

# THE PUPPY PLACE

SPARKY



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*For Jennifer and Choṭi Jyotī, with thanks for the inspiration!*

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# CHAPTER ONE

“All set for your nap, Petey?” Lizzie said as she tucked the soft blanket around her furry friend. She leaned down to kiss him on the nose, and Petey kissed her back, then snuffled happily as he flapped his long ears at her.

Petey was an older Basset hound mix with a gray muzzle, droopy eyes, and silky, floppy ears that hung so low Lizzie sometimes worried he would trip on them. He was one of her favorite dogs at Caring Paws, the animal shelter where she volunteered every Saturday. Petey was so grateful for everything she offered him: a walk outdoors, a biscuit, a soft red fleece blanket she'd



made especially for his bed. He'd look up at her with his big, sad hound eyes and wrinkled brow, tilting his head sideways, as if he were saying, "You would do that for little old me?"

Lizzie laughed and bent to give him a hug. Petey loved hugs, and he loved being tucked into his bed for a nap. Lizzie wished someone would come along who would think Petey would make the perfect pet—but so far, nobody had.

"It's hard to find homes for the older dogs," Ms. Dobbins always said. Ms. Dobbins was the director of Caring Paws. "Face it, nothing is as cute as a puppy. And older dogs can be expensive, since many of them need to go to the vet more often."

Lizzie knew Ms. Dobbins spoke from experience. "But if somebody just got to know you, Petey," Lizzie said to Petey now, looking into his big brown eyes. "They'd know you are the



sweetest, most patient, most gentle dog in the world. You'd be a perfect dog to have *before* they get a puppy, since a dog like you is the best teacher a puppy can have."

"I know, right?"

Lizzie jumped, surprised by the voice. She hadn't heard any footsteps. But standing right in front of Petey's kennel, with her hand gripping the wire mesh fencing, was a brown-haired girl with a dimply smile and sparkly brown eyes. Lizzie squinted up at her. She thought they looked about the same age, but Lizzie had never seen her at school. "Petey," the girl said nodding. "He's, like, the best dog ever. I can't believe nobody's adopted him."

Who was this girl? And how did she know Petey? Lizzie knew all the regular staff because she spent so much time volunteering. She was

curious, but how could she find out more? Would it be rude to just burst out with, “Who are you, anyway?”

Ms. Dobbins walked up just in time. “Oh, great, you two have met,” she said. “I know you’re going to get along. You have so much in common.” She smiled at Lizzie. “Harper has been coming to volunteer three mornings a week for the last month or so,” she told her.

Lizzie’s eyebrows shot up. That was a lot of volunteering. How did she have so much time, this Harper person?

“I’m homeschooled,” Harper said, as if to answer the question Lizzie had not asked out loud. “I get most of my schoolwork done really early in the morning. Then my mom and I come here, and afterward we go back home and I finish up the rest of my lessons.”

“She’s been a big help,” said Ms. Dobbins. “Harper knows so much about dogs and how to care for them.”

Lizzie tried to look happy about that, but she couldn’t help but feel a twinge of envy. She was the one who knew the most about dogs. She was the one who Ms. Dobbins called her “superstar volunteer.” She was the responsible one, the only volunteer under fourteen who was allowed to walk the shelter dogs on her own. Lizzie took a breath. “Cool,” she said.

Ms. Dobbins laughed. “Oh, but of course Harper still has plenty to learn,” she said. She turned to Harper. “Lizzie is one of our longest-term volunteers. She’s taught *me* things I didn’t know about dogs. Plus, she’s great with all the animals and very responsible. Her family fosters puppies, so I know I can trust her with just about any dog.”