

THE PUPPY PLACE

WAFFLES



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helped them learn to love reading!

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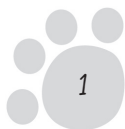
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CHAPTER ONE

“Really? You’re hungry again?” Maria’s dad shook his head as he reached for his wallet.

Lizzie Peterson and her best friend, Maria Santiago, grinned at each other. It wasn’t that they were hungry, exactly. Just a half hour earlier they’d inhaled pumpkin-spice waffles slathered in sweet, fluffy whipped cream. But they were at the county fair! And there were so many yummy things to eat. Corn dogs, fries, and BBQ sandwiches. Onion rings! Apple cider doughnuts! Cotton candy! All the smells blended together into one delicious cloud.

Lizzie loved the fair. She’d gone every fall for as



long as she could remember, and Mom had told her that she'd even loved it as a toddler—the age her brother, the Bean, was now—when she still sometimes rode in a stroller. Lizzie loved the midway, the long, wide walking path lined with stalls selling everything from socks to crystals, burritos to smoothies. Oh, and the games! Lizzie loved the games, where you could win rainbow glow sticks or a giant stuffie. But those weren't even the best part of the fair. What she loved most were all the animals, the ones who spent the fair in stalls at one end of the midway. These were the best of the best farm animals, brought here by their owners from all over the region. Oxen as big as Volkswagen Beetles, tiny pink piglets, beautiful chickens in every color of the rainbow, goats and geese and horses and even llamas. Lizzie loved meeting curly-haired sheep; watching 4-H kids in clean white shirts lead their calves into the



judging ring; and counting baby bunnies in their hutches. Lizzie knew that every single one of these animals was treated with love and care, and that made her happy.

“Wait,” said Maria now. She held up a hand. “Before we eat anything else, maybe we should go on that ride.”

Lizzie gulped. She knew which ride Maria was talking about. This wasn’t the tame carousel or the Ferris wheel that stopped when you were way up at the top and left you rocking in the breeze, looking out over the whole fair.

No, the ride Maria wanted to go on was called the Octopus, and it whirled and twirled and threw you upside down and sideways and . . .

“Um,” said Lizzie. She knew Maria was right: It was better to wait to eat. There was no way she was going to ride on the Octopus after having a cup of chili with cheese or a large order of sweet

potato fries. That would definitely be a mistake. Actually, in Lizzie's mind it was a mistake to go on the Octopus at all. But if Maria really, really wanted her to . . .

“How about if you and I go on that one together?” Mr. Santiago said to Maria. Lizzie shot Maria's dad a grateful look. She could tell that he had guessed the truth: Lizzie was afraid of scary rides. “Lizzie and your mom can go check out the pony pull.”

Maria's mom put her arm through Lizzie's. “Great idea,” she said. “Lizzie can tell me all about what's happening.”

Maria's mom was blind. She had the most wonderful guide dog, Simba, who sat at her side at that very moment, waiting patiently for the humans to make a decision.

“I love the pony pull!” said Lizzie. She remembered it from last year. The “ponies” were

actually huge horses, all decked out in beautiful harnesses covered with shiny silver badges. These were horses that were meant to pull plows or heavy trucks full of logs. They were so strong! For the contest, they took turns hauling a big flat-bottomed sled (called a “boat”) covered with concrete slabs. Each time they made it through a round, helpers added more weight to the boat, using the kind of machinery that Lizzie’s other younger brother, Charles, loved to watch.

Lizzie found seats for herself and Mrs. Santiago, and they settled in on the bleachers just as the last round of action began. A woman made announcements over a crackly loudspeaker, telling the crowd which handlers and which ponies were still competing in the final round. “And this time they’ll be pulling five thousand, two hundred pounds,” she finished. “Let’s welcome our first team, Sarah Owens with Pete and Bob!”

Lizzie and Mrs. Santiago joined in the applause. “Wow,” Lizzie said, leaning over to whisper in Mrs. Santiago’s ear. “The horses are enormous. One of them is brown, and the other is white. And their handler is—well, she’s not big. She’s practically, like, my size!” Lizzie watched, fascinated, as the young woman moved the horses into place, backing them up so her teammate could hook up the boat and holding them steady so they wouldn’t pull too soon or unevenly.

Lizzie remembered that the pony handlers often yelled and cracked whips to get the horses to do what they wanted them to do. Not this woman. She spoke in a soft voice and made small movements with her hands that the horses seemed to understand and respond to right away. Lizzie explained this all to Mrs. Santiago, then leaned forward, watching closely, as the woman dropped her hand and gave a soft one-word command. The



horses surged forward and the sled slid along the soft, sandy soil. When they stopped, unable to pull any farther, a man ran up, checked the length of their pull with a tape measure, and hollered out a number. The crowd applauded and cheered.

“That’ll take the blue ribbon,” Lizzie heard the man next to her say.

After three other teams had competed (with lots of loud yelling on the part of the handlers), there was a brief pause while the judges looked over the figures. Then the loudspeaker crackled. “Blue ribbon goes to Sarah Owens with Pete and Bob.”

The young woman ran into the ring to grab her ribbon, grinned at the crowd, then dashed off. Lizzie laughed. “I guess she has somewhere else to be,” she told Mrs. Santiago. “She looks happy with her blue ribbon, but she’s in a hurry.” Lizzie and Mrs. Santiago clapped for the woman even

though she'd left the ring, then they stayed on for the second- and third-place winners as well.

“That was so cool,” Lizzie said as they got up and headed back to the midway to meet up with Maria and her dad. “That handler Sarah Owens was amazing. I wish I could have that kind of control over Buddy, not to mention some of the puppies we’ve fostered.” Lizzie knew she was a good dog trainer for her age, but she also knew that she had a lot to learn. She was lucky to be able to practice on all sorts of dogs, since her family fostered puppies who needed homes. (Sweet, cute Buddy was the only one they’d kept for good.)

“You Petersons do such a great job with your puppies,” said Mrs. Santiago. “And you always find them the best homes, too.”

“Speaking of puppies,” said Lizzie. “I noticed there was a really cute purple puppy stuffie as



a prize at this basketball-toss game we passed before. Maria would love it.”

“Then let’s go try to win it for her,” said Mrs. Santiago. “Lead on!”

A few minutes later, Lizzie stood at the basketball-toss booth, getting ready to take one more shot. She’d missed by a mile on her first two, but she was determined to get the ball into the basket this time. She held the ball carefully, getting herself set into position. She lifted the ball. She aimed. She tossed—just as something banged into her elbow, causing the ball to fly sideways, straight into the man who was in charge of the booth. “Oof!” he said.

“Sorry!” Lizzie frowned as she turned to see who had jostled her. Then she gasped. “Well, hello,” she said. “Who are you?” She stared down at the most adorable fluffy white puppy,



who immediately jumped up, touching her paws lightly on Lizzie's hip. The puppy grinned and tossed her flappy ears. Her black eyes sparkled mischievously.

Hi, friend! Isn't this fun? I'm having the greatest time.

Lizzie glanced up and down the midway, looking for the puppy's owner.

But nobody called her.

Nobody stepped forward to claim her.

"Uh-oh," said Lizzie.