

THE PUPPY PLACE

RUSTY



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For Nicole, Marc, and Natalie

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CHAPTER ONE

Lizzie Peterson woke up early on the first day of spring vacation. She stretched and yawned, then rolled over to give her puppy, Buddy, a hug. “You’re such a good sleeper,” she told him as they cuddled. Buddy never snored or stole the covers. He just slept quietly, curled up in a soft, warm ball. He stayed right beside her, ready to snuggle if she woke in the night or had a bad dream. She missed Buddy when he sometimes slept with Charles or the Bean, her younger brothers. Lizzie had dozens of stuffies to hug, but they just weren’t the same as a real, live puppy.



Lizzie was crazy about animals, especially dogs of all ages. She loved playing with them, learning about them, and taking care of them. She even had a dog-walking business with three friends. Lizzie stretched and yawned again, thinking how glad she was that they had decided to take a break from the business during school vacation, since they all had big plans.

Lizzie's best friend, Maria, was going to her family's cabin in the woods. Daphne was going to Arizona, and Brianna was going to Disney World. All three of them were super excited and had acted like Lizzie was losing out, since she wasn't leaving town. Lizzie didn't care. She was going to Animal Camp!

"Why do you get to go to Animal Camp every day and I just have to stay home?" Charles asked when she went downstairs that morning. He was sitting at the kitchen table, nibbling a piece of toast.



“I told you,” she said as she got herself a bowl of cereal. “Because Ms. Dobbins is just trying out the idea. She decided to start with one four-day session, just for fourth and fifth graders.” Lizzie was in fourth, but Charles was only in second grade. “If it works out, they’ll have day camp this summer for all ages.”

Ms. Dobbins was the director of Caring Paws, the animal shelter where Lizzie regularly volunteered. Ms. Dobbins had been talking forever about hosting an animal day camp, and now she was finally doing it. She and the other staff members at Caring Paws had been planning the camp for weeks, but she hadn’t told Lizzie much about it. “I want you to be surprised,” Ms. Dobbins had said. “But trust me, there will be a ton of activities and games and plenty of time to be with the animals, too. Plus some special guests. I think you’re going to love it.”

“Anyway, you get to stay home and play with Buddy,” Lizzie reminded Charles. He loved their puppy as much as she did. Sometimes they even argued about who loved Buddy more.

“And with me and the Bean,” said Mom as she joined them at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. “We’re going to do some fun things this week, the three of us.” She raised an eyebrow at Lizzie. Mom had already told Lizzie that she planned to take Charles and the Bean to a professional hockey game—and she’d even arranged a meeting with the mascot, who was a giant purple tiger. Lizzie knew her brothers were going to love that.

Later, when Mom dropped Lizzie off at Caring Paws, she gave Lizzie a kiss good-bye and said, “Just promise me you won’t come home with a puppy for us to foster. I’ve got enough on my

hands already this week; I can't be chasing after a puppy, too."

Lizzie smiled. "No worries," she said. "I already know who I'm choosing for my Pet Pal."

The idea of Pet Pals was the only thing Ms. Dobbins had shared about camp. She'd told Lizzie that each camper was going to have a special friend among the shelter animals, someone they'd take care of, learn about, and maybe even help find a home for. From her volunteering, Lizzie already knew most of the shelter dogs. She had decided she'd choose Nora, an old black Lab who loved to nap in the sun out in the dog yard. Lizzie felt a little sorry for Nora; she had been at the shelter for over six months—very few people wanted to adopt older dogs. But plump old Nora was such a sweetheart, with her gray muzzle and slow, plodding walk. She'd be easy to deal

with, too. That would leave Lizzie plenty of time to pay attention to all the other activities at Animal Camp.

“Have fun,” Mom said as she gave Lizzie another kiss good-bye.

Lizzie walked into Caring Paws, wondering if she would know any of the other campers. She wasn’t usually shy, but it would be nice to see a friendly face.

“Yay! Lizzie’s here!” April, one of the shelter staff, gave her a big smile from behind the reception desk. “Camp’s starting soon. They’re all in the meeting room.”

Lizzie smiled and headed to the back. “Wow,” she said when she walked in. The room had been transformed from a boring space with a big table and a bunch of chairs into a colorful, exciting place. The table had been pushed against the wall, and huge comfy-looking pillows in every color of the



rainbow filled the floor. Posters of animals—from puppies to elephants to tortoises—decorated the walls. Lizzie spotted an array of tempting craft supplies on the table and a stack of T-shirts ready to be passed out to campers. “It looks fantastic in here,” she said to Ms. Dobbins, who stood near the door.

Ms. Dobbins smiled happily. “Doesn’t it? We’re all so excited about camp. We had a lot of fun getting things ready yesterday.”

Lizzie saw Nicole, a girl she knew from school, and went to talk to her. A moment later, Ms. Dobbins clapped her hands and asked everyone to grab a pillow and sit in a circle. “Welcome, everyone,” she said when they were settled. “We’re so happy to have you all here for our very first Camp Cares-a-Lot. For any of you I haven’t met yet, I’m Ms. Dobbins, the director of Caring Paws. And I want to introduce Rebecca and Linda, who

will be helping with all our activities.” She gestured to two teenagers beside her.

Lizzie knew Rebecca and Linda a bit from her volunteering. Linda gave her a little wave, and she waved back.

“We have so many exciting things planned for this week,” said Ms. Dobbins, “but we wanted to start with a little icebreaker, just to get to know each other. Let’s go around the circle and introduce ourselves, but instead of telling where you live and what grade you are in, tell us which animal you’d be if you could be any animal in the world—and why!”

It was a fun way to get to know people. Lizzie laughed along with everyone else when a girl named Natalie said she’d like to be a monkey so she could swing through the trees, and Lizzie nodded when a boy named Marc said he’d always wanted to be a hawk so he could fly high above the clouds.

Lizzie was not the only one who said she'd like to be a dog, but she was the only one who picked a specific breed: she wanted to be a Newfoundland so she could swim even in the coldest water.

“Wonderful,” said Ms. Dobbins when they had each had a turn. “I feel like I really know something about each of you. Now it’s time to meet our Pet Pals, the animals you’ll be caring for this week. People who are interested in kittens and cats can go with Rebecca. Linda will help you if you want a guinea pig, hamster, or rabbit. And if you’re all about dogs”—she gave Lizzie a special wink and a smile—“come with me.”

Lizzie jumped right up to follow Ms. Dobbins back to the kennels. She couldn’t wait to give Nora a big hug and show the old Lab the special treat she’d brought her.

But as they walked toward the kennels, Ms. Dobbins put her arm around Lizzie’s shoulders. “I

have a favor to ask you,” she said. “We have a new guest here at Caring Paws. He needs some special attention, and I think you’re just the person to give it to him. All the other campers are going to be paired with our easiest, most well-behaved dogs—but I’m hoping you’ll choose this new guest as your Pet Pal.” She stopped at the first kennel. A beautiful dog with a shiny, flowing red coat sprang off his bed and ran to the door of his cage. He put his paws up on the door and barked, wagging his feathered tail. He grinned at Lizzie, his long ears framing a face full of mischievous spirit.

Hi, hi, hi! Let me out so we can play!

“Lizzie, meet Rusty,” said Ms. Dobbins.

