

pugs
in a
blanket

j.j. howard

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Don't Blame the Broccoli

“Only two more weeks of school—finally!” my best friend, Nina, announced as she stepped off the bus after me.

I looked over at her, surprised. “*I’m* usually the one counting down to summer vacation,” I said. “You love school.”

She sighed. “Yeah. I’m just really excited to go to California!”

Now it was my turn to sigh. Thanks to my parents’ catering business, my family almost never went on trips. Since cooking was my favorite thing in the world, I didn’t mind helping out at our events. But sometimes I did feel jealous of all the traveling Nina’s family did.

“I *will* miss Monster and Molly when we go,” Nina said as we walked down the street together.

I felt another sigh escape—I was *also* jealous of the fact that Nina had not just one but two adorable dogs. I’d been asking for a puppy for Christmas or my birthday or Arbor Day—I wasn’t picky—since I was six. But my mother was firmly anti-dog. Well, she was anti-anything that got in the way of working on events for Calloway’s Creations.

“Too bad I can’t dog-sit for you,” I said, adjusting my backpack on my shoulder. It was a typically hot May afternoon in West Palm Beach, Florida.

“I know,” Nina agreed. “I hate that M and M have to stay at the vet’s. I even asked my parents if I could bring them with us.”

I laughed out loud as I pictured Monster—a Great Dane—and Molly—a Siberian husky—trying to fit under an airplane seat.

“Sam, I wish *you* could have a dog,” Nina told me, lifting her long brown hair off the back of her neck.

I nodded sadly, looking down at my green sandals. “I just

have to keep asking. Summer would be a great time to get a puppy—I'd be home from school so I could train him or her.”

“Good point. You can put that on your list.”

I glanced up. “My list?”

Nina raised one eyebrow. “You’ve never compiled a comprehensive list to present to your parents of reasons you should have a pet? Have I taught you nothing?”

I laughed. “Can you picture getting my mom to stand still long enough to read a list like that?” I shook my head. “Not unless it was a grocery list for an event.”

Nina put her arm around me sympathetically. “You’re right,” she said. “It’s pretty much food twenty-four seven at your house, I know.” She paused. “Hey, do you have a new recipe in the works?” Nina loved being a taste tester for my cooking creations.

I smiled with anticipation as we rounded the corner. “I’ve been thinking of two new dishes. One’s a spicy chicken meatball and the other is a roasted broccoli side.”

“Yum on the meatballs, but you can keep the broccoli.” Nina crinkled her nose. “My dad makes it all the time, and . . . yuck.”

I chuckled, remembering the last time I'd been at the Katzif house for dinner. "You can't blame the broccoli," I said. "Your dad just boils all the flavor out and then puts cheese on top. If you treat it right, broccoli is super delicious. It's my second-favorite cruciferous vegetable!"

Nina rolled her eyes and laughed. "Only you, Sam Calloway, could get so excited defending the honor of a vegetable." We reached the corner of Nina's street and she turned and waved. "Text me later!"

"Okay. Later, friieeeennnndd!" Nina and I had a tradition of calling each other *friend* but drawing out the word so that it lasted as long as possible.

"Bye, friieeeen . . ." Nina's voice trailed off as she headed down her street.

I hitched my backpack higher on my shoulder and walked over to my town house on the next block. I reached into the front pocket of my backpack for my key, but then I realized that our porch gate was unlocked. I knew right away that it was my little brother, Oliver's, fault. His elementary school gets out before my middle school, and our parents' van and car were both missing,

so they weren't home yet. Ollie knows he's supposed to lock the gate; Mom, Dad, and I have all reminded him one million times. But still, he always forgets.

I was halfway across the porch when I heard it: a whimpering sound.

I froze.

After a quick look around, I didn't see anything out of place. Maybe I'd just heard a squirrel in a nearby tree. But then the sound came again. It was definitely a whimper, and this time I could tell that it was coming from a big cardboard box that was sitting on one of the lounge chairs. At first I hadn't even noticed the box. Now I wondered if it was some sort of delivery of catering supplies for my parents.

I walked over to the box and peered inside. And I couldn't believe what I saw.