

A Dog. Steals Home



Kathleen Schrenk

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For Wylie and Lucy

In memory of Dingo

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Chapter 1

“Dad, can we get a puppy?” The screen door slammed behind Zach as he jammed the baseball into the pocket of his glove and dropped it on the storage bench by the back door. Dingo lifted his head and slapped his tail on the wood floor.

Zach’s dad glanced up from his laptop. “Zach, will you please remember to close the screen door without letting it slam behind you every time?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. Sorry, Dad.”

“It’s almost six. Did practice run late?”

“No, I stayed after with Harry and his new puppy, Mickey. Harry’s mom brought him to the ball park. Me and Harry are teaching him to fetch.”

“Harry and I,” said Dad.

“Harry and I,” parroted Zach. “Mickey can get the ball okay, but mostly he just wants to chew on it instead of bringing it back.”

“I remember teaching Dingo to fetch.” Dad smiled. “He was a natural. There wasn’t a fly ball he couldn’t catch.”

At the mention of his name, Dingo padded over and placed his graying muzzle on Dad’s knee. Mr. Stewart stroked the dog’s head. “But your days of playing ball are behind you now, aren’t they, old boy?”

“Totally. That’s why we need a puppy. Dingo’s just too old to—”

“Speaking of Dingo, it’s time for his dinner and a walk.



Before you feed him, go outside and take off those cleats. You'll leave half the clay from the pitcher's mound on the kitchen floor."

Hearing two of his favorite words—dinner and walk—Dingo headed over to his feeding dish. He waited by the empty bowl as Zach stepped onto the back porch to change into his sneakers. Zach caught the screen door with his foot right before it slammed shut.

The smack of a tennis ball hitting the wood siding sounded inside the house.

Dingo began to paw the empty dish.

SMACK! Louder this time.

Dingo whined and sniffed the bowl.

SMACK!

"Zachary William Stewart, stop throwing the tennis ball against the house and come feed Dingo!"

Zach came inside, just missing the door as it banged behind him. "Oops, sorry, Dad."

He scooped food into Dingo's dish and scratched him behind the ears. As Dingo wolfed down his dinner, Zach took the leash from its hook by the door and looped it around his waist. He then clipped it to Dingo's collar and grabbed his glove and ball from the bench.

"Okay, D, let's go to the park."

The little neighborhood "pocket park" wasn't really much of a park—just a triangle of green space in the city. Neighbors had adopted it and kept adding trees, bushes, fountains, benches, and even concrete chess tables and a sculpture, so it was more like an overstuffed living room than a park. There was hardly room to get a good wind up, much less pitch a ball.

"I wish you could still walk all the way to the ball park, D. Then I could practice in the batting cage or pitch with

the guys while you sniffed around as much as you wanted. Plus, if we went to the ball park instead of coming here, we wouldn't have to listen to Audrey bragging about Beau. She'll just have to show off how smart he is. You'd think he's the only dog who ever learned anything."

Before Zach even crossed the street into the park, he saw Audrey waving to him. "Come on, Dingo, let's get this over with."

"Hi, Zach," she peeped.

Zach thought Audrey sounded like a Muppet. With her Elmo-like eyes, skinny arms, and flyaway blond hair, he thought she even looked like a Muppet. Her skin was so pale you could almost see through it. She was the smallest kid in sixth grade.

Audrey had moved into the neighborhood last summer to live with her aunt around the corner from Zach. She started at his school last August. They had a couple of classes together, but she never talked to him or to any of the other kids at school. She hadn't talked to Zach at all until January, when she started coming to the neighborhood park with Beau. Her aunt had given her the black Lab mix as a Christmas present. Audrey recently started training him at the park. With Beau by her side, Audrey acted like a different person. The quiet kid who kept to herself at school morphed into a chatty know-it-all. She reminded Zach of a flyweight Miss Piggy.

He would have expected Audrey to have a fluffy little dog for a pet, the kind of dog that girls carry in their purses and dress up in goofy dog clothes. Beau was the exact opposite. He was as big and dark as Audrey was small and fair. When he stood on his hind legs, he was taller than she was. He weighed almost sixty pounds. His head was huge, and his shiny, black coat was short and



slick. She never dressed him up in clothes, but around his neck he always wore his Saints collar and a gold bandana with BEAU printed on it in black letters.

“Hi, Audrey. Imagine meeting you here.”

“I’m teaching Beau some new commands. Watch this. Sit, Beau.”

Beau sat.

“Good boy, Beau.” Audrey gave Beau a treat.

“That’s not new. It’s like the first thing he ever learned.”

“I know, but here’s the new part. Beau, stay.” Audrey circled behind the dog, out of his line of vision, and then stepped several feet away. Beau remained seated without turning to look for Audrey. “Now, Zach, you try to get Beau to move from that spot.”

“Move,” muttered Zach.

“Not like that. *Really* try to make him move.”

Zach tossed the baseball away from the dog. “Get the ball, Beau.”

Beau glanced at the ball but held his position.

“See, he knows to stay when I say ‘stay.’”

“Maybe he’s just tired, and he doesn’t want to play ball. Maybe he doesn’t even *know* how to play ball.”

“He knows how to play ball, but I told him to stay. He listens to *me*. Come, Beau.”

Beau walked over to Audrey, sat, and took the treat she offered. “Good boy, Beau,” she praised. She placed the bag of treats on the ground beside her and petted the dog’s head.

“Yeah, well Dingo used to be able to catch any ball my dad threw to him. He used to do a lot of stuff. He’s just old, is all. Anyhow, when we get a puppy, I can teach it a bunch of tricks.”

“I’m really good at training dogs. I can help you if you want.”

In your dreams and my nightmares, thought Zach.

“Watch this. Lie down, Beau.” Beau lay in the soft grass with his head down between his paws and waited for his treat.

“Good boy, Beau.” Audrey reached down for a treat, but the bag was gone.

Zach and Audrey saw Dingo slinking behind an azalea bush with the stolen goods in his mouth.

“No!” ordered Audrey as Dingo tried to push the bag farther under the bush and gobble the treats at the same time. “You have to do tricks to get treats, Dingo, and you don’t know any.”

“He does too know tricks. But I told you, he’s old. He saves his energy for things that are useful, like taking this dumb bag of treats.”

Zach squatted down, scratched Dingo under his chin, took the bag from his mouth, and handed it to Audrey. “Come on, boy. Let’s go home. We have lots of treats for you there.”