”

It was true. They were in the top of the ninth inning, and the police still had not scored a run. The firefighters hadn’t, either, but now they had two runners on base. Charles knew them both: Meg was on first, and Rick, one of the newer guys on the squad, was on third. “Bring ’em home, Dad,”



Charles yelled as the pitcher wound up. He knew that the police would still have a chance to score when they came up at the end of the inning, but a couple of runs would be great insurance.

“Yup,” said the man as the ball sailed over the plate, “they’ve got a chance, as long as Reggie doesn’t show up.”

“Steerike!” yelled the ump.

Charles’s dad stepped back from the plate, frowning and shaking his head.

“Reggie?” Charles asked. “Oh, right. Reggie. The guy who gets all the home runs.” Now he remembered. Reggie was the main reason the police won every year. He was a state trooper, big and muscular. He could hit to just about any spot in the field, and he could field, too. He usually played third base. Sure enough, Charles saw that there was a new guy at third, an unfamiliar face. Definitely not Reggie. That was good news.

Charles's dad stepped back in, took his stance, and got ready for the next pitch. Charles had a feeling he was going to swing hard this time — but he didn't. The pitch came in low, and the umpire called, "Ball!"

"One and one," said the man next to Charles.

The next pitch was way to the outside. "Ball two," called the ump.

Charles's dad swung hard at the next pitch but didn't make contact. He kicked the dirt. Charles could tell he was frustrated. Another pitch, high and inside, and the count was full. "Come on, Dad," Charles said under his breath. "Come on!"

The pitcher wound up. She let the ball fly. Charles's dad stepped in, swung hard, and connected! The ball went sailing deep into left field. Charles jumped to his feet. "Yes!" he yelled when he saw the ball bounce to the ground between the two guys who'd been running for it. "Go, Dad!" he

shouted as he watched his dad sprint for first. Already Rick had crossed home plate. Now Meg was between third and home, and Dad was rounding second. Out in left field, a player swept the ball up in his glove, bobbled it, recovered, and threw to the third baseman.

The throw was too hard, and the ball tipped off the third baseman's glove. "Go! Go! Go!" yelled Charles as Dad flew toward home. "Yesss!" Charles shouted as Dad slid across the plate. "Three runs! Go, Dad!" Dad looked up at him and grinned, holding his fists over his head.

Charles couldn't believe Mom had missed seeing this: she was at the nearby playground with Charles's little brother, the Bean. And Charles's sister, Lizzie, hadn't even come to the game. Well, they'd all be hearing about it at dinner that night, for sure.

The guy next to Charles was grinning, too.

“Nice hit,” he said. He gave Charles a high five. “Your dad’s a good player.”

Charles nodded. He was proud of his father — for that three-run homer, and for a lot of other things, too. It was cool that he was a fire-fighter and an EMT: he helped people all the time. Dad was smart and funny and kind, and — Charles smiled — he loved puppies. If only everybody could see the way his dad cooed over little puppies.

Charles had seen his dad with a lot of puppies, since the Petersons were a foster family. That meant they took care of puppies who needed homes, just until they found each one the perfect forever family. Charles loved fostering, even though it was always hard to give the puppies up when the time came. He fell in love with each one and would have loved to keep them all. Fortunately, his family had kept one — the cutest,



smartest, sweetest puppy ever. His name was Buddy. Buddy had soft brown fur and sparkly brown eyes. He wasn't any particular breed, but he wasn't "just a mutt." He was Charles's best friend in the whole world, and Charles told him everything.

Right then, Charles couldn't wait to tell Buddy about Dad's home run. "There was no way the police were going to come back after that," he would say as he scratched the heart-shaped white spot on his puppy's chest. "After Dad's hit, I knew that the firefighters were going to win this time."

"Uh-oh," said the man next to Charles. "Looks like your team's good luck might be about to come to an end." He pointed toward the parking lot near the police team dugout.

Charles looked — and groaned. It was Reggie, the big home-run hitter. But wait. What was that? A dark shadow flitted around Reggie's legs,

following him as he strode toward his teammates. The police were coming off the field after their pitcher had caught a high pop-up for the last out. They cheered and laughed when they spotted Reggie, and the shadow shrank behind the big man.

The man next to Charles stood up for a better look. “What’s Reggie doing with that scrawny puppy?” he asked.

