

THE PUPPY PLACE

SCRUFFY



SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Lauren and the herd

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

Copyright © 2023 by Ellen Miles

Cover art by Tim O’Brien

Original cover design by Steve Scott

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920.*

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-338-84735-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

First printing 2023

CHAPTER ONE

“You wouldn’t believe what Lizzie did last night,” Charles said, panting a little as he tried to keep up with his best friend, Sammy. They were biking home from school on a sunny, warm Friday, the last day of school before spring vacation. Bright green leaves were bursting out all over, and people’s yards were full of candy-colored flowers. Charles could smell freshly cut grass and the sweet scent of apple blossoms as they biked under a tree covered in pink-and-white flowers.

“What?” Sammy didn’t sound very interested. He pedaled even faster, as if he wanted to get away from Charles.



Charles pedaled harder, too. “She—she told Mom that I was the one who left dirty dishes in the sink. No way! It was her and Maria. Mostly.”

“Uh-huh,” Sammy said. He stopped pedaling and just coasted as if he wanted to let Charles race on ahead.

“It’s just not fair,” Charles said, putting on his brakes. “And then when I called her on it, Mom got mad at me, for ‘bickering,’” He made a Mom face as he said the word in a Mom voice.

“Uh-huh,” Sammy said again.

Charles wished Sammy would say something else. Something like “Wow, that sounds awful. Your sister, Lizzie, really is the worst.” After all, Sammy was his best friend. Weren’t friends supposed to be supportive and let you know that your feelings mattered? That was what their teacher, Mr. Mason, always said. “It’s not fair,” Charles

repeated. “Don’t you think Lizzie is the one who should get in trouble, not me?”

Sammy shrugged. “I guess. Maybe. I don’t know.”

Charles stopped his bike. “Come on, Sammy. Back me up here!”

Sammy stopped, too. They were right in front of the rickety old gray house they passed every day on the way home from school, the house they sometimes thought might be haunted. Nobody had lived there for years. The front door was boarded up with plywood, the yard was a forest of dead weeds, and the old picket fence around the property had peeling paint and was missing slats.

Charles looked at the house and felt a shiver up his spine. Why had he stopped right at this spot? It was safer to ride past this empty, rickety old place as quickly as he could. But Charles wasn’t

about to start pedaling again until he knew what Sammy was thinking. He turned his back on the scary house and looked Sammy in the eye. Charles held up his hands in a “well?” gesture.

Sammy frowned. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’s just—I don’t get why you and Lizzie have to argue all the time lately. You didn’t used to. And neither of you ever argues with the Bean.”

The Bean was their little brother. “Who could argue with the Bean?” Charles asked. “All he ever does is laugh and cuddle.” He shook his head. “But Lizzie, she’s just such a know-it-all, and she gets away with everything. It’s like she’s my parents’ favorite.” He looked down at the sidewalk and kicked at some weeds that were trying to escape the wild yard by pushing through the spaces in the fence.

“Oh, come on, you know that’s not true,” said Sammy. “Anyway, if I had a sister I’d never fight

with her. It would be like—like fighting with your best teammate. Because that’s what you two are, a team. Look at all the puppies you’ve fostered together! Your family really is a team.”

Charles mulled that over. It was true, he and Lizzie usually worked well together when they were taking care of one of the many puppies that the Petersons had fostered, taking care of each one just until they could find it the perfect forever home. “But she always—” he started to argue with Sammy anyway.

“Look,” Sammy interrupted. “I don’t have any teammates. I’m over here playing all by myself, and believe me, I could use a little backup, too, sometimes.”

That made Charles stop and think. He’d always thought Sammy was so lucky to be an only child. Nobody to have to share the last piece of cake with. Nobody to tell you how dumb your ideas

are. Nobody to split your parents' love and attention with. Charles had never considered the other part of it. The lonely part.

But he put his hands on his hips and grinned at Sammy. "Oh, believe me, you'd fight sometimes," Charles said. "Sisters are soooo annoying."

"Maybe," said Sammy. "But anyway, hearing about your arguments with Lizzie is kind of boring."

"That's what Dad says!" Charles said. "He says, 'How can you stand all that bickering over nothing? It's so boring!'" Charles sighed. It wasn't like he *wanted* to argue all the time. But he had to stand up for himself, didn't he? "It's just—"

He stopped and listened for a moment.

He gulped.

"Wait. What's that noise?" he whispered.

Sammy cocked his head, and his eyes went

wide. Charles could tell that he'd heard it, too. An eerie, high-pitched wailing.

Charles glanced at the falling-down house and felt that shiver down his back again. He straightened up his bike and put his foot on a pedal. "Let's get out of here," he said.

"Wait," said Sammy. "I don't think it's coming from the house." He cupped his ear and listened. "It's coming from over there," he said, pointing to an overgrown bush that almost hid part of the broken-down fence. He started to walk toward it, slowly and quietly.

Charles felt frozen in place. What was Sammy doing? The last place Charles wanted to be was anywhere closer to that spine-tingling sound. He watched as Sammy got closer to the wild bush, then bent down and pushed aside a tangle of branches. "*Stop!*" Charles wanted to yell. This

was like a scary movie. What if something even scarier happened, like a hand reaching out to grab Sammy?

But Sammy just pushed in even farther. Then he pushed back out, fast. “Charles!” he called in a low voice. He waved an arm. “You have to come here and see this.”

“Um,” Charles said. He still felt like he couldn’t move.

“Charles!” hissed Sammy. “Come on! Now!”

Charles got off his bike and took a few steps, feeling as if he was walking through quicksand. *Wishing* he was walking through quicksand. That would be better than walking up to a ghost. “What—what is it?” he asked as he came closer to Sammy, who had pushed all the branches away from the fence.

“It’s a puppy,” said Sammy.

