

THE PUPPY PLACE

NALA



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For Miriam

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CHAPTER ONE

“Maybe it’ll be floor hockey,” said Sammy, sweeping a pretend hockey stick to pass a pretend ball to David.

“My cousin plays that at college,” David said, sending a pretend pass back to Sammy. “It sounds like a blast.”

Charles noticed that neither of his friends bothered to pretend-pass to him. They probably figured he would mess up the shot, pretend or not. Charles Peterson was good at a lot of things — for example, taking care of dogs and understanding their special language and ways — but unlike his friends, he was not a natural



athlete. Also unlike them, he could not get himself excited about the “special new activity” Ms. Helm had promised they would be starting that day in PE.

Their gym teacher had been dropping hints about it for weeks, telling the second graders how much fun they were about to have. “Everybody always says this is the best unit of the year,” she’d promised. Now, as Charles and his friends walked to school, they tried to guess what it might be.

Charles had asked his older sister, Lizzie, if she remembered what she had done in second-grade PE (she was in fourth grade now), but she didn’t. “All I remember is dumb old square dancing last year,” she said. “Sweaty hands and everybody crashing into each other.”

Lizzie wasn’t too much into PE, either. Like Charles, she was mainly interested in dogs. In



fact, she was totally dog-crazy. She was the one who had decided that their family should foster puppies.

Their family included Lizzie and Charles's younger brother, Adam (known as the Bean); their dad, a firefighter; and their mom, a newspaper reporter. By now the Petersons had fostered dozens of puppies, taking care of them just long enough to find the perfect home for each one. Charles remembered every single puppy, and he would have loved to keep them all — but that wasn't how fostering worked. Sometimes he still had dreams about Moose, the huge but cowardly Great Dane they'd had for a while, or Lucy the long-eared hound mix. He knew they had both gone to terrific homes, but he wished he could still play with them now and then.

“Wouldn't that be great, Cheese?” Sammy said, elbowing Charles in the ribs.



“Wouldn’t what be great?” Charles stared at his friend. He’d been lost in thought about puppies and had not been paying attention to the conversation.

“Learning circus stuff, like how to swing on a trapeze or walk a tightrope or be a clown, like David’s cousin. I heard they do that at some schools.”

Charles shrugged. “I guess,” he said. He pictured himself trying to balance as he tiptoed along a tightrope strung high above the playground. His stomach lurched. *Hmm*, he thought. Maybe it wouldn’t be so great after all. He’d really rather be in his own backyard, tossing a soft rubber football for Buddy, the one foster puppy the Petersons had not been able to give up. Now the sweet little brown pup was part of their family, and Charles never got tired of hanging out with him.



Charles looked at Sammy and David. They were both good friends, but his *best* friend was definitely Buddy. Who else could he tell all his secrets to? Who else was always, always happy to see him and ready to do anything Charles wanted to do? Which, Charles realized, definitely did not include walking on tightropes.

“What would you want PE to be?” Sammy asked. “I mean, if you could pick anything.”

Charles shrugged again. “Probably something I could do with Buddy,” he said. “Like when we did agility. That was the most fun.” He and Lizzie had taken agility classes with Buddy and one of their foster puppies, a sheltie named Gizmo. Charles remembered that Gizmo had not caught on very quickly, but Buddy had been a natural at running the special obstacle course.

“I don’t think they’re going to be doing dog sports at school anytime soon,” said David.

“Nope,” agreed Sammy. “But I bet Ms. Helm has something awesome planned for us, whatever it is.”

David nodded eagerly, but Charles was still lost in picturing Buddy running through the yellow tunnel at agility class, his short little tail wagging as he disappeared into its mouth. When he popped out, he’d scramble toward the seesaw to run up one side, balance in the middle, then run down the other end, making the seesaw come down with a bang as he sprang off it. Buddy always grinned as he did the obstacles. He was obviously having the time of his life.

A school bus passed the boys, and Sammy waved at the kids looking out the back window. One of them made a funny face, and Sammy made one back, sticking out his tongue as far as it would go.



The bus trundled on down the block, passing Mr. Mike, the crossing guard. He waved and made a face, too. “Look at Mr. Mike, cracking himself up again,” said Sammy, laughing and waving. Mr. Mike was always in a good mood, even on gloomy or freezing cold days. He was always ready for a high five or Charles’s latest knock-knock joke. He’d been king of that corner for as long as Charles could remember, and he made it fun to arrive at school every day.

By now, the friends were just a block away from school, passing the little brick house that was always super decorated for the holidays: huge skeletons dancing all over the lawn at Halloween; a sled and reindeer, all lit up, on the roof for Christmas; a tree full of colorful eggs at Easter.

At the moment, the house looked pretty plain except for some cutout snowflakes in the window

and a snowman banner waving from the front porch — even though they hadn't had any real snowstorms so far.

“Hey, what's that?” Sammy pointed to a quick flash of orangey red disappearing behind the garage. “Was it a fox?”

“A cat?” guessed David.

Charles had only caught a glimpse, but he shook his head. “No,” he said. “I'm pretty sure it was a puppy.”

