



HEARTS & CRAFTS

#2: Pet Project



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SCHOLASTIC INC.



This book is dedicated to Amanda Maciel,
who always puts her heart into the craft.

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CHAPTER ONE



"Oh, turkey, I forgot the dessert," Mom said the minute we pulled up to my aunt's brown ranch-style house.

"We were supposed to bring dessert?" I looked over my shoulder at the backseat, in case there was a cake or something that I had forgotten about.

Mom sighed and glanced doubtfully at me. "Should we head over to Tart Café to get a pie?"

"That's ten minutes away," I pointed out. My aunt lives in a place I call "the middle of nowhere" and that Mom calls "a more rural environment." It's only a short drive from the center of town, but there's also an actual farm at the end of Aunt Goldie's road. Sometimes the breeze smells like wet cow and fertilizer . . . in a good, tangy way. "We'll be twenty minutes late if we get dessert," I said. "And we're already here. Aunt Goldie doesn't care that much about pie."

Mom still looked stressed, so I added, “Everyone forgets stuff, Mom.” I very nicely did not point out that she had been forgetting stuff right and left lately.

“It’s just . . . *work*,” she said. Her hands gripped the steering wheel even though the car was parked. “It’s giving me brain fog.”

I nodded. Mom started a new job a few weeks ago, and then a bigger company bought her company. All of a sudden, she had a bunch of new responsibilities. I knew she was still trying to figure everything out. “They should pay you more money,” I said.

Those words seemed to snap her back to the present. Mom reached for the door handle, pushed open the car door, and smiled at me. “They’re still reorganizing everything to make two companies into one big one. I might end up with a different job; I might even end up with a promotion.”

“They should have promoted you already!” I insisted.

Mom laughed. “Mackenzie, I love your confidence. But I’ve been in this job for less than two months. We’ll see what happens, okay?”

I grunted in a way that meant *I’m right and you know it* as we both stepped out of the car and headed toward my aunt’s

side door. Only people promoting political candidates or trying to sell cookies ever showed up at the front entrance, so she never answered it.

I could smell Aunt Goldie's famous roast beef when I knocked, and was met with the sound of two sharp barks, and then scrambling toenails clicking across the wood floor.

"Sounds like she has a visitor," I said, and a moment later we heard my aunt say, "Buster, now sit. Okay, good boy." Then she pulled open the door, smiling hugely, her blonde hair in a messy bun at the base of her neck. She was wearing a white V-neck shirt and faded jeans. Next to her was a brown-black-and-white dog with bright eyes and a bit of gray at his muzzle.

"Who's this?" I cried as Mom said, "What a cutie!"

The dog spotted something behind me and stood up suddenly.

"Close the—" Goldie cried, but the dog—Buster, I assumed—had already darted out the side door. A squirrel streaked across the driveway and bounded up a tree. Buster was instantly standing at the roots, barking furiously up at a branch and the fiercely chattering squirrel. Goldie sighed. "Yeah, we're still working on that."

“It’s going great,” Mom teased.

“It isn’t easy to catch Buster once he spots a squirrel,” Goldie admitted as she reached for a leash on the peg by the door. “He’s a Jack Russell terrier—they’re fast.”

I hurried into the kitchen and pulled a tiny piece of beef from the roast. “Okay?” I asked as I held it up.

“He’ll be your best friend,” Goldie said, and I went outside calling, “Buster!”

He glanced over at me and caught a whiff of the beef. He glanced back up at the squirrel, almost like he was saying, *Catch you later*, then turned toward me and plopped into a sit, waiting for his treat. “He’s trained,” I said as I held out the treat. As he chewed, I gently took hold of his collar.

“Somewhat.” Goldie joined us and clicked on the leash. “He’s housebroken and knows how to sit. But he’s a little rambunctious.”

“How old is he?” Mom asked as her sister guided Buster back inside and removed the leash. I shut the door and we all headed into the kitchen.

“He’s nine.” Goldie washed her hands and then headed to the counter to slice the roast beef. “His owner passed away, and her daughter inherited him. She brought him in because

his fur had started falling out. Anyway, I asked a few questions and it turned out that she had been keeping him in the garage because she was allergic to him. She took him out a couple of times a day but that was it.”

Mom bent down to scratch Buster behind the ears. He stood up, his butt wiggling with every wag of his stumpy tail.

“So he’s yours now?” I looked over at Buster, who was sitting again, paying very careful attention to the plates as Aunt Goldie filled them with mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, and roast beef. His little tail wiggled from side to side against the floor.

“No—I’m not home enough to care for a dog,” Aunt Goldie said. “He needs to socialize and explore. I think he’s losing his fur because he was stressed out from being alone. But I talked the woman into surrendering Buster—which wasn’t that hard to do. She seemed really relieved when I promised I’d take him to the shelter and see personally that he got a good home. I just wanted to observe him and make sure he didn’t have any more medical issues before I brought him over, which I’ll do Monday.” She placed the plates on the table and gestured for us to sit.

All my aunt's furniture looks like it was found by the side of the road, which it was. Aunt Goldie always says that she hates the idea of nice furniture because she has too many houseguests. (The houseguests are all animals.) I chose the sturdiest-looking chair and drew the paper towel napkin across my lap as Goldie directed Buster to his bed and put up a doggie playpen around him. He rested his chin on the edge of the pillow and looked up at us with big eyes.

"What a horrible person," I said, thinking about the woman who had kept him in her garage.

"She felt terrible about it." Aunt Goldie slipped into her seat. "She knew it wasn't a good situation, but she felt she owed it to her mom to try."

"But poor Buster," I insisted.

"Sometimes people can't think straight when they lose someone," Mom said gently. "Her mother had died, after all."

I huffed out a breath. I knew Mom was right, but did she really always have to be so *nice* and *understanding* all the time? Buster had been locked in a garage! And he was clearly such a good dog.

"I'm sure he'll find a family who loves him," Mom added.

“It can be hard to place a senior dog, but I’m sure we’ll find someone.” Aunt Goldie smiled.

“He’s a sweetie,” Mom agreed. “Someone would be lucky to have him.”

As if he realized we were talking about him, Buster sat up, his ears pricked, with the tips flopping over. Then he rose onto his haunches, with his front paws dangling in a begging pose, which made us all laugh.

“You didn’t tell me he could do that!” I cried.

“I didn’t know! I guess he wants some more roast beef,” Aunt Goldie said. “I’ll give him a little more later.

“You have to wait,” she told Buster, who turned in a circle and settled back onto his bed.

We finished dinner, which was excellent, as always. To be clear, my aunt only knows how to make one fancy meal: the one we just ate. We eat that whenever we come over, which is about once every three months. Aunt Goldie doesn’t really care about cooking—she’s too busy working as a vet tech, volunteering at the shelter, and studying to be a veterinarian. It’s a bummer that she’s so busy these days because she’s an awesome aunt. She’s crazy about amusement parks and fairs and takes me on all the rides, even the scary,

stomach-dropping ones that Mom can barely look at. She knows every waterfall in the area, and sometimes we go for hikes and end up splashing in the water. Goldie also loves action movies, and she used to take me to all the big opening weekends. We haven't done any of those things lately, though. The only consolation is that I know she misses it all as much as I do.

After dinner, Goldie opened Buster's pen and let him do a few tricks for treats. He showed us that he knew how to lie down and roll over. Mom got him to hop up on his hind feet and congratulated him with a treat and a hug. He gave her a big lick on the cheek, which made her giggle.

Then we played Uno, and I won the most games, as usual, mostly because my mom can never remember to say "Uno" and my aunt never pays attention to anyone's cards but her own.

"One more round?" I asked, shuffling the deck.

"Well, I have to play," Mom said. "I can't get up." She smiled down at Buster, who had settled into her lap and was snoring softly. She ran her hand gently over his back. "What a good boy."

"Pets are scientifically proven to be relaxing," Aunt

Goldie said as I handed her the deck to deal the cards.

“Maybe we should bring him home with us,” I suggested.

“Mackenzie, we can’t get a dog,” Mom said, patting Buster. “I work too much.”

“I meant for the weekend.” I picked up my cards, which included two Draw Fours. “We can bring him to the shelter on Monday for Aunt Goldie.”

“Wow, do you think you could do that?” Goldie asked. “I told my study group to go ahead without me because I didn’t want to leave Buster alone, but it would be really great if I could meet up with them.” She looked over at my mom, who patted Buster’s head.

This is just what Mom needs! I realized. She seemed more relaxed than she had in three weeks. Besides, it was Friday—we could take Buster to the park on Saturday and maybe even down to the river on Sunday.

“We could have a chill weekend, just going to the park and stuff,” I pointed out. “And you’ll have someone to sit next to you on the couch while you watch your cheesy romance movies.” She hesitated, so I added, “Besides, we’d be helping Aunt Goldie.”