

THE PUPPY PLACE

SPIRIT



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Special thanks to Kristin Earhart

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CHAPTER ONE

Brrrrrr!

Lizzie Peterson pulled her hood up over her red wool winter hat. It hadn't seemed so cold when she left her house, but that was before the wind had picked up. Now, it was fierce. The brisk gusts blew snow from the trees. Icy crystals prickled at Lizzie's face. *Brrrrrr!*

Lizzie usually loved snow. When it was light and fluffy, it was perfect for playing with Buddy, her family's sweet, funny puppy. In fresh snow, Buddy would leap around, chasing and biting at snowballs. It made Lizzie and her younger brothers, Charles and the Bean, laugh out loud every



time. Whenever the puppy managed to catch a clump of snow, he would immediately drop it and shake his head. The snow was just too cold for Buddy's mouth!

Today's snow was not light or fluffy. It was more like hail, hard little balls of ice. It left a shiny, crunchy layer on the snow from the day before. If the weather tomorrow was nicer, Lizzie would play outside with Buddy. Today, she had other plans. She was going to her friend Mariko's house.

Lizzie had met Mariko in the Greenies, an environmental club. Last summer, Lizzie and Mariko had gone wild blueberry picking along with Lizzie's best friend, Maria. Together, the three girls had filled two big buckets with the plump, ink-colored berries. They finished up with a lot of blueberries, even though they all admitted to sneaking some bites as they picked. Afterward



they baked blueberry muffins at Mariko's house. It had been so much fun. Lizzie remembered how delicious the whole house had smelled. She had imagined she was a character in *Blueberries for Sal*, which was one of the Bean's favorite books.

Lizzie was excited for today, too. Mariko had invited her to make maple syrup candy, from real maple syrup. It sounded like something Lizzie—and her sweet tooth—would really enjoy. The only downside was that Maria couldn't be there. Maria was training for a big indoor horse show, so she was busy for the next few weekends.

Lizzie adjusted her scarf to cover her nose and mouth. It was so cold! Plus, it had started to hail again—icy pellets that pinged off Lizzie's jacket and stung her forehead. Even though she had gloves on, Lizzie shoved her hands into her pockets. She tried to walk faster, but the crusty snow

was deep and hard to push through. Even though it would have been much warmer to ride over in the car with Dad, Lizzie had really wanted to walk to Mariko's today. She had pictured a snowy adventure, but this was turning out to be a lot snowier and a little more adventurous than she'd imagined.

Just then, Lizzie heard a tiny bark over the frosty wind. It sounded close by. That bark was followed by another one. Lizzie was sure they were from the same dog. The barks did not sound like a happy dog playing in the snow. They were sharp and loud, like the dog was in trouble.

Lizzie forced herself to move more quickly, tugging her boots out of the deep snow. The park's soccer field looked like a sparkling white ocean, with waves of snowdrifts reaching all across the meadow.



The barks came closer and closer together. To get to Mariko's house, Lizzie needed to go left—but the barks were coming from the right. Lizzie hesitated. She had told her parents she would go straight to her friend's house, but she couldn't ignore a dog in trouble. She was sure they would understand.

Lizzie took a deep breath and trudged toward the barks. For a while, she could only see white. Then a black dot appeared, bouncing up and down through the snow. Lizzie squinted through the snowflakes and realized that the black spot was a nose! Soon, she saw eyes and a pink tongue, too. It was a puppy, with fur so white that it blended in with the snow.

Lizzie's heart swelled as she pushed even faster toward the puppy. When they reached each other, he jumped up and put his paws on her legs. He

pricked his oversized triangular ears and looked up at her with sparkling brown eyes as he yipped in excitement.

Who are you? Can you help? Someone needs you. Quick! I can take you there right away!

“Hello,” Lizzie said, kneeling next to the excited puppy. She was tempted to take off her gloves so she could bury her hands in his thick white fur. The puppy was gorgeous, from the tip of his fluffy tail to the tip of his shiny black nose. “Wow. A white German shepherd,” she breathed. “I’ve seen pictures of them, but never been near one in real life. You’re beautiful!” Lizzie nuzzled the puppy’s neck, breathing in his delicious puppy smell. Why were puppies so—so perfect? Lizzie’s family had fostered dozens of puppies who needed help, keeping each one just long enough to find it the right



forever home — but she never got tired of how special each and every puppy truly was.

The puppy wriggled and yipped again, and Lizzie snapped back to attention. “What are you doing out here all alone? It’s pretty cold, little guy.” Lizzie reached around the dog’s neck and found a red collar. She felt for a license or name tag, but her hands were clumsy inside the padded gloves. “Spirit,” she said when she finally found the tag. There was a phone number, too. “It’s nice to meet you, Spirit. I wonder if I should call this number and get you home. Do you live around here?” The puppy barked three times and then took a few steps in the other direction.

Lizzie stood back up and looked all around. She thought about what she should do. She could take the puppy to Mariko’s house and call from there, but the puppy seemed to want her to go the other way.



Spirit barked once, spun around, and darted off. Lizzie didn't think twice. She followed his tracks through the snow. Even though he was only a puppy, Spirit seemed to have a definite plan. She had to find out what it was.

