

HAZEL CHRISTIANSEN

CASH

THE **Dog** WITH
Butterfly Ears

“Cash” The Dog with Butterfly Ears
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DEDICATION



I dedicate this book to the memory of my mother, May Adams Hancock Messenger, who allowed me the company of goats, calves and so many fuzzy friends with four legs. She put up with an orphaned baby pig beneath a heat lamp in my bedroom, muddy paw prints deposited across her clean kitchen floor, and taking rabbit pellets and salt blocks from my jean pockets. Thanks, Mom, for giving me lessons in having faith while chasing a dream.

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CHAPTER 1



If Madison recognized her feelings, or even admitted to having them, she hid them as skillfully as a feral cat hides her kittens. She moved like a warrior, but inside she felt like a marionette with someone else always pulling the strings. A more familiar numbness returned as she strode ahead of the man who had apprehended her. The imposing security officer escorted her past carefully posed mannequins, lit jewelry cases, and racks of designer clothes to a small, sparsely furnished room.

Her thoughts raced. *I've made a mess of it. I've disappointed Dad. Again. Maybe he'll hate me for it.*

She squared her shoulders and thrust her hands into her pockets. *Why can't I ever do anything right?*

"Shoplifters are some of the angriest people I see in here," the officer said, as he pushed a bottle of water across the desk towards fifteen-year-old Madison Taylor. "Most are pissed off at the world and don't even know it. Their anger runs beneath the surface."

Madison stewed. *What do I have to be mad about? Mom loves her boyfriend more than me. When I said so, she called me delusional and disappointing. Dad's changing jobs, and I will lose my home, my school, and my friends when we move from Olympia. Nothing to be angry about here.*

She snatched the bottle of water and took a sip, thinking it would help the tightness in her throat. It didn't. There were some things that hurt

too much to discuss.

Madison glowered as she sat in the oak chair, her arms folded across her belly; one hand on her elbow and the other tucked to her side beneath the oversized blue sweatshirt. She watched the activity in the security office parking lot through the one small window in the southeast corner of Silverfish Mall.

Her father's red pickup pulled into a diagonal parking space. Water dripped from the door as he opened it and trudged toward the red brick building where she was detained. His head was low, shoulders hunched, and his arms seemed to dangle as glasses slid down the bridge of his nose. *Well, at least he doesn't look pissed,* she thought, and immediately regretted thinking it. He looked sad, and that seemed worse. Madison couldn't bear to look up when her father entered. She sunk lower in the chair, chewed her nails, and retreated into her own mind to consider what she should say and how much of the truth she would tell him.

CHAPTER 2



One hundred miles south of Silverfish Mall in Portland, Oregon, Mr. Fellows slipped off his shoes near his front door and slid his achy feet into his well-worn leather slippers. He brought a small pet carrier into the den and placed it near his reclining chair. His gnarled hands pulled open heavy drapery to let sunbeams dazzle across the carpet.

“Cash is always welcome, and you almost fit in my pocket,” Mr. Fellows said when he opened the door of the pet carrier. “Cash is a good name for you, little one. That’s what I’ll call you. You’re just what the doctor prescribed when he told me that loneliness and lack of exercise contribute to ill health.” The man had a physique still reminiscent of his early days as a hockey player. His hand was the same size as the pup.

The eight-week-old Papillon pup blinked and stared, then bounded from the crate to explore and sniff his new environment. In a few minutes, he returned to the feet of his new owner. A couple of puppy sniffs, then he sank his tiny teeth into one slipper.

“Ouch! No, no,” Mr. Fellows gently scolded. “You like the tasty smell of old leather? Or you just testing me? Here, I got you something to chew on and a toy that squeaks. Which do you want?” He unwrapped them and held both out for Cash to choose. Cash took the toy, the first of many that would come his way. He wagged his tail; his eyes sparkled, and his feet danced.



Mr. Fellows keyed opened the front door, smiling in anticipation. He loved this game with Cash. Sure enough, the pup was sitting in front of the box that held his toys, waiting. He softly whined when he saw his owner.

“Come on, then. You know I brought you something.”

Without hesitation, his new best friend followed him into the kitchen, waited and watched while he put things away. The whine got louder. Hiding his grin and whistling an old tune, he ignored the pup pawing at his shoe, then trying to climb his leg.

“Woof, woof!”

“What, you think there’s a treat in this bag?” He held up the plastic sack and shook it. A loud whine followed by high-pitched puppy barks hurt his ears. “Alright, buddy, here it is.” He tossed down a bright blue squeaky-toy and watched the pup pounce on it. “You make me laugh, Cash, so you’re worth it.” Then he laughed at his own joke.

Mr. Fellows normally took Cash for a long walk in the afternoon, when it had cooled down a bit, but the sun was still bright after the dimness in the house. He paused on the porch, squinting as he donned his sunglasses. He could see the dog blinking rapidly. “Looks like I should get you some glasses, too. Sorry, boy. We’ll be in the shade soon.”

He turned to lock the door behind him when he felt the leash take a sharp tug to the left. Cash stood still and focused, then swiveled his big, fluffy ears right, left, right, left. He let out a tiny growl.

“What’re you playing at, pup?” He watched the dog bounce forward, then back, swivel his head again, then sit with a bark. Mr. Fellows finally saw what Cash saw, then let out a hearty laugh. “It’s not some giant bug that’s after you, silly pup—that’s just your shadow! Your big ol’ butterfly ears following you everywhere.” Mr. Fellows bent down and stroked the silky ears. “You’re an observant little thing, I have got to say. Come on, let’s do our walk.” He tugged Cash off the steps. “Don’t worry—your shadow is coming too.”

When they got home, the elderly man turned on classical music and settled into his favorite chair. Mr. Fellows covered his legs with a blanket, then lifted Cash to his lap.

The busy pup climbed to the old man's shoulders and wrapped himself around Mr. Fellow's neck, tickling his ear with playful nibbles.

"Settle down, you rascal," he chuckled. He pulled the pup to his lap again. Cash tucked his nose beneath Mr. Fellow's whiskered chin and tried to lick his face.

At last, Mr. Fellows held Cash still and patted his back. As usual, the two fell asleep there, next to the flicker of the fireplace.

CHAPTER 3



Madison’s stomach churned like clothes in a washing machine when her father opened the door of the security office.

“Mr. Taylor?” the officer asked.

“Yes.” He slipped into a chair next to Madison. A bottle the color of spring violets sat beneath a desk lamp on the adjacent desk. Its top glinted like a jewel.

“That’s one of our more expensive brands. I found it in the pocket of her sweatshirt as she left the store about an hour ago,” the officer said as he pointed at the bottle.

Mr. Taylor glanced at the bottle and then at Madison, whose hand now covered her eyes. He scuffed his feet on the rung of the chair as they discussed Madison’s consequences.

“Her friends took off when I apprehended her. Some friends, huh?” He turned his attention to the computer screen on the desk. With a brief glance at Mr. Taylor, he continued. “It says here that she has nothing else on her record, except for being at a party six months ago where there was some underage drinking.”

At the mention of drinking, Mr. Taylor’s body stiffened. His black leather, steel-toed boots slapped the vinyl floor as he leaned forward in his chair. His jaw tightened and chin jutted out.

“It was a mistake for her to take the bottles of booze her mother had hidden beneath the towels in the bathroom,” he said. He resumed his

position in the chair and rested his hand on Madison's arm.

"I'm gonna release her into your custody. I think the kid needs counseling. If she's lucky, the store won't press charges. If they do, she'll get off with probation." After discussing policy and procedures, the officer escorted them out.

Mr. Taylor took Madison by the elbow and walked her to the pickup. He held the door open as she climbed up. Striding to the other side of the truck, he stopped to light a cigarette before he entered and slammed the door behind him. The cigarette glowed red with each puff, on and off, like a warning beacon in the darkness. Madison squeezed her eyes shut and tried to hold back her tears.

"No more hanging out at the mall unless I am with you," her dad said. His face looked different now; sterner, angrier, with a mixed emotion in his eyes. He took another puff and then jammed the cigarette into the ashtray. "Why did you do this?"

Madison blinked. She whispered, "I don't know."

She couldn't face him, so she looked out the window as shoppers exited nearby cars.

"Look at me, Madison! I'm talking to you."

She turned toward him. The lights in the parking lot illuminated Mr. Taylor's face. Her father's body was rigid, and his knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel.

"You don't even wear perfume," he said. "Why did you do it?"

Madison hesitated, swallowed hard, and tried to decide how to explain that she hadn't been thinking at all. She gulped, then replied, "Well, my friend wanted it and she didn't have a pocket. The clerk looked at us like she thought we couldn't afford to buy anything. I just wanted Jess to like me."

"Is she that girl wearing those leggings with bright pink flowers that I saw you with when I picked you up at school?" he asked. Madison squirmed in her seat and lowered her head.

She struggled to find the words, but nothing came out.

"Oh, Madison! I thought you knew by now you can't buy friends. This crap has got to stop." He put the key in the ignition, switched the

heat to high, and shifted, glancing at Madison. She was shaking. He put the pickup in park and pounded the steering wheel with his fist. Madison's father reached across the seat, pulled the trembling girl to him and held her as she sobbed into his chest.

"I hate seeing you cry, Maddie," he said.

"Okay, Dad, I'll tell you." Guilt washed over her. She buried her face in his jacket and said, "I'm sorry, Dad." Her next words rushed out. "One of my friends slipped it into my pocket. We were at the front of the store, next to the exit. It happened so fast. I got confused, didn't know what to do and just allowed myself to get swept up into the crowd of shoppers." Madison gulped for air. She paused. "I didn't want to get anyone else in trouble, so I didn't say anything. It was wrong. What I did was wrong. I'm so sorry. Really, I am. I just ... keep messing up. Why can't I ever do things right?"

"Oh, Maddie." He straightened her on the seat, looked at her tear-stained face, and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "I don't like the choice you made. But you know I love you, right?"

Yes, she nodded. She slid back across the seat and leaned against the window as the truck pulled from the parking lot. She traced her finger in the fog on the window to draw a heart with an arrow through it. A few minutes later, she imagined what it might be like at a new school, and thought, *gosh! Maybe this move will be a good idea. At least we'll still live in Washington. It's hard to think of anywhere beyond the Northwest.*

The pickup splashed through puddles and traffic became congested. The truck lurched as Mr. Taylor applied the brakes to avoid hitting a stray dog that darted across the road.

"Wow, that was close," she said.

Seeing the dog reminded her of her father's promise that they could get a dog after the move. She hoped she hadn't ruined that, too.

When they got home, Madison darted from the truck to her bedroom and shut the door. She closed the curtains, fluffed her pillow, flopped on the bed, and willed her body to be still. Thoughts spun as she pulled the pillow over her head and curled to a fetal position. She tried to sleep. *Maybe I'll wake up and this nightmare will be over. Sleep didn't come,*

but a torrent of tears did. She tossed enough that the quilt sagged off the bed. A rap on the door caused her to bolt upright.

Her father spoke from behind the still closed door. “Maddie, I’m warming supper. Are you hungry?”

“No, Dad.”

“Are you sure? It will only take a minute.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Okay. Maybe later?”

Madison didn’t answer and waited until there was no sound from the other side. She went to the dresser, where she picked up an overturned photo of her once intact family. Wistfully, she stared at the laughing little girl in the picture. She put it back and paced the room. She hung her head as she wrestled with questions about her friendships, family, and herself.

I’ve made some bad choices. Even if I didn’t drink alcohol, giving it to my friends was wrong and so was this last dumb mistake. What am I going to say to Jess on Monday? Fixing this won’t be easy.

CHAPTER 4



On Monday, Madison slowly climbed her school's entrance stairs. She wasn't looking forward to seeing her friends. *Seems like everyone's staring at me.* She ducked her head and scurried toward her locker.

Jess waved when Madison approached. Her fiery hair peeked from beneath her stocking cap. She took several steps towards Madison. "Hi. Are you still speaking to me? I tried texting and calling you all weekend."

"Dad took my phone." At her locker, Madison shrugged off her backpack. It hit the floor with a thud. She fumbled with her lock.

"So, what happened?"

"They didn't handcuff me and haul me off to jail, but Dad's pretty ticked off." Madison avoided eye contact and kept her back turned as she took off her coat. "I was so scared that you were going to be mad at me if I put the perfume back. Now I'm mad at myself. I knew you guys had a lot of new, expensive stuff in your lockers. Call me stupid, but I didn't catch on. I sure never expected you to involve me."

"I hope you didn't tell."

"Nope."

Jess placed her hand on Madison's shoulder. "Why didn't you run?"

Madison struggled to breathe. "Like you guys did ... leaving me behind?" She choked. "I wanted to, but I just couldn't."

"Here, I brought you a present." Jess thrust a sparkling silver bracelet

toward Madison. “You said you liked it.”

“I do like it,” Madison said wistfully. She traced a finger across the delicate links. “But my dad would kill me. He would like, just know, and so would I.”

“So, take it, you know you want to.”

Madison took the bracelet. She laid it over her wrist and admired the intricate design.

“I wanted it when I saw it in the store last week. It’s so pretty.”

“Call it an early birthday present.”

Light reflected from the bracelet in Madison’s hand. She liked the coolness against her skin.

“No. Thanks. I can’t. I don’t want it.” Madison passed the bracelet back to Jess. She picked up her backpack and slung it over her shoulder. “I won’t be shopping with you anytime soon. If I ever decide again to just go with the flow, I’ll make sure the current takes me in the direction where I want to end up. I learned my lesson.” Noise from other students in the hallway nearly drowned out their private conversation.

“Come on, Madison. Get over it.”

“Maybe I will and maybe I won’t.” Madison bit her lip and backed away. “Anyway, Dad says we have to move.” Another student strode up to open the locker nearby.

As the class bell rang, Madison turned away abruptly and dashed off.

CHAPTER 5



Jill Fellows, still in shock, slumped in a burgundy leather swivel chair behind the desk. She leaned back into the hollow left by her father's heavier frame; a testimony to the use the chair had seen. A picture of her mother and father, taken on their last anniversary, sat on the credenza. Oil paintings with cobalt blue and vivid reds still hung on one wall. The adjacent wall held collections of books and porcelain statues. The vault-like stillness of the room was further enhanced by the dimness of the diffused light that spilled through gaps in the brocade drapery and heavy blackout blinds which covered the windows. Jill heard the echo of her father's voice telling her, "*It's necessary. Sunlight fades the colors in the paintings.*"

This room was always colder than the rest of the house too. In order to protect the books, he'd say. She rose and stood in front of the bookcase, stealthily removing the book closest to her. Her fingers trembled as she opened the pages of George Edwards' *Gleanings of Natural History of Uncommon Birds* to one of the color plates. She ran her fingers over the gold-edged trim, admired the colors of the illustration on the page, and inhaled the musty scent. Placing the book back on the shelf, she caressed the spines of others, many of which were bound in leather. If her father were still alive, he would have smacked her fingers, just like he'd done years ago. "*You will bend the pages. Give it to me.*"

What good are books one is not allowed to read, and what use are

statues behind glass no one can touch? she wondered. Her father's antique business had thrived on items that were more valued in an unused condition. Toys in boxes that had never been opened, chairs that no one sat in, and vases that never held flowers; they all seemed of little value to her.

Jill wandered to the glass shelves facing the books, turned on the light, and removed a porcelain elephant from the collection sheltered there. There were others; some in jade, others carved in rare wood, and some in exquisite glass. She lovingly held this piece to the light and gazed at the pomegranate-colored stones embedded in the elephant's headpiece. Rubies, she was told, precious stones for a precious animal. She remembered the day when he had purchased the elephant and allowed her to see it, ensconced in a satin nest inside a carved ebony box. Look, but don't touch, her father had admonished. Every piece in the collection was elaborately decorated and all with their trunks in the air. *I think I remember mom said when they are created with trunks in the air, it means good luck*, she thought. If he kept them for that reason, his luck had now run out.

She scuffed the toe of her shoe into the carpet and stared blankly into the case, as she remembered her father in this place, a place her parents rarely permitted her to enter. His treasures would not be her treasures. The only things she wanted from this house were her old Steiff teddy bear and the well-worn books of Grimm's Fairy Tales.

Her fingers felt the smoothness of the walnut top of his desk and followed its curves to the carvings at the edge. She opened the middle drawer to rummage through the pencils and pens. There were paper clips, a brass letter opener, a jeweler's loop, and a flashlight. A notebook lay in a corner, its pages half-filled with the prices of items purchased at auctions or estate sales.

"Everything in perfect order," she said aloud. Her father had loved systems. Nothing had been touched since he left. She could still envision him there, hands behind his head, leaning back in his chair.

She discovered a crumpled envelope with her mother's writing. Her cheeks flushed when she opened it to find a handwritten note telling her

father how much she loved him, in poetic terms. It surprised her he'd kept it, since her mother had died over ten years ago, and her father never seemed the sentimental type. "What an old softie. I would have never guessed," she murmured. She pressed the letter to her heart before she refolded it and slid it back into the envelope. It's funny how you can live with someone for so long and still not really know them. She sat quietly, enjoying the silence of the room, until she remembered a quarrel she'd had with her father.

Her decision to change her major in college from art history to interior design meant a few months of estrangement. Now that he was gone, the memory of those harsh words was even more painful. She'd chosen a restaurant as a safe place to share her decision and waited until after dessert to drop the news.

"You want to change your major now? That's a horrid idea!"

"Dad, it's my life, and I'm old enough to make this decision. I'm the one doing the work." Jill threw her napkin onto the table and hissed the words.

"Jill, I thought you'd run the business someday or even have your own gallery with that degree," he argued. He pushed himself back from the table and glared at Jill.

"I don't want your business and I don't want to work for a museum. I want my own dream, Dad. What I'm doing will still be artistic."

"Look, Jill, I've footed this bill and I say no." His voice raised enough to draw the attention of other diners.

"Fine, Dad, just fine. I'll do this by myself. I thought you'd understand." She rose from the table and left.

She was beyond surprised when he had a silver sports car delivered as a present for her last birthday. "Ride in style, Jill. Happy 24th Birthday. Love, Dad," was written on a card that the driver handed her. A part of her wanted to be irritated.

That's just like him to buy me something I can't afford when I told him I could make it without him. Then she ran her hands over the chrome and leather and drove it. She loved the bursts of speed and the way people looked at her as she flew past.

In her last conversation with her father, she thanked him and apologized for having left in such a huff. He told her he'd bought a puppy, something with a French name. It was just like him to want something rare, expensive, and to call it "Cash," but it seemed unlike the man she knew to get a little dog that would sit on his lap in his recliner. She envied that dog.

Now, Cash lay beneath the desk and pawed at the pink running shoe closest to him. He chewed the plastic on the lace before Jill repositioned her feet. Then he napped.

It was too late now to dwell on words left unspoken. Jill continued to search the desk. A drawer to the side held envelopes, paper, and a few manila file folders. At the top of the first folder were the words "Cash's Registration." There were pictures of the parents of the puppy. Her fingers trembled as she unfolded the first page. Somehow, digging through this desk still left her feeling like an intruder.

She found a pedigree, health records, and a breeder's contract. Using her phone, she checked the American Kennel Club's website and discovered that the abbreviations indicated a heritage of both beauty and brains behind this little dog's lineage.

Well, this dog seems to have some important ancestry behind it. Look at all the letters behind the names and photographs in these papers, G.CH, CD, BIS, and others, she thought. She had to do some research.

The little dog with big, upright ears was listed as "Zenith Creek's Captain Cooke's Crusade." He was a registered Papillon. The photographs showed adult dogs with luxurious fringes hanging from their obliquely set ears that did, indeed, resemble butterfly wings. His registered name hardly seemed to fit the pup hidden under the desk, cowering with his head between his paws. The contract in the envelope had a header with Zenith Creek Kennels, the name of the owner, address, and phone number.

I think I remember that place; a nicely built and well-kept operation just outside of town where they board dogs. I didn't know they bred them, too. They have a good reputation in the community, she thought, as she continued to peruse the papers in the file.

CASH THE DOG WITH BUTTERFLY EARS

The puppy crept from beneath the desk and placed his paws on her knee. He whimpered. She lifted him up and held him for a moment. The emotion she had suppressed overwhelmed her. Pounding in the “For Sale” sign on the front lawn this morning had been gut-wrenching. She’d kept her emotions under control, but the warmth of the puppy triggered feelings she had held in check. Now, tears flowed from her eyes as the puppy licked her face. “I can’t believe he’s really gone, Cash. None of this seems real.”

CHAPTER 6



“Thank you for looking. If you’re seriously interested, you should call my realtor right away. I understand there are multiple offers coming in.” Jill handed the excited young couple a Hometown Realty card and shut the front door behind them. Her realtor normally showed the house, but this couple had dared knock on the door and asked for a tour. Jill didn’t care; she wanted to sell her dad’s house and get back to her life as soon as possible. The conflicting memories here were just too much.

“And then there’s you.” She looked down at the pup, who was once again whining and sniffing the rug where the couple had stood. He did that every time anyone came to see the house. Even though her dad had been gone several weeks, Cash still seemed puzzled and confused. Especially during the visitation lunch after the funeral. He whimpered and sniffed and wandered through people’s legs until he finally settled in his missing friend’s chair with that pitiful, forlorn look in his puppy dog eyes.

Jill knew she was partly to blame. Not that it made sense, but she was strangely resentful this *dog* was with her dad when he took his final breath instead of her. When the paramedics showed up and found a frantic, barking, protective dog between them and the lifeless man on the floor, they had closed him up in the bedroom until they could move the body. The neighbor who had temporarily taken him home had coaxed him out from under her dad’s bed, shivering and quiet, too traumatized

to emit his usual high-pitched yap of excitement. When Jill had been forced to claim him the next day, she was too numb from shock to connect to the pup in any way. She had been in and out of the house, making arrangements that no twenty-four-year-old should have to make, and when she was home, she only tended to his basic needs.

Now the lonely pup was sneaking into her wounded heart a bit, and she felt guilty for her distancing and her smoldering resentments. She wasn't allowed to have a dog or any pet growing up. Yet here was her dad's latest acquisition, along with a crate full of well-played- with toys. Did her dad love Cash more than her? Had he snuggled and played with a pup, but not her as a child? She had been told don't touch so many times; objects of art and beauty aren't meant to be played with. Cash was a thing of beauty with those butterfly ears. It wasn't his fault; none of it was.

Jill picked him up and snuggled close. "I know, boy ... I know. You can look and look, but he's not coming back. Not ever." She leaned her back against the nearest wall and slid down to the floor, closing her eyes against the sting of tears.



The next morning, Jill placed the papers she had removed from the desk into her purse. She checked her lipstick in the mirror. Cash stared forlornly at her in the reflection.

Jill bent down and rubbed his head. "Hey, little guy. Don't worry. I'll be back, I promise."

She perched her sunglasses on her nose, walked out, and closed the door behind her, leaving the tiny pup alone again in the big house.

He explored the laundry room, pawed at the food in his bowl and snatched a bite, but soon left the bowl. The lonely dog wandered over to the laundry basket and sniffed at a shirt sleeve hanging over the edge. He whined as he caught a familiar scent. The pup tugged and tugged, but the shirt didn't move. Whining, he pulled on a towel layered above it and carried it away from the basket. He repeated this process with other pieces of clothing until he could get the shirt free. Just as he pulled the

shirt loose, the basket tipped over and fell on top of the timid pup, trapping him underneath.

When Jill got back to the house, Cash was not at the door to meet her. “Cash?” she called. She followed his distressed cries, which began the moment she called. Jill easily found him. A trail of fabric led to the laundry room. He had nested in the pin-striped cotton shirt and was trapped by the basket. “How did this happen? You’re such a silly pup!”

She pulled the basket off with one hand and picked him up with the other, giving him a hug as she did so. Then she placed him back on the textured tile floor.

Freed, his energy kicked in. Cash zoomed around the house and nearly tripped Jill. “Slow down!” Jill laughed. She remembered her dad telling her in a recent phone conversation that his new puppy’s full-speed zoom racing made him laugh until the time he ran figure-eight patterns around and under a side-table and an art vase had crashed to the floor.

When he slowed, he spun in circles, barking in his shrill voice of excitement. Jill watched his antics. She picked up the shirt from the laundry room floor and held it for a moment. She could smell her father’s Old Spice cologne still lingering on the shirt. She paused before she shoved it back into the basket.

The next day, Jill unzipped her purse and pulled out her keys. She watched Cash’s ears go back. He knew that sound. It meant she was about to depart. Again. “Sorry boy.” She sighed as his ears swiveled back and forth. Jill knew he would listen at the door and whine pathetically when he heard the crunch of the gravel in the drive when she backed out. She felt a little guilty, but she had to leave. She wasn’t going to take him with her everywhere she went.

Alone again, the puppy went to the laundry room. This time, he peered into his water dish. A single morsel of food sat on the bottom. In determined puppy-fashion, both of his feet reached into the dish. Water rippled and cascaded over the sides. The dog named Cash let out a delighted yip at his fun new game. He splashed again and again until the bowl was empty. He grabbed the soggy kernel of food and swallowed it. With a little yawn, he settled onto the wet floor.



When Jill returned, the house was quiet. She began her search for Cash. She entered the laundry room. As she switched on the light, she slipped in the water and hit the floor. Suddenly, the soggy puppy jumped into her lap. Jill was still uncertain where he'd hidden. He licked her face and left wet paw prints on her silk suit. The corners of her mouth tightened, and she sighed. "Oh, Cash, look at what you've done to this suit. Nuts! I wore it when Dave and I had our engagement photos taken." She pushed Cash aside, regained her footing, and removed a towel from the top of the dryer. She dabbed at the paw prints on her suit and used the towel to dry Cash's feet before she picked him up and carried him to the kitchen.

"I wish I had more time to spend with you. Maybe then you wouldn't get into so much mischief. I feel like my life is so out of control. All I do is work, study, and sleep; and now I have this mess to clean up. At least you're trained."

Cash curled his tail over his back and wagged his body from side to side. It was as if his happy dance was saying, "Cheer up."

After breakfast the next morning, Jill picked up her purse to leave again. She was going to be late to meet the realtor, so she didn't bother clearing the table. "Cash, no shenanigans while I'm gone! And stay out of the laundry room!" she admonished as she slammed the door behind her.

The dejected dog yipped once, but he seemed more interested at the tantalizing scent of bacon than her departure. Several pieces had been left on a saucer at the table and his nosed twitched upward.

His feet could barely reach the seat of a nearby chair, but he jumped and jumped. He tried again and again without success. After several attempts, he laid down on the floor in defeat.

Movement from the tablecloth fringes caught the dog's eye as they swayed in a draft from the air vents. He yipped at them a couple times, then jumped and grabbed the fringe in his tiny teeth. He tugged again and again, in an excited tug-of-war way. The lonely pup was finally learning to self-satisfy himself with play, even without his human. He firmly

planted his feet and tugged as hard as he could. At last, the tablecloth came free, and the saucer crashed to the floor with the bacon. The little white ball of fur grabbed the treat and zipped to the laundry room.

When Jill returned, she was tired from a day filled with legalities. She hung her keys on the hook and placed her purse on the chair near the door before she headed to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. That was when Jill discovered the unwelcome mess in the kitchen. Her eyes widened. She picked up the pieces of the broken saucer and swept the floor. She found Cash curled up in the shirt instead of his bed.

“You miss him too, don’t you, pup? What am I going to do with you?” she sighed. Cash put his head between his paws and searched Jill’s eyes. She put the shirt on top of the washing machine, flipped off the laundry room light, and sighed with exhaustion as she passed cardboard boxes that filled the spaces where furniture once stood.

CHAPTER 7



The moving van arrived and Jill invited the two workers in. They loaded boxes. The elephants from the office had been laboriously packed in bubble wrap, taped, and placed in padded containers. Another box from the bathroom held towels. The stainless-steel pans from the kitchen clattered as the movers carried them out. One by one, the boxes left the dining room. Jill had placed the pin-striped shirt and the dog bed in the last box.

As they loaded the desk into the truck, they removed its drawers to lighten the load. A single sheet of paper fell from beneath one drawer.

One mover called to Jill, “This has your name on it.”

Jill took the page. It appeared to be an unfinished letter. She strode back into the house, where she sat on the floor and read.

My dearest Jill,

I have reached a time in my life where I look back with pride and regret. I am so proud of the woman you have become. You are strong, beautiful, and smart; so much like your mother that it was sometimes painful. How I wish I hadn't been so busy making a living that I neglected our relationship. After she died, I filled our home with too many precious things and too few precious moments. I miss you.

Jill folded the paper and put it into her pocket before the dam of emotion burst.

A shaking Cash crept into her arms. “Oh, sorry boy. Didn’t mean to scare you.” She put her head against his. Her tears dampened his fur, and he gently licked them from her face. She finally regained her composure and released him from her grasp.

“I didn’t want to love you, but you sure are sweet.”

Moments later, Jill watched Cash wander from room to room. He explored the emptiness without furniture. The expensive Persian rugs were gone, and the hardwood floors were slippery. She let out a soft laugh as she watched him slide around. With determination, Jill pushed herself up off the floor. “Back to work.” She took two boxes to the attached garage. One held the treats, toys, and leashes that belonged to the puppy. The other box contained a well-worn plush toy bear and a few books.

Cash stayed close to Jill. He followed her to the door of the attached garage and seemed to watch as she lifted the carrier that her dad had brought him home in. As Jill put the carrier into the seat of her car, he cocked his butterfly ears to one side and yipped.

“Not yet, Cash. Come on, pup.”

They went back into the house, and Jill went through every room. She stood in doorways and searched as though she expected a ghost. Soon, she picked up the tiny wriggling pup at her feet. “Come on, buddy. We are going to your new home.”



A few hours later, Jill pulled into her driveway. She yawned, stretched her arms upward, then plunked her head down on the steering wheel. She was exhausted, physically, and mentally. She let herself drift into oblivion until Cash’s barking and scratching on the carrier door startled her to her senses.

“Oh, sorry Cash. I know, I know, you gotta go.” Jill stepped into the balmy night, released the anxious pup from his prison, and set him in the grass. “Stay near, Cash. This is unfamiliar territory for you.”

Streetlights now flickered and glowed like candles in the night as Jill

unloaded the trunk of her once shiny car, now dusty from the trip. Rain first drizzled, then hit like a deluge as she carried Cash in one hand and his carrier in the other, to the top of the second flight of stairs. The crate banged against her leg.

Upon reaching the landing, she unlocked the door and turned the knob. She pushed it open with her foot and lowered Cash to the floor. He followed her while she put his food and water dish in her kitchen and tucked his bed under a chair. Jill filled the litter box that Cash used when he needed to take care of bathroom duties. Her father had trained him to use it instead of risking him making a mess on those precious carpets. Jill fixed herself a bowl of soup and a handful of crackers. She sat at the counter on a tall stool, blowing on her spoon and gently smacking her lips.

It surprised Jill that Cash ignored his food bowl and didn't beg for a bite or wait to see if something would drop from overhead. He had plopped down on the cold floor and closed his eyes. "What's the matter, Cash? Is your tummy upset from the trip?" He opened one eye and drooped his ears. She watched him pad softly into the room where a sofa was pushed against the light-colored wall. He seemed too tired to explore with his usual curiosity, ignoring her bookcase full of memorabilia and her desk topped with a laptop and printer. He crawled into his bed beneath the chair, snuffed once, and fell fast asleep.

When Jill left the next morning, the puppy dashed after her, sliding to a halt at the door—the door that Jill hadn't quite shut. Using his little paws and sharp nails, he squeezed his foot into the crack between the door and trim. Using both front paws with determination, he scratched and scratched, pulled, and pulled. The door opened just enough that he could scramble out and scurry down the stairs, onto the grass, and into the sunlight.

It was nearly dark when Jill arrived home after attending her college classes and checking in with her supervisor at the Studio of Commercial Design. *When my inheritance is settled, she reasoned, I will never have to work again if I choose not to, but I don't quit so easily. I will get that degree, and I will continue to work, at least for a while longer.* Jolted

from deep thought, it startled her to find the door slightly ajar.

“Oh no, Cash,” she called, as she checked the kitchen, under the bed, and in every hiding place she could imagine. She continued calling his name, softly at first. “Cash,” she pleaded in desperation. She searched the hallways of the apartment building. Then she scoured the apartment complex and knocked on doors to ask if anyone had seen a small white dog. Jill trekked several blocks in each direction, taking time to ask passersby if they had seen a dog on the loose.

In panicky exhaustion, she thought, *I’m so embarrassed that Cash escaped. I’ve let Dad down. What if something happens to him? That dog meant so much to him.*

She posted her plight on social media and placed a local internet ad, which included the offer of a reward, then called the local animal shelter. Tomorrow she would make up some posters at work and place them in windows of the nearby stores, if the owners will allow it. Cash was so small; he couldn’t get very far.

She called Dave. Sometimes it seemed he lived a world away. “I can’t believe this,” she exclaimed. “After all I’ve been through this past month and now this!” Her voice rushed on like a windstorm until she finished the story. Then she whispered, “I wish you were here with me right now. I need a hug.” Jill loosened her grip on the phone, sighed at the sound of his voice, and relaxed. She slipped off her shoes, curled her legs up, and pulled a throw over her feet.

Dave began, “Listen, honey, don’t worry. The dog will show up in the morning. I bet he will be right outside the door when you wake up. If you don’t find him, I’ll get up there and we can expand the search.”

As Dave talked, Jill relaxed. She stifled a yawn.

“Get some sleep. I know you must be worn out. Things will get better. Try not to worry. I love you, sweetheart.”

When Jill woke the next morning, Cash was not at the door waiting, as Dave had predicted. The scattered dog toys reminded her of his absence. She put all of Cash’s belongings in a cardboard box. Jill couldn’t keep looking. She’d already missed so much work. During her lunch break, she’d put an ad in the local paper and make some fliers.

CHAPTER 8



The trays slid, dishes clattered, and a cacophony of voices filled the cafeteria at Madison's new school. She finished the last of her cinnamon roll and sipped her milk. At the opposite end of the table, two other girls took their places. They gave her a nod but made no further sign of including her in their discussion. She sat with one elbow on the table, her waif-like face pressed against her hand. Then she shrugged and stood to drop her waste in the garbage can, other items in the recycle bin.

She couldn't help but overhear what was being said at the table behind her. Several boys were arguing about the merits of different video game players and their favorite games.

"Well, I like the games that have car chases and the newest version of the war game we all play," one said.

A tall blonde responded, "I'm already at level fifty."

Madison blurted, "Well, I'm at Prestige two-fifty."

"What?" they said in unison.

"Yeah, I play a lot."

"That's a game most guys play. I'm surprised. Hi, I'm Josh Gladstone," the tall, dark-haired boy said as he stood with athletic confidence. He looked at Madison and continued, "I think I saw you on the bus. You don't live that far from me."

"I'm Madison, and I'm new here."

"Well then, may I walk you to your house from the bus stop?"

“I’d like that, but my dad is picking me up.” She thought she saw a hint of disappointment on his face, so she added, “You’re welcome to come over. I have a new game, and our TV has split screens. Dad lets me download new games sometimes.”

As he turned, he said, “Okay, see you soon. Glad we met.”

After school, Madison spotted her dad’s truck at the curb. She climbed in and clicked her seat belt. Her mind was still preoccupied with the boy with big, beautiful, cocker spaniel eyes.

“Your chariot has arrived, Princess. Bet you wish you were headed for the ball instead of this meeting.”

“You can say that again. But I don’t want to talk about it.” They rode in silence for a few minutes.

“It will be okay. Give it time. It’s only been six months,” he said.

“Not sure I care, after the last one,” Madison sighed.

“You’ll find me here when you’re done.” He pulled to a stop in front of the counseling center.

“I love you, Dad. Thanks.”



Madison checked in at the reception desk and hurried past the shelf with toys in bins, posters on the wall, and a board with markers. She always felt embarrassed being in a “child” psychologist office. Not that Dr. Moore treated her like a child, but still. She snagged a magazine featuring her favorite rock band on the cover, leaned against the wall, and tried to hide her face behind its pages.

“Madison Taylor?”

Madison straightened and took a step toward the receptionist.

“You can go on back,” she said with a smile as she buzzed open the door.



“Hi, Maddie. How are you doing today?” the therapist asked, as she closed the door behind her.

“Fine.” Madison smelled the aroma of coffee from a still-steaming mug

behind the desk. *I'd like to jump over that desk and swig some. Dad says it's not good for me, but I could use a jolt.*

She took off the puffy coat that swallowed her small frame, pulling loose a tendril of her dark hair. She pushed it back into the clip and put on a happy face. Madison settled into one of the soft chairs and tapped on the polished arm of it with one fingernail, crossing and uncrossing her legs, jiggling her foot in cadence with her tapping finger.

Dr. Moore sat on a small sofa opposite Madison and focused on her face. "Okay, so tell me about the incident at the mall. I've read the report, but I want to know how you're feeling about it."

Madison squirmed in the chair and stared out the window before she spat out the words. "Like I disappointed everyone. Like my friends bolted at the mall and left me to take the blame, just like my mom. Like I was just stupid!"

"So, how are you going to handle it?"

"I can't change it. Now, I'm mad, mad at the world, and mad at myself."

"Everyone gets mad sometimes, but we don't have to stay that way. So?"

"Mostly, I'm worried about Mom's reaction. Dad handled it okay. I know he's upset, and he took my phone, but he didn't yell at me."

"So, you think your mom will?"

"Probably. We fight now more than ever." Madison chewed her lip and clenched her fist. "It's hard to tell. She's so unpredictable. I could never bring friends home, because I didn't know if I was going to walk in to the smell of fresh-baked cookies, or alcohol."

"That had to be hard."

"It was, but then she moved out, so it's okay."

"Are you sure about that? The tear in your eyes says something different."

Madison thrust her fist to her cheek and brushed away the telltale tear and sat upright in the chair. "Sometimes I just hate her. How does someone forgive that? I trusted people I shouldn't have and didn't stick up for what I knew I should. So. What does that make me?"

"It makes you human. We all make mistakes. At least your legal issue got resolved."

"Yeah, that's another part of the mess. It was scary not knowing, being

worried, and seeing Dad worried.”

“Uncertainty is part of life, Maddie, but I bet you’re glad that part is over.”

“I am.”

The clatter of high-heeled shoes in the hallway interrupted their conversation.



The door opened and her mother breezed through, took off her jacket, and tossed it onto the back of the chair next to Madison and sat down.

“Hi, kiddo. How’s it going?” she said too brightly, ignoring Dr. Moore.

Madison cringed a bit. *Rude, as usual.* She swallowed hard and lifted her chin. “It’s going. You?”

“I’m not a fan of this weather, but you always seemed to like it.”

“Yeah, I like the snow and the way it whitewashes the dirty side of everything.”

“Your dad told me about the mall. I warned you about your friends. You got off lucky.”

“I don’t have any friends. They all let me down, just like everyone else... except for Dad.”

“Madison, is that a fair comment?” Dr. Moore interjected.

“What’s fair?” Madison shot back. She rolled her eyes and threw up her hands.

Madison’s mother squirmed. “I’m sorry you feel that way. I did what was best for all of us. I hope you’ll see that one day.”

“You did what was best for you, Mom,” Madison snapped as she bolted from the chair.

“Don’t say that, hon.”

“You didn’t expect me to be grateful.” Madison deliberately snorted.

“Sorry. I guess you just made a bad decision.”

“Yes, I did. Now, do you want to talk about yours?”

“I’ve made some mistakes, Madison. I’m paying for them now.”

“So am I. So is Dad.”

Madison grabbed the door handle and slammed the door behind her as she stormed out.

Once in the hall, Madison noticed a wad of paper on the floor. With her best impression of a football punt, she kicked it. The paper ball flew past the reception desk, bounced, and rolled into the lobby.

Why couldn't I do that on the soccer field?

She took a few deep breaths, and with a wry smile, retrieved the paper and tossed it into the wastebasket near the desk.

A family of four blocked the entrance of the counseling center. The man struggled with a wheelchair, and the lady shifted a baby stroller. To allow them time and space, Madison plopped into a chair and hid her face in the puff of her coat.



“Well, that certainly went well—not!” Madison’s mother smoothed her skirt and looked for reassurance.

“Give her a minute to calm down,” the therapist said as she edged toward the door. She glanced at her watch. “Our staff is out front, and her dad should be waiting. I’ll check on her.”

Dr. Moore peeked into the hall, saw Madison, and strode toward her. Madison didn’t look up when she sat in the chair beside her.

“Maddie, running away is never the solution. Are you okay?”

Madison rubbed the back of her neck. “I thought I’d gotten over it. I’m fine. Just fine. I guess she forgets about how scared I was when they fought, or when she passed out and I thought she was dead.”

The therapist patted Madison’s hand. “Take a minute and a few deep breaths. I’m sorry. This must be hard for you.”

“I guess she forgets all the times she wasn’t there for me. She says she loves me, but ...”

“You must be very hurt.”

“That doesn’t begin to describe it. I don’t know what I feel. I want to remember the good times too. Sometimes it feels like I only dreamed them. Then I see her again, and—oh, I just can’t think at all.” Madison propped her elbows on her knees and covered her eyes with both hands, pushing the palms against her cheeks.

“Take your time. When you’re ready, we can go back.”

“Do I have to?”

“No, but it might be a good idea.”

Madison removed her hands from her eyes, ran her fingers through her hair, and paused. Grabbing a tissue from the box on the magazine table, she blew her nose, rubbed her eyes, and scooted to the edge of the chair. Reluctantly, she stood.

“Okay. Let’s go. But I’m not like, staying.”

The therapist accompanied the distraught girl as she marched down the hall and opened the door to face her mother.

“Look, Mom, I know I screwed up. I disappointed everyone, including myself. Please, just don’t preach.” Madison’s hand never left the doorknob and was already closing the door when her mother responded.

“Okay, honey. See you next time. I love—” Before she completed the sentence, the door clicked shut.



On the morning following the counseling session, Madison poured milk into a half-filled bowl of cold cereal. Her father entered the kitchen behind her.

“I just got off the phone with your mother. She complained you bolted from the session yesterday.” He frowned and wiped his forehead. “Maddie, you’ve got to learn to talk things out.”

Madison slammed the plastic jug against the table, yanked out a chair, and plopped down. “Oh, and did she tell you I went back?” Not glancing up, she plunged her spoon into the bowl.

“Nope,” he said, picking a mug from the shelf above the coffee pot.

Madison tried not to choke on the bite she’d just taken. Tears filled her eyes. “Or did she happen to mention that she slapped me when we had our last big fight?”

“No, she didn’t, and neither did you. Why didn’t you tell me?” His shoulders squared and his face turned white. His hands shook when he poured coffee.

“I guessed I thought I deserved it for being rude, but I was too mad to talk about it.”

“Now I’m pissed,” he said. The coffee pot rattled against the granite countertop as he thrust it.

“She never tells you everything, never did, so maybe don’t tell me about talking things out.”

“It wasn’t your fault, and I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“I am too,” Madison choked. She slid back her chair and sent the still-full bowl clattering into the sink. “I’m going to ride my bike. Be back later.”

“Don’t walk out on me.” He blocked her as she tried to pass. “We need to talk more about this and you running amuck. I need you to keep me posted with your phone about where you’re going, who you’re with, and when you’ll be home. And you’d darned well better answer when I call. I can’t always be there to protect you.”

She pulled past, wiped tears from her face and shrugged. “I know that, Dad, but I’m almost grown. I can take care of myself. I need to go. See ya later.”

Madison fled the kitchen. She paused long enough to balance the bike between her knees and shove her phone deeper into her pocket. As she jammed the pedals forward, she thought, *a girl needs to feel the wind in her face, as if she had wings*. She could almost picture that in her imagination.

Her emotions sorted themselves in her mind.

If I owned a car, it would be easier. I’ll have one someday, but I wonder how far away someday is?

On her own now, tears streamed freely, and she didn’t have to fight them. *There are some things you need to allow yourself to feel in order to heal*. Isn’t that what she remembered her therapist saying? This just might be the saddest, loneliest she’d ever felt, and she hated it.

CHAPTER 9



After church the following Sunday, Madison and her dad finished lunch in the cozy kitchen of their new home with a great yard.

“I am so grateful we were able to get this place. It has more room and lower taxes than our last house,” her dad said.

Madison loaded the dishwasher. “I like that I got to choose the color for the walls in my bedroom. The Seafoam Green I picked reminds me of our time at Newport Beach, and the new TV is a bonus.” With her back turned away from her father, she smiled slyly and added, “Plus, we have a fenced yard. That’s like perfect for...”

The door chimes rang.

“Got it, Maddie,” he said, darting from the room.

“Darn! I didn’t get to finish,” Madison mumbled.

When the front door opened, Josh Gladstone was leaning against the porch rail just as he had done nearly every afternoon in the past few weeks.

“C’mon in, Josh. She’ll be right here.” Mr. Taylor escorted Josh to the family room.

Madison followed. Her dad headed to his desk nearby.

“I’ve got that new game we wanted to play. Are you ready to get beaten?” she teased.

“You’re on!” Josh responded.

After a couple hours of fun, Madison’s dad appeared in the doorway.

“Sounds like you’re having fun and I hate to be a spoiler, but your mom just called, Josh. It’s time for you to head home.”

“Give us a couple more minutes?” Madison looked at her father with eyes that pled her case.

Her dad shrugged. “I’ll give you five.”

Soon, Josh stood to leave. “See you again tomorrow. I’ll kick your butt at this game,” Josh teased.

“Not tomorrow. I signed up for soccer and it’ll be our first practice. I’ll call you later.”

“Okay. See you soon,” Josh said as he shut the door behind him.

Madison’s dad had left the room, but popped back in. “Oh, Madison, I almost forgot. I ran into Katy Anderson, an acquaintance of mine, and she wondered if you’d like to have a summer job at—” He smiled slyly. “Well, I’ll let you find out. I think you should call her.”

Madison entered the phone number, and a voice quickly answered.

“Zenith Creek Kennels, Katy Anderson speaking.”

“Hi. This is Madison Taylor,” she said with what she hoped sounded like more confidence than she felt. “So, my dad said you need some help.”

“I need some flower beds weeded. Are you able to tell flowers from weeds?”

“Yes, my grandma taught me. She had lots of flowers. I even mow lawns.”

“Nice! Do you like dogs?”

“Love ‘em.”

“Great. Do you know where we’re located, and can you to come tomorrow? We’ll meet and I can show you around.”

“Yes. I’ve ridden my bike past there before. I’ll be there for sure,” Madison replied. After the call, she pumped her fist. “Sweet,” she squealed.



The next day, Madison biked to the kennel, being greeted by barking dogs.

“Come in. You must be Madison.”

“Hi. I’m glad to meet you.”

Mrs. Anderson held the door open, shifted aside, and motioned for Madison to enter.

“Thanks. I mow the lawn at home, and I could do that here, too. We even have an extra mower,” Madison offered.

“Well, you are ambitious. For now, I need the flower beds cleaned. The place needs to look good. Neatness and cleanliness are important to me. You’ll mostly be working out front.”

Madison motioned to the flower bed she saw near the entrance. “I see irises and peonies over there, but grass is invading.”

“Yes. That’s why I need someone. You said you like dogs. Come on through and I’ll show you the rest of the place.” Mrs. Anderson led Madison through her office and opened a barrier to the rear of the house, where several small dogs greeted them.

“These little guys have a special place in my heart. You won’t need to be around them long to see why.” Mrs. Anderson picked up the dog closest to her. “Would you like to hold this one?”

Madison nodded yes.

Mrs. Anderson carefully handed her the dog. It licked Madison’s cheek. Madison ran her fingers through silky strands of fringe that hung from its large, obliquely set ears. “She’s so cute, and her ears are so different.”

“These are Papillons, a special breed of dog. They’re busy little guys. They were originally bred to keep as companions.” Mrs. Anderson said. She took a toy from a bin and put it in the pocket of her jeans.

“She’s darling. I see one puppy on the bed there. Do you have more?”

“No. Little dogs have small litters. I sell most of mine before they are even born. So, I can be choosy about their forever homes.” Mrs. Anderson picked up the only puppy. It wriggled and grunted. Mrs. Anderson chuckled. “I sold this little pup to a couple in their late thirties. They miscarried two pregnancies. The husband thought they needed something to love and nurture. I wish you could have seen his wife’s face

when she held that pup. She just glowed.”

The mother dog squirmed in Madison’s arms, so she put it back on the floor. Mrs. Anderson passed the puppy to her.

“It’s so soft. Look at how it snuggles right up,” Madison said. She laid her cheek against the pup.

Mrs. Anderson took the toy from her pocket and tossed it. The dog at her feet bounded to it and brought it back. Mrs. Anderson knelt and patted the dog. “They are so affectionate. These guys have a huge desire to please and to forgive. I think that’s what love is all about. That’s why I keep doing this. I’m a matchmaker. Guess you could say I sell love; puppy love—genuine love—or at least the possibility for it,” Mrs. Anderson said proudly.

Minutes later, she took the pup from Madison and put it back into its bed. “If I got paid by the hour for the time I put in, I’d be broke, but still happy,” she said. “Come on, we’ll tour the rest of the property.”

Upon closing the gate, Madison looked back over her shoulder. “Oh, I want a dog so much. Dad promised me a dog once. I hoped I’d get it for my birthday, but, with the move and all, that didn’t happen.”

Mrs. Anderson placed her hand on Madison’s shoulder. “Oh, Madison, I’m sorry. Did you remind him?”

“No. He has a lot on his mind, you know, so I hate to bother him.”

“Well, when the time is right, I suppose.”

Madison followed Mrs. Anderson down a path towards the kennel. The woman’s elegant grace and proud head carriage reminded her of the Arabian mare she’d seen in the pasture below the kennel. Yet there she was, dressed in khaki pants and a uniform shirt. *There’s something mysterious about her*, she thought.

They made a circle around the exterior and finished the tour back in the kennel office.

“I’ll be here Friday after school for sure!” Madison promised.



In the weeks that followed, Madison proved her worth by being on time and working diligently, even in heat. Mrs. Anderson let her try the

mowing as well.

The sun had burned the dew from the grass by the time Madison arrived to mow. Mrs. Anderson watched from the window as Madison struggled with the mower. She pulled the cord again and again until the machine chugged to life.

“Determined little thing,” Mrs. Anderson said to no one in particular. “Can’t help but like her.” She shook her head. “Silly old woman. The longer you live alone, the more you talk to yourself.” She left the window to pull two glasses and a pitcher from a kitchen cabinet.

At the end of each working day, Madison would check with Mrs. Anderson. When invited, she sank into a chair to chat before she headed home.

“I’d come here even if I didn’t get paid. I love this place and we feel almost like family; don’t you think?” Madison said on just such an occasion.

“Yes. Family.” Mrs. Anderson’s voice trailed off.

CHAPTER 10



Cash's adventurous search to find his old home began innocently on a brilliant, sunny day, but would end in quite a different fashion. After wandering past over-flowing garbage cans and nearly being run over by a garbage truck, he made his way into a park. As hungry dogs do, the pup begged for tidbits of food with just enough success to fuel him for a short while.

Tired and temporarily satiated, he headed to the shade of a nearby tree and flopped down in the grass. The Papillon's ears went up at the sound of loud and agitated chattering. A squirrel scrambled into the tree, puffed its cheeks, then sounded the alarm. Cash jumped with a yip, but with the squirrel now out of reach, the tiny dog turned his attention to a butterfly that flitted past. This time he pounced, but wings fluttered above, and his leap into the air wasn't successful either. He landed flat on his little belly. After a couple whines and pants, he was again on the move.

Two terriers saw the tiny dog padding across the grass, growled, and jerked their leashes from their owner's hand as they gave chase, charging after him as he fled the park. "Angus, Arlo, no! Come back here!" The lady caught up with the tiny pursuers, grabbing the leashes just as they neared Cash, their prize. The Papillon pup blazed down the block without looking back.

Rain clouds gathered, thunder boomed, and lightning slashed the

sky. The exhausted dog stopped and panted, frantic to escape the storm. He trotted to the nearest shelter, the space beneath a porch, and darted in. Digging into the soft soil to make a nest for himself, he shivered, cold, wet, and in terror.



In the morning, Mr. Andrew Shaw shuffled out onto his damp front porch to retrieve his morning paper. He never had his coffee until he had his paper. He huffed as he saw the paperboy had missed again, and what a day for it. His sharp eyes surveyed the scattered limbs and leaves and dirty puddles left by the storm. “Going to get wet, going to get muddy.”

By the time he picked up the newspaper, totally soaked on one side, and got back to the steps, his leather slippers were indeed wet and muddy. Beatrice, his housekeeper, would have a conniption fit if he tracked this mess inside. He stomped his feet on the porch several times before wiping them on the doormat.

Soft and pitiful whines coming from beneath the porch floor echoed the loud stomps. What was that? He gave one good stomp with his right foot and was met by a sharp yip, yip. Something was stirring down there. He got down on his knees and leaned over the edge of the boards, peering into the crawl space between the support blocks.

“Well, I’ll be darned. Look who I found!” Mr. Shaw coaxed and grabbed until he had the disheveled, wet pup in his arms. “Come on, let’s get you dried off. You’re just in time for breakfast, if you don’t mind sharing.”

At first, the dog wriggled to free himself, but the effort was futile. The elderly man looked down with brown eyes that were heavily guarded by bushy eyebrows, but the gaze was without question one of tenderness.

Finally, the dog named Cash leaned against the man’s bony chest. The gentle man carried him into the house, grabbed a towel, and sat in a big chair, speaking softly. He ran his fingers through the pup’s coat and rubbed away rain and dirt with the towel. “You’re a good little man. Look at these ears!” he said, massaging them and patting him on the head.

“It’s okay, little man. You’re going to be just fine.” He gently sat

Cash down and ambled to the kitchen where the pup followed until the clatter of the cast-iron skillet hitting the stove scared the dog and he ducked under the table.

“Come on out. There’s nothing to be afraid of here,” he said, as he sat a plate on the floor. It held an egg and a bit of toast slathered in butter. Mr. Shaw watched his unexpected guest gobble down the food and keep his eyes locked on his rescuer at the same time. After the pup ate, he put him on a towel in a velvet rocking chair. After circling twice, the dog bedded down, but he jerked at every sound.



Jill’s phone rang. She didn’t recognize the number. Hope sprang up in her heart. “This is Jill,” she answered.

A baritone voice said, “Hi. My name is Andrew Shaw. In the paper, I saw where you advertised for a lost Papillon pup. I think I’ve found him. The dog I found is mostly white. Well, kind of white. He’s dirty. If you want to come and look, I’ll give you my address.”

Jill immediately left to pick up Cash. The mile-long drive from her apartment to Mr. Shaw’s house seemed much longer than it really was. After she pushed the bell, Jill recognized the voice she had heard on the phone. A slightly bent old man swung the door open. “Please, come in.” He extended his hand to show she should enter.

“Does this look like the guy you’re looking for?” The old man asked Jill, as he pointed to the dog.

Jill’s voice trembled. “Yes. That’s him. He belonged to my father until he passed away a few weeks ago,” Jill rushed on. “Somehow, he got out.” Just then, a whistling sound came from the stove and steam escaped from the hole in the kettle.

“Would you like a cup of tea? I was about to fix some for myself. I’ve got several kinds.”

“Thanks, but no. I need to get back. I feel so guilty about losing him.” Fumbling in her purse, she pulled some bills out and attempted to hand them over. “What a relief it is to have him returned.”

“I saw the pup in the park yesterday. He looked like he was running

for his life, and maybe he was, with two white terriers chasing him. Even though I called to him, he just kept running. Then he shows up under my porch.” Mr. Shaw gestured to the spot where he first saw Cash. He looked back at Jill and mirrored her smile. “You just keep your money. I didn’t do anything special to earn it, and it was kind of nice to have the company.”

“Well, thank you once again for your kindness. Are you sure you won’t take the money? Really, I insist. Dad was a stickler about keeping his word,” said Jill. When Mr. Shaw hesitated, Jill pressed the money into his hands.

“Well, thank you.” He slipped the bills into the frayed pocket of his trousers. Jill carried Cash to the car, whispering to him in reassuring tones.



When Jill left for work the next morning, she had forgotten about the cardboard box with Cash’s belongings. The freshly bathed dog, however, stood on his rear legs and peered into the box. Tempted by the familiar smell of treats, he snapped his little teeth over the edge, but retrieved nothing but air. He chewed the corner of the box, making ferocious puppy sounds until he had loosened enough of the cardboard so his teeth could clamp down and pull. Off came a strip. He repeated the process again and again until he reached the box of treats, then ate his fill. He immediately became ill and vomited on the carpet, then slunk back to his bed.

“Ach! What’s that smell?” Jill had just returned and stepped inside her apartment. Looking around, she saw the remnants of Cash’s toy box. “Oh, no,” she moaned. She stomped over the floorboards toward the shredded mess. “Gross! Oh, no, my shoe!” Her right foot had landed in Cash’s sick deposit. She stepped carefully out of the shoe and as far away as she could, then slung the clean shoe off her foot. It clanged against the wall. “That’s. It. I’ve had it! Cash! Cash, come here this instant, you little...” Jill found him cowering in his bed. He barely raised his head to her and was trembling.

The pitiful sight of him tempered her anger. She sighed. “Poor pup.

You keep getting into trouble. What am I to do?" She reached down to pat his head, and he flinched away. "I'm sorry, Cash. Don't be afraid of me. Nothing that has happened has been your fault." The pup licked her hand. "Now, to clean up your mess!"

The next morning, Jill snuggled Cash close to her, then reluctantly crated the little dog. "This is where you will have to stay while I'm at work, Cash. It should keep you safer." She tapped the front of the carrier and let Cash lick her fingers through the grill of the door before she left.

There was room in the crate for the poor pup to stand, sit, or lie down, but no room to play. The dog called Cash turned circles in the crate, pawed at the door, stood on his rear legs, and bit at the metal crate door. Then he barked in protest, followed by a howl.

The same fuss was repeated the next day.

Jill had just settled in for the night. It had been a long day, and she had argued with her team over her designs for the interior of the new restaurant on Fifth Street. She wanted fresh colors, quality wood, more mirrors, and richer fabrics. They wanted less expense. Defending her position made her think she was more like her father than she liked to admit.

That night, a knock on the door startled Jill, and she jumped from the chair. She had not expected guests. Cash followed on her heels as she went to the door. When she opened it, she saw a man whose ruddy face looked like a puffer fish. She took a step back. It was the neighbor from the adjoining apartment.

"That dog barked all day and I need to sleep," growled the neighbor as he jabbed his fat fingers in Cash's direction. Jill stepped defensively between the man and Cash, who yipped and took off down the hall.

"I work most nights, you know? Isn't there something you can do to keep it quiet?"

"I'll figure something out," she said. "I'm so sorry he disturbed you."

"Just do something about it," he said, as he backed away from the door frame.

Jill sheepishly closed the door and collapsed back into her chair. What in the world am I going to do now? she pondered.

The next day, Jill moved Cash's crate to a different room on the other

side of the apartment. *Maybe this will solve it*, she thought. At least it was further from the adjoining wall where the blustery neighbor might have slept. Cash was still fussing when Jill came home from work that afternoon. “Sorry, buddy. I know you’re not happy. We both miss Dad.”

Jill cuddled Cash for a long time, lost in thought. He was a special pup and she loved him, but it seemed like she couldn’t give him the time or attention that he needed. Jill glanced at her desk and saw the envelope that held Cash’s registration papers. She kissed Cash’s head and set him on the floor. Then she reached for the envelope and pulled the papers out. After a few minutes, she picked up her phone. “I don’t want to, but I have to do this.”

Moments after Jill dialed, she heard a woman’s voice say, “Zenith Creek Kennels. This is Katy Anderson speaking. How may I help you?”

“Hi. This is Jill Fellows. I found the registration my father received for a purebred dog he purchased from you. The contract says you wanted him returned if he couldn’t keep him for any reason. Unfortunately, my father passed away.” Jill had a catch in her throat. She stared at the paper as though she were seeing it for the first time before she continued. “I wanted to keep Cash, but I work, and may move soon. I don’t think this is best for him.” She could see Cash pawing at the food in his dish as if he were sorting a box of buttons. “He’s not really happy. I love the little guy, but my life is in a state of flux, and I am at my wit’s end.”

“I am so sorry about your father. Please bring the pup back,” Mrs. Anderson said without hesitation.

Jill looked down at the papers again, noting the Vancouver address. Not far. She could make it tonight. “I will bring him right away if that is okay.”

“Of course. See you soon.”

Jill put the box that held Cash’s chew toys, treats and bed into her car. Cash sat in the crate on the seat next to her. The top was down, and the air blew through the fringes on his big ears. He flattened down in the back of the crate, eyes shut.

CHAPTER 11



Jill took the pet carrier from the car and stood on the porch of Zenith Creek Kennels. She took a deep breath and rang the bell.

Mrs. Anderson greeted Jill with a smile and invited her inside. “I was so sorry to hear about your father,” Mrs. Anderson said, guiding Jill to the sanctuary of her office. “I’m surprised to hear about all of this. He was on a waiting list for several months before I had puppies available, and he called often, just to check in. I only sell dogs to dedicated people and your father was one of them. He answered so many questions before he took the pup. Most people give up part way through the process.” Mrs. Anderson smiled gently at Jill, who was clutching the arms of the damask-covered chair.

“How nice of you to take this puppy back. I’m so grateful.”

“I wish more people vetted the breeder of purebred dogs like your father did before he purchased from me. He used to send me photos, so I’m eager to see this dog again. Let’s go check on him.” In the hall, Mrs. Anderson knelt to peer at the pup.

Cash hugged the back of the crate and refused their invitations to come out. His tiny body trembled. He looked scared and confused.

Mrs. Anderson opened the crate, reached in, and patted the pup gently. “He will be fine, Jill. Of course, he’ll need some time. Don’t worry, though. I’ll find him a perfect home with a special person. I think I may have someone in mind.”

Jill thanked Mrs. Anderson and stood. “Let me get a box from the trunk. I brought everything I could find that belonged to him while he was with my dad, in case a new owner wanted them. I thought his bed might be of some comfort to him,” she said. “I hope you won’t mind if I keep in touch. I do feel guilty, and he was important to my father.”

Soon, Jill retrieved the box from the trunk, then solemnly waved goodbye to Mrs. Anderson.

On the drive back, she passed a dark-haired girl on a bicycle.



Madison pulled over to let a car pass and let the dust settle. She pushed her hair back from her face and tucked a strand behind her ear. It always seemed to work its way free from her ponytail. She looked ahead at the rolling hills and flower gardens which encircled the house. The chain-link fence around the kennel sparkled in the sun like a silver necklace. Dogs barked as she arrived.

“Come in, Madison. I have your money ready.” Mrs. Anderson glanced at the lush green turf and the designs left in the grass by the lawnmower. “This lawn always looks so nice after you mow. The flower beds look better since you weeded them, too. Will you be back next week?” Mrs. Anderson asked as she counted money into Madison’s outstretched hand.

“Sure will.” She noticed a pet carrier in the hall. So, do you have a new boarder?”

“No. This is a puppy I’ll be placing just as soon as I finish evaluating him.”

“May I see him?”

“Of course.” Mrs. Anderson bent down, pushed the latch, and tried to coax Cash from the crate, but the dog cowered at the back and refused to budge.

“Let me try.” Madison got on her hands and knees and scooped Cash out. The pup looked up. He put his head under her chin. Then he folded himself into the crease of her lap. She sat cross-legged with him nestled there for several minutes as a tear streaked down her cheek.

“You know, I’ve wanted one of your dogs like from the moment I saw them. Well, I have been saving the money I earned for a smart phone, but maybe if it’s not enough, I can get more from my dad. Can I keep him?” Madison pleaded.

“This dog needs a forever home. He has had a few bad breaks and it may take some extra work to get him settled in. He always was a bit more reserved than his littermates, and he became used to having company all day.” Mrs. Anderson was shaking her head from side to side, and Madison frowned. “Then he went to being alone a lot! He is seven months old. A small, scared dog needs a strong leader. I’m not sure he is the right dog for you.”

“Yes, he is,” declared Madison. “He’s perfect! I don’t have a lot of friends. It is early summer, so I’m home all day by myself since Mom is gone and Dad works. We will be perfect together,” pleaded Madison.

Mrs. Anderson observed Cash’s body language and Madison’s earnest expression. “You don’t give up easily, do you?” She chuckled and scratched her head.

Madison stood upright, still holding Cash tightly in her arms, “I promise, really promise, if you let me have him, I’ll do whatever you say. If he needs to be trained, I’ll do it. If he needs love, I’ve got it.” Madison watched Mrs. Anderson settle further back into the chair and noted that her hands were no longer clasped. She gave the most charming smile she could muster.

“Please?”

“I think I will talk this over with your father first. He works so hard. I need to know he is on board. You know, I’ve seen him in that truck of his loaded with lumber and pipe. I wonder if he’ll be okay with a dog in the house.” Mrs. Anderson shifted from side to side in the chair. “Then there’s the money thing. If he says you can have the dog, I’ll cut you a deal, so it can be your very own dog. This breed is uncommon, and I want to be sure he will be safe, welcome, and loved by all. He deserves someone as special as he is.”

Mrs. Anderson took the puppy from Madison and put him back into the carrier, then led Madison to the sofa, where she sat with her arm

across Madison's shoulder. "A dog is not like a toy that you can set aside when you get bored with it. They are living beings which require a long commitment of care. You also have to think of the expense of food and veterinary care because they need vaccines and checkups, just as people do."

Cash stuck his paw out the front of the carrier and whimpered. Madison could hardly pay attention. Her eyes repeatedly alternated between the carrier and Mrs. Anderson.

"Let's see what your father has to say, and then we will decide."



That night, Madison set the table and put a lasagna in the oven for supper. It was her father's favorite. After the meal, Madison begged her father as diligently as she had with Mrs. Anderson, to prepare for the phone call she knew was soon to come.

"You have been quite responsible for the past four months. Still, you are home alone a lot." He paused for a minute.

"The summer months are really busy ones for my business, Madison. If you get a dog, you're going to have even more responsibility," her father said.

"I know. I know. I know," Madison said, as she perched on the arm of his charcoal-colored recliner. She held her position even after his phone rang, and she could tell it was Mrs. Anderson calling.

The suspense seemed to last forever. She fidgeted, spun a ring on her finger, twirled her hair, and bit her lip. Finally, her father looked at her... and nodded yes. Madison squealed and slid from the arm of the chair into her dad's lap.

CHAPTER 12



The next day, Madison was giddy with happiness. Her face ached from smiling. She listened for the rumble of her father's truck or the sound of the carport door. She kept watch at the window in case she missed the familiar sound. The little brown box that held her savings had been opened so many times the hinges had loosened. She counted her money again and again. The puppy she had only dreamed of was about to become hers. She could hardly contain her excitement. Would he never get home?

When the truck pulled up, Madison was already alongside it, ready to open the door even before it came to a full stop.

"Hey, wait a minute, babe. I need to wash up." Madison followed her father into the house as if she feared he might lose his way. She stood in the bathroom's doorway while he cleaned up.

"Hurry, Dad, hurry," she said.

"Don't worry, Maddie. The dog isn't going anywhere. Give me a sec."

Madison felt like the drive to the kennel took longer in the truck than it would have if she had walked. She sat at the edge of her seat the entire time and bolted from the truck as soon as it stopped. Madison skipped up the stairs. Mrs. Anderson opened the door before they rang the bell.

"I have the money," Madison said. She counted out the bills. By now, Mr. Taylor had his keys in his pocket and was close behind. His

grin gave him away. Cash was waiting, and Madison quickly took him from the carrier to show him to her father. “Isn’t he adorable, Daddy? Don’t you just love him?”

“Well, he is cute,” he said. Madison pressed her cheek against the softness of Cash’s fur and Cash wriggled to escape from the tightness of her grip.

“Isn’t he just the sweetest?” Madison gushed. Her eyes sparkled and her face beamed.

“I can see why you wanted him,” Madison’s dad said.

Cash’s feet never touched the floor while Mrs. Anderson and Mr. Taylor talked. He was enveloped in Madison’s arms until she reluctantly placed him in the carrier for the trip home.

When they got home, Madison offered Cash food and water. Then he explored his new surroundings.

That night, Cash slept in his bed next to Madison’s. Her fingers dangled over the bed and stroked his furry ears. “I love you, funny face. You are so soft, as soft as Grandma’s cashmere sweater. I wonder if that is why your name is Cash. Is that short for cashmere?” Madison’s fingers slowed. “We are gonna have so much fun together,” Madison said sleepily before they both drifted off.

Several days later, Mrs. Anderson called. “I talked with your dad and the trainer. Classes start next week.”

“Classes?” Madison asked, confused.

“Yes. Puppies that have been vaccinated need to be around other dogs and people. We call it socialization. It makes them less fearful and happier. My friend, Mr. Baker, owns the training center,” Mrs. Anderson chirped.

“Exactly what will we learn?” Madison questioned.

“With consistent and ongoing training, he’ll quickly learn how to walk next to you on leash, to sit, stay, and come when asked. He will also be around other dogs and people. It helps build a stronger bond between the two of you, make him more confident, and it can be a lot of fun. Just wait and give it a chance. I can loan you some books about dogs and their needs, too.”

Mrs. Anderson paused. “I’ve decided you can help out more around here, if you’d like. You could wash the water and food dishes, then clean and disinfect some of the kitty condos.” The enthusiasm in Mrs. Anderson’s voice was infectious.

“I don’t read much, but I’ll try. Last year, my grades weren’t very good,” replied Madison.

“I’ll bring you some books later today. Just ask me if you have questions and we will go over them together.”

The next morning, Cash was exploring the room when Madison stuck her feet out of the blanket and dangled them over the bed. He jumped up and nibbled on her toes.

She tried to put on her socks, but he grabbed one and ran. She caught him as he tried to escape and wrestled the sock from his tiny teeth. “You can’t chew my socks.” She replaced the stolen sock with one of Cash’s toys.

Cash danced about, emboldened by her engagement in a game of catch me if you can, and Madison chuckled as she hurriedly dressed. She couldn’t help but smile when she looked at his adorable face. It didn’t matter if Cash had his ears up or down; she thought he was the most precious dog she had ever seen.

Madison thought her new puppy was learning the ropes quickly. He followed her everywhere and stuck as close to her as he could get. He followed her to the kitchen and lay sprawled out on the vinyl floor. It seemed to Madison that he watched every spoonful of food transferred from her bowl to her mouth. When she played games on her phone, he rested his chin across the arch of her foot. When he trailed behind, he nipped at her fluffy slippers. Even when she took a bath, he peered over the edge of the tub.

Sometimes Madison threw a ball for Cash. He would jump at it, grasp it tightly, and then dodge her hands, as if he were playing keep away. Eventually, she would stop chasing him and he would flop down beside her. When he was tired, his tongue flicked in and out, and curled at the end. He liked to pounce on things like a cat; his tail curled and twitched like a squirrel’s. When he was excited, he whirled in circles. She

always laughed when he bowed when he got ready to play. His posture seemed as if he was paying honor to a queen, or maybe he was doing the downward dog yoga pose.

“The dark lines in your fur at the outside corner of each eye make it appear that you’ve been playing in mascara. What a funny guy you are. You make me laugh every day,” she told him.

With all the good things, there were still some challenges. He had to learn to use the doggy door installed for him. At first, he didn’t want to use it. Cash ran from unexpected loud noises and dodged the hands of unfamiliar people. If Madison picked him up and handed him to them, he quivered as if he was cold; his ears flattened in fear. Madison learned those ears were like a barometer of whether he was happy or not.

A week passed quickly with Cash now hers. Madison rode her bike down the road to the kennel. It was time for the lawn to be mowed. Horses in the pasture stood nose to tail, swatting flies from one another in the shade of the lone tree. Madison stopped to watch them and wiped the sweat from her brow. The summer heat had kept the grass short. At the kennel, she took the mower from the shed and pulled the starter, but motion in her peripheral vision caught her attention.

Mrs. Anderson called her to the broad porch with iron rails and patted the chair next to her. “I made us some lemonade. Join me, won’t you?” She handed Madison a glass of the pale-yellow liquid with chips of ice floating at the top as Madison plopped down onto the flowered cushion of the chair.

“Thanks Mrs. Anderson. I love lemonade.”

“I spoke with the pet stylist in town, and she’ll help you select the right brushes and combs. Grooming Cash will be another way to bond,” Mrs. Anderson said. She took a sip of lemonade.

“All dogs shed. Some dogs can get by with just brushing and some need both a brush and a comb. It depends on the coat. Dogs like Cash shed quite a bit as their coat changes from pup to adult, and again when the seasons change,” Mrs. Anderson said. She lowered her glass and motioned Madison to a plate of cookies. “Anyway, if you want to keep Cash looking his best, it’s a good idea to take care of his hair regularly. You

can look at what is available and then decide after you talk to my friend Maxine, if you like.”

“What exactly does a pet stylist do?”

“Some people call them dog groomers. Their work is to help others understand and care for their dog’s skin and coat. Most people like dogs more when they’re clean and smell good. It also addresses shedding.”

“How fun to give dogs baths and play with puppies. What a cool job!” Madison chomped into a still warm cookie.

“It’s not quite like that. It can be both fun and hard work. Not every dog wants a bath or likes the vibration of the clippers.” Mrs. Anderson wiped her hand across her forehead and pulled back a strand of hair. “A good pet stylist helps people choose clips that work well for their budget, lifestyle, and enhances the appearance of their dog.” Mrs. Anderson brushed crumbs from her lap and refilled her glass.

“Her shop is cute, and I think you’d like her. She’s a good friend. And we’re having dinner tonight. Would you like to come?” She took a sip and looked at Madison.

“I’d like to.” Madison stood, stretched, and walked to the steps of the porch. She turned. “Why do you like purebred dogs so much?”

“I like the fact that two well-bred dogs of the same breed will provide puppies that will be similar in size, shape, disposition, and maybe even the same color when both parents are carefully chosen for quality and adherence to set guidelines. I like consistency. What you see is what you get. Just because a dog is purebred doesn’t always mean that it has been well bred.”

Mrs. Anderson bent to pick up a napkin that had fallen. “I also like my friendships with other breeders, handlers, and judges. These people have the desire to strive toward excellence, which I admire. You see, there are rules called standards that explain the desired qualities for each individual dog breed. Judges are people who have studied those standards, bred dogs and been active in the show arena. Handlers are paid professionals who show dogs for others. Anyway...”

Madison fidgeted. She turned to face Mrs. Anderson. Her mouth tightened, and she drew her arms across her chest. “Yesterday, a friend

said I'd gone to the dogs. He also said mixed-breed dogs are healthier than purebreds. I thought I liked him, but ..."

"Friend, huh? Wouldn't be the one you played all those computer games with?"

Madison shrugged, then nodded yes.

"He's probably hurt that you don't spend as much time with him as when you first started here. Seems like that was all you were doing back then." Mrs. Anderson joined Madison at the porch rail.

"First, you don't have to agree with someone all the time to still like them. Second, most of the breeders I'm acquainted with spend time and money to do quite a lot of testing to avoid health issues. A good breeder studies written standards for their breed and develops knowledge about genetics."

Mrs. Anderson sighed, as if she'd been through this conversation many times. There was a glint in her eye and an edge to her voice when she said, "Let's forget the mowing. I want to get the dogs fed before we go into town. I'll pick you and Cash up in my van and we'll go visit Max."

Mrs. Anderson opened the door to the house and was about to head to the kennels.

"So, you don't mind when people call you 'that dog lady'?"

Mrs. Anderson stopped and turned toward Madison. She laughed and clapped her hands together. "Nope. That's a badge of honor. You just made my day, if that's what people say about me," she said with a chuckle.

Madison skipped down the steps, crossed the gravel drive, and dragged the mower into the shed. She shook her head. She had a lot to think about.

CHAPTER 13



Late that afternoon, they pulled the van up to the front of the pet styling salon with dogs etched in its glass doors. Madison carried Cash inside.

The receptionist greeted them, then left to call Maxine to the front.

Madison was drawn to the wall near the desk. Framed certificates hung there and the shelves above were lined with trophies. “Wow. Those look important,” Madison said as she turned to Mrs. Anderson.

“Yes, Madison. It means that Max took voluntary testing of her academic knowledge of dogs. She also demonstrated her skill with the tools of the trade and grooming ability, then was judged by industry leaders as competent enough to earn certification.” Mrs. Anderson pointed at the trophies. “She won those when she competed at grooming competitions to show her work. I think it’s reassuring to her clients. It shows how much she cares about her career.”

Their conversation was interrupted when Max appeared.

“Hi, I’m Max. Oh, there’s your Papillon. How sweet he is,” the groomer exclaimed. “I love this breed!”

Max took the puppy from Madison as she spoke. “Come on back into what I call my operating room,” she said as she beckoned them to follow. She put the pup on a grooming table topped with a soft rubber mat. Cash explored the table for a moment with Max guarding the edges so that he wouldn’t step off. Then she slipped a grooming loop over his head to

secure him in place.

“You will need a brush that gets through tangles but won’t scratch his skin. I’ll show you the technique today. We’ll also clip his nails and trim his feet. If a dog’s toenails grow too long, it causes them to walk abnormally and puts stress their joints. Thus, keeping a dog’s nails short is important,” said Max. Cash attempted to climb up on Madison, but Max guided him back into place and continued. “You may need to brush him weekly for now or do it for a few short minutes each day to get him used to it.”

“This dog is small, so you can probably do it on your lap unless your folks want to get a table like mine,” Max said.

She took a brush from the drawer beneath the table and stroked Cash with the soft bristles. “Bath time next,” said Max.

Cash wriggled and stood on his rear legs as he was placed in the tub. He squirmed as he gazed up with pleading eyes. He trembled as the warm water from the spray nozzle saturated his coat. Encouraging him back into place again, Max patiently massaged the shampoo from neck to tail, leaving his head for last. Cash now glanced up and his dark lips seemed curled into a smile.

“I think he likes it,” Madison said.

“You will know he is clean when the hair squeaks between your fingers. See? Like this,” Max said, as she demonstrated grasping a wisp of hair between her fingers and thumb.

“That looks pretty easy. I’m sure I can do it,” Madison replied.

“Rinsing is just as important as the bath. Shampoo left in the coat can make a dog itch. Do you want to try rinsing?” Max turned the water back on and adjusted the temperature.

“Sure. Let’s trade places.” Madison imitated the motions that Max had just demonstrated.

“Keep feeling the coat until you know all the shampoo is gone.”

After a few minutes, Madison looked at Max and said, “Done, I think. See how clear the water is now?” She stepped aside to let Max slip back into place at the sink.

As she held Cash in one hand, Max pulled a towel from the rack. She

blotted his fur and wrapped him up like a burrito in the warm towel. After much of the moisture was absorbed, she carried him to a drying station.

Back on the grooming table, Cash seemed to like the warm air coming from the dryer until it was directed toward his ears. He shook his head, followed by his whole body, showering them all. Everyone laughed. Less than half an hour later, Cash was dry and placed in a compartment on a clean, dry towel. "He'll stay here until we get back from dinner, but before we go, let's look at tools," Max said.

The display rack in the shop was filled with toys that hung from pegs, a shelf of various kinds of shampoos, and a selection of brushes and combs. Brightly colored collars were hung to one side. Max pulled a brush from the display case and handed it to Madison. "I like this one. Did you notice the protective tips of this brush?" She took a second brush from a wall display. "I also like the brass pins on this one. This comb is nice, too," Max said, as she explained the merits of each of her selections.

"Do you really think I have to have both a brush and a comb?"

"Well, I like both, but if cost is an issue, and it is for most of us, you could get one now and the other later."

Madison chose a comb and a toy for Cash. *I think I'll be able to do this just fine by myself*, Madison thought as she left the salon.

At dinner, Madison enjoyed listening to the two women visit as they ate. They talked about famous dogs from the past, litters of puppies, and the merits of dogs currently being shown even after gaining their championship status. She got a little restless and tired before the evening was over. It was after nine before Madison got home.

When Madison arrived, she found her father reviewing invoices spread across his desk. After greeting her, they went to the family room. He settled into his favorite chair. She sat on the arm of the chair and filled him in on the day. She was glad she didn't have to get up for school in the morning, although Cash knew nothing about schedules and he would want her to get up early, anyway.

The next morning, she patiently combed Cash's fur from the backs of his ears down to his tail, then down his front and back legs. She had to reposition him several times. He tried to lick the comb and Madison's

face, but she persisted. She fluffed the fur on his chest.

This comb is working beautifully, she thought, congratulating herself on the choice she had made. His fur glittered in the sun. Cash's white coat made her think of the sun hitting snowbanks in the winter. The darker color around his eyes made him look like he was wearing a Mardi Gras mask. She giggled as she thought of him in a costume. She had seen some in a catalog at the grooming shop and it amused her that some people dress their dogs up for special occasions.

Madison's father made breakfast while she lay sprawled on her bed. She opened one of the books Mrs. Anderson had given her. There were so many pictures of such different dogs. She called through the open door, "Dad, did you know this book talks about the history and job of each breed? So many varieties and colors. So cool. Isn't that interesting?"

"Sure," he replied.

After breakfast, she opened the books again, struggling with the words as she turned the pages. "Listen to this, Cash," she said as she read aloud. He laid on her bed and watched her face, his ears flicking at the changes in the tone of her voice. Sometimes she stopped and checked her phone to search out more pictures of dogs.

Cash swiveled his ears and picked up noises no one else seemed to notice and barked often to alert his new family. "Quiet," Madison said. Sometimes he continued to bark. "Shush!" she told him as she held her fingers to her lips, throwing him a treat to distract him. Treats always seemed to make him happy.

"Not too many; you don't want him to get fat," her dad scolded. He had always liked big dogs, but he seemed to like Cash, as evidenced when she caught her father baby-talking to him.

Madison wished her mom could see Cash, but since she had moved in with Daniel and filed for divorce, that wasn't going to happen. She had sent a few photos from her phone. Madison's body tensed as she thought about it. Even that seemed somehow disloyal to Dad. She tried to fight against the conflict within herself. Sending a picture on the phone wasn't the same as having her with them.

Madison's mother was absent from her life a lot, but then she had

really been absent even when she lived in the same house. Madison could find her passed out on the sofa from time to time, or sprawled on her bed, seemingly oblivious to the ringing phone or the smoke alarm when the pan on the stove was so hot the handle was melting. When she wasn't passed out, she was arguing with Dad. Maybe passed out was better. *Sometimes I don't mind seeing her only during supervised visits*, Madison thought, when she remembered those incidents.

She picked Cash up, went to her room, and closed the door. Resting on the bed, she placed Cash on her belly. Her fingertips drew slow circles in his fur. "What would I do without you, little one? I love you so."

Cash gazed down at her. His eyes blinked. When she tickled him, his mouth opened to reveal the end of his tiny pink tongue.

"Such a funny expression," she said. She placed Cash on the bed and rolled to her side. "I'm so glad I have you and my job."

Cash shifted to the foot of the bed, and they fell asleep in an afternoon nap.

CHAPTER 14



“Miss Madison Taylor,” read the envelope. *Must be important.* The enclosed letter featured a logo with a dog in a cap and gown holding a diploma. “Alpine Meadows School for Dogs” was embossed in gold letters. Madison chuckled at the logo and scanned the page to read.

Dear Miss Taylor,

We are happy to see you enrolled in our six-week basic training classes to be held weekly at 7 p.m. on Fridays. Dogs should wear a training collar and lead. We will provide a clicker as part of our training process.

Please bring a small toy or a few treats your dog enjoys. If you bring treats, remember the high value of scent. Pieces should be small and easily swallowed.

We look forward to seeing your dog.

George Baker, Owner

Just three days to wait.



Alpine Meadows School for Dogs was in a huge building. Green rubber mats lay in a square pattern on the floor, while a longer mat crossed the diagonal. Madison saw hurdles, teeter totters, tunnels, and cones along the wall. It looked like something from a children's daycare center. Other dogs and their owners lined up along one side of the room. The owners held leashes with varying degrees of control over the dogs.

Madison noticed a Standard Poodle, French Bulldog, and Miniature Schnauzer all lined up with their owners in the same class. She and Cash took their places at the end of the line.

"Welcome to class. This is Teddy," the trainer said, pointing to a Miniature Poodle at his side. "Today, we will teach our dogs where we want them to be, when we move and when we stop."

The trainer held up a new collar and leash. "Please make sure that you have yours like this," he said as he demonstrated. "We begin with the dog in the sit position. See where my dog is placed?"

The trainer circled the room with his dog starting and stopping on command. The dog wagged his tail happily as they practiced. Then, the trainer handed the dog to an assistant and returned to the center of the room.

"Are you ready? Sit your dog," he commanded. He approached each dog.

He made sure each dog was positioned near the left side of each owner. The dogs were to face forward and be positioned near the calf of their person's leg. "When I say 'heel,' step forward on your left foot as you say your dog's name and the word heel. When I say 'halt,' stop and put your dog back in sit position."

Madison felt Cash lean against her. She pulled him upright and straightened herself again. He seemed to watch her but was a bit nervous with all these other dogs. There was a much larger dog right in front of them. Cash whined his scared-whine and tried to duck behind her. As soon as he did, the dog behind them sniffed Cash. Cash bolted forward. This scenario happened over and over again. It was start-and-stop at first, stall and dart. They went around and around, starting and stopping on command.

Madison tried to calm Cash with a small piece of roasted chicken from her pocket. She was relieved she had remembered to bring everything on the instruction sheet. Cash looked up with those luminous brown eyes, sniffed the air, and followed the smell of the treat. Praise and treats helped. By the end of the evening, Cash was cooperating. He had stopped shaking as much when other dogs barked or got close.

Madison noticed several other girls near her age in the class. They seemed to know one another and watched as she and Cash received individual instruction.

“Now, I want you to practice at home,” offered the trainer. “Practice makes perfect.”

At the end of the lesson, the girl with the Golden Retriever in tow dashed up to Madison. Freckles sprinkled across her nose and her golden hair curled like ribbons. Madison had seen her at school, always surrounded by friends.

“Hi,” the girl said, “My name is Amy Hutchins. We haven’t met, but I’ve seen you at school. This is Bella.”

“I moved here in March,” Madison replied.

“Well, I’m glad we finally met up,” Amy said, as her dog tugged at the leash.

“Me, too,” Madison replied.

“I hope to see you here next week ... Same time, same place,” Amy said, looking back over her shoulder as she and her dog strolled away.

“Nice Golden,” Madison called after her, pleased with herself that by studying those borrowed books, she’d been able to identify Amy’s dog and each of the other purebred dogs in the class.

Madison’s father’s pickup rumbled a throaty sound while he waited at the training center for her to appear. He’d washed and waxed it that afternoon until the deep red paint glistened, the chrome shined, and the interior smelled like glass cleaner. Madison opened the door and secured Cash on the seat between them.

“Well, how did it go? Did you like it?”

“It was ok. Cash was acting funny at first, but he got better after a bit.”

“Well, that’s the way it is. Confidence is built by doing, not by sitting on the sidelines.” He leaned across to give her shoulder a squeeze. “I just want to make sure you are enjoying yourself.”

“I liked it a lot. It was fun. Some girls from my school were there, too.”

“Oh. Were they on your soccer team?”

“No, and I might not play this year after all, you know. I’m not that good at sports.” Madison’s shoulders slumped, and she settled down into the seat, seeming smaller than her already diminutive frame. “So, I just want to feel like I’m part of it. Sometimes I miss my old friends, even though I know we got in trouble.”

“I’m sorry, honey. This won’t last forever, you know. You’ll find your niche.” Her father put the key in the ignition and turned on the headlights.

“Well, I like this a lot better; and with my job, homework, and now this, I think doing less would be wiser.” Cash, who had been settled between them, put his paws on Madison and gazed into her face, waiting for the pat she always gave him.

Two weeks later, Madison and Cash arrived at the training center a few minutes early. Amy and Bella were already there.

“Hi, Madison. I forgot to ask you last time. Where do you live?”

“On Allen Road, about a quarter mile from the big park.”

“Oh, I know about where you are. My uncle lives in the blue house across the street from that park. He says a lot of new houses are being built out there.”

Bella pulled forward and stuck her nose into Cash’s ear. Amy pulled her back. “She needs more work. That’s one of her habits I’d like to change. Maybe we could get together at the park and practice.”

“I’d like that.”

“There’s a creek through there that Bella likes to wade in. This is my second set of lessons, Madison. I might have some ideas about how to build Cash’s confidence.”

Madison scooped Cash up and held him close. “He sure needs that. Let’s do it.”

A few days later, they did just that. The park bordered farmland on one side. Trees shaded winding paths. Picnic tables were located near the park's entrance. Flocks of geese streamed above like tails on a kite.

The girls sat at a table and talked, letting the dogs get acquainted, too. Then, they took turns walking the dogs one in front of, and then behind the other. Amy corrected Bella when she pressed forward, trying to get close to Cash, and Madison corrected Cash when he wanted to whirl to see Bella. Soon, the dogs began to gait more evenly.

They would practice, stop, rest, and chat. Sometimes the girls shared music and video on their phones before starting another practice session. One afternoon, Madison had a skip in her step and a smile on her face. "Look, Amy, I found a video about teaching your dog tricks."

"Oh, let me see it." Madison held her phone so that Amy could watch it.

"Hey, I like that. Send me the link. That's a really good site."

"Okay, give me a second. There. I just did. Now, let's work the dogs."

When no others were in the park, Amy let Bella off-leash for a game of fetch. Madison kept Cash tethered. He stood on his hind legs and barked at Bella when she ran. When Bella tired, Amy sat next to Madison on a picnic table.

"Amy, do you play video games?"

"Not much. I'm usually busy."

"Oh. My mom and I used to play. She's not living with us now, and I just wondered if you played."

"What happened?"

"Long story, and most of it's not pretty. I don't usually mention it. It's kind of embarrassing. She drank a lot, and she left us."

"That's got to be hard. Do you want to talk about it? I'm a good listener."

Madison shrugged and averted her gaze. "No, I'm okay."

Seeing discomfort, Amy changed the subject. "Maybe we could go to the movies or to the swimming pool next week."

"I'd like that. Let's work the dogs more, and then I've got to get

home.”

Thirty minutes later, Madison checked her watch. “Time to go. Let’s do this again soon.”

“Absolutely. I think Cash is getting less intimidated by bigger dogs. I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

Madison and Cash started home, and Amy and Bella sauntered across the road to her uncle’s house.

It was a pattern that they repeated often in the following weeks.

When Cash wasn’t at home, he shied from the unfamiliar. Madison wasn’t sure whether it was because something had frightened him early in his life, or if it had always been his nature. Most of the time, he seemed fine. But, in public, he hid behind Madison or pulled to the end of the leash and refused to come near anything that seemed different, especially if it made noises or moved quickly. She decided to try something Amy had mentioned.

Each day, she placed something new on the ground: a beach ball, a straw hat, a rubber cone, a small ice chest, a cardboard box, etc. She put his leash on him and walked near the object with Cash at her side, nonchalantly passing the articles. Later, she took the leash off and let him take his time. He approached, pulled back, sniffed, retreated, and sometimes barked. Eventually, he would tentatively touch the article with his nose. When he did, Madison praised him and said, “Good touch, Cash. Good touch.” She put his leash back on and patted her leg to encourage him forward as they passed the articles. “Good boy, Cash. Nothing bad will happen to you when you are with me. You can do it, silly boy.”

For six weeks, Madison took Cash for a daily walk to practice the lessons from the training. At first, he stopped to inspect every bush, every bug, and to watch the old black cat who glared menacingly. She noticed things along the path that she had not seen. It was as if his sharp eyes pointed them out. She enjoyed the noisy starlings and the wind rustling through the trees’ leaves.

On one walk, Madison sat beneath a towering pine. The sun shone between the long glossy needles. A huge cone fell from the branches. Her inquisitive dog barked to tell her of its arrival. Madison picked up the

cone and showed it to Cash. “It’s not dangerous, Cash. It just surprised you.”

A month passed. Exercising Cash became more about exploration and adventure than about giving him lessons. The walks became longer and more frequent, especially in the cooler evening hours. It gave Madison joy to see the changes in the sky as colors faded from scarlet to lavender and the silver moon appeared. Rays of light filtered through branches, leaves whispered in the breeze, and the scent of blossoms filled the air. Often, Amy and her dog, Bella, accompanied them. Sometimes, Amy and Madison chatted as they walked. Other times, they simply strolled quietly and marveled at the wonders around them. With just a few more weeks of class, Madison was feeling like she and Cash had made a lot of progress.

The sun shone brightly as Madison and Amy ambled down the path toward a stream, with Cash and Bella at their sides. They passed a tree with a jagged scrape and Madison grew pensive.

“Is there something wrong?” Amy asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You sure? What’s up?”

The girls stopped where a fallen log lay next to the creek. They sat down on it. Bella tugged toward the water and Amy allowed her to have slack in the lead. Madison lifted Cash into her lap. “Come on, Maddie, we’re friends. What’s wrong?”

Madison picked up a pinecone and threw it into the nearby stream. “It’s just that sometimes my thoughts are as tangled as blackberry bushes.” She scuffed the soil with the toe of her shoe. “I just noticed the scrape on that tree back there and it reminded me of a car accident that my mom and I were in.”

“Were either of you hurt?” Amy asked as she scooted closer to Madison.

“The car was badly damaged, but we didn’t get hurt. She was just taking me to school, but we could have died. She was drunk.”

Amy grew quiet for a moment. “I’m so glad you didn’t get hurt. I bet you were scared.”

“I was. You know, I still get mad at her sometimes.” Madison glanced at Cash, while she stroked her fingers through his fur. “I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help it.” She rose from the log, plopped Cash down, and took a few steps toward the creek bank. The girls stood on the shore and watched a leaf float past and drift away. “Maybe I’ll tell you more someday. Those were some hard times. But Dad and I are okay. I’m glad we’re friends.”

“Remember, I’m here if you ever need to talk,” Amy said softly. They continued the journey home together, and both girls relaxed their grip on the leashes and let the dogs have a little more freedom to explore. Bella flushed a pheasant that took flight, and Cash yapped at it when it flew. Madison grinned as Amy regained control of her dog.

On the days when Cash didn’t get to go for a walk, he behaved in a fashion that seemed unique to him and his breed. He spun in circles when excited or zipped around the house at full speed until he was so tired that he flopped down, panting. Sometimes, in the yard, he ran in great circles around her. It was as if he was running for his life, but his eyes and the rest of his body told her he was running for the joy of it. It always made her laugh.

The dark-haired girl and the shimmering white puppy had become a team, moving together in rhythm and style. She used praise and treats to encourage him to sit, stand, stay, and come when called. Madison learned to place Cash on the table and stand as others examined him. Finally, it seemed that Cash had decided Madison meant what she said, and that she would see to his comfort.

After several months of training, they offered the class pamphlets about a dog show to be held in a few weeks. “Give it a try. It can be fun,” the trainer suggested.



One evening, Mrs. Anderson parked her pearl-white van in front of the training center and went inside. It made her happy when she saw Madison and Cash together. She chose a seat on a black wrought-iron bench near the practice rings and observed as Madison and Cash went through their

drill. How satisfying it was to know that the decision to let her dog go to this new home had been a good one.

When class was dismissed, Madison and Amy sauntered over to Mrs. Anderson, Bella, and Cash trailing behind. After introductions, they chatted excitedly about the upcoming show.

“What should I wear?” Madison asked Mrs. Anderson.

“Well, something that fits you nicely. Certainly not those shorts with the frayed cuffs. You will want something that makes Cash the focus, so I would choose a color you like that looks good next to him. Why don’t you look at the photos in my albums in the kennel to see what others are wearing and keep that in mind. We can even go shopping, if you’d like,” she said.

“Oh, good! Can I come with you?” Amy asked.

“Yes, of course. Whatever you decide to buy, it should probably have pockets for treats or a toy.” Mrs. Anderson smiled and leaned back, sipping her green tea purchase. “We could even go to the beauty shop for a manicure.” She glanced at her own fingernails and grimaced when she noted that they also needed attention. “My treat.”

“This is so new to me,” Madison admitted.

“Well, we want both of you to look and feel good for your first time in dog show competition. Do it for yourself as much as for him.” Mrs. Anderson pointed to Cash as he spun in a circle. She grinned. “You two belong together.”

Madison left to retrieve her backpack while Amy sat cross-legged on the floor with one arm around Bella. She glanced up and looked directly at Mrs. Anderson. They exchanged smiles as their eyes met for that moment.

“Mrs. Anderson, Madison says you know more about dogs than anyone she knows. Do you know if our animal shelter allows volunteers?”

“If they don’t, many pure breed clubs have their own rescue organizations. In fact, some of my friends raise funds for shelters or volunteer at them. Max sometimes volunteers to groom for our local shelter.” Mrs. Anderson stood and tossed her cup into a nearby recycle bin.

“I think I just might see if they could use some help. Maybe the

training I'm taking here could help a dog get a new home."

Mrs. Anderson bent down and stroked Bella's ear as she said, "Sounds good! Lots of reasons dogs end up there. Some are unneutered males. Most need training. People's lives change, as you know. Many good dogs are looking for a forever home. Some purebreds are surrendered. So, let me know how it goes."

Mrs. Anderson watched Madison hurry back across the room to where they waited. She seemed even more excited now than when she left. She was wide-eyed and smiling. Well, it was her first professional mani, and having her good friend Amy along would make it even more special, she thought.

Madison cuddled Cash close and giggled. "Wouldn't it be great if Cash, like, won a ribbon at our first real competition?"

Mrs. Anderson's hand rested comfortably on Madison's shoulder as they strolled through the exit door. "It sure would, and I'll bet you'll do great!" she replied.

CHAPTER 15



On the day of the show, Madison chose to pull her hair back into a bun. She was excited to wear her new shirt, but her old jeans were getting big around the waist and too short at the hem. She shoved them back into the drawer and searched the closet, pushing hangers to the side as she looked for another option. Forgotten at the rear hung an unworn red skirt. Her Mom had given it to her for her sixteenth birthday.

Memories flooded back as she held the skirt. Her mother had shipped her birthday present. When it was delivered, Madison took the box from the driver, strolled to the kitchen to find scissors, and opened it. A birthday card in a pink envelope lay across the layers of tissue. She laid the card aside and peeled back the tissue to reveal a bright red skirt.

“A skirt? I hardly ever wear a skirt. Maybe I could wear it to church.” She grasped the skirt and measured it across her hips. “Too big.” Madison muttered. She plucked the card from the envelope to read her mother’s message of regret at not being there for her birthday. She ran her fingers across the raised butterflies on the card. She put the card and the box aside and the scissors back in the drawer. *I’ll show dad when he gets home and call Mom tomorrow to thank her*, was her thought. She grabbed a cookie from the jar, poured a glass of milk, and hopped onto her sofa to play her favorite video game.

That night, Madison’s father had brought home a pizza and an ice cream cake. After they ate, Madison cleaned the kitchen. She took the

skirt to her bedroom, put it on a hanger, and shoved it to the rear of the closet where it had hung for months.

She had been ungrateful, and now she felt guilty about it. The thought ended the memory video in her head. Madison slid the skirt gently over her hips. Today, it seemed perfect. It would almost match her new shirt and athletic shoes Mrs. Anderson and Amy had helped her pick out, and it had pockets! Perfect for Cash's treats. She held her hands in front of her to admire the tiny paw print design made in her new polish. Her reflection stared back at her from the mirror. She was changing, growing, and developing, just like Cash. She felt more grown up when she dressed up. Madison looked back over her shoulder and smiled in approval. "You'll be proud of me, my puppy," she said. "Well, you are not a puppy anymore, but you are still so little."

When it was time to leave, Madison's dad put Cash in his carrier, and, with Madison buckled in the truck, they used GPS to find the best way there.

Loudspeakers, barking dogs, and people chatted at the sidelines of the show. A young mother stroked her child's hair and secured it with rubber bands. A large Golden Retriever lunged ahead, towing a child behind as if he were a cart.

Madison and her dad waited in line at the parking lot next to the venue. Madison noticed the gatekeeper with keys attached to his belt. They were so heavy he had to keep hiking his jeans back up as he directed them to a parking spot. After parking, they strolled the show grounds. Cameras clicked. Two teenage boys sat on the tailgate of a truck. Their fingers flew across their phones. The air smelled of shampoo and fast-food concessions. The freshly cut grass flattened with the people and dog traffic.

Upon earlier arrival at the show site, Mrs. Anderson had set up exercise pens where dogs could stretch or relieve themselves. Madison found her hard at work and pitched in to help. Carefully she removed Jet, the tri-colored Papillon male, from his crate and let him in one of the pens

"He sure is a pretty dog," Madison said.

"Well, I hope my judge thinks so. He is about as close to breed

standards as I have come so far,” said Mrs. Anderson proudly.

After all the dogs had a turn inside the exercise pen and had been given water, Madison and Mrs. Anderson combed each dog.

“No tangles on this one,” Madison said.

“Well, there shouldn’t be. They get combed for a few minutes each day,” Mrs. Anderson replied.

Madison fidgeted. A shiver sneaked down her spine. She peeked at Mrs. Anderson. Her voice trembled. “I’m kind of scared today. What if I’m not ready, or Cash acts up? I’ll be so embarrassed.”

Mrs. Anderson didn’t look up and continued her work as she replied. “So, life is about struggles and learning. Don’t let fear stop you from doing what you really want to do.”

Madison swallowed hard and attempted a weak smile. She patted the dog and ran the comb through once more. Finished combing, Madison slipped the special show lead over the male Papillon’s head. “It’s almost eleven and your class starts in fifteen minutes. If you take Jet, I’ll bring Jewell to the ring for you,” Madison offered.

They carried the dogs to where they would be judged. Upon entering the confirmation ring, Mrs. Anderson skillfully maneuvered her dog into position so the judge could see him at his best angle. She placed the dog on the judge’s examination table, and it stood perfectly still and balanced as the judge ran her hands over the dog. When it was their turn to move around the ring, the dog carried his tail over his back and walked the ring, with Mrs. Anderson by his side.

“I hope I can make Cash behave like that,” Madison said. She applauded when the judge placed Jet, the tri-colored Papillon that Mrs. Anderson was showing, as Best of Breed.

When Mrs. Anderson exited the ring, she explained to Madison, “This win made him eligible to compete in the Toy Group. That means he will compete with other small companion dogs who have won their breed competition. And, if he places first in the group, then he could compete for Best in Show.”

Since the Toy Group competition would be later in the day, Madison decided to look for her friends. She set Cash on the grass and adjusted his

leash. Cash trotted along, but playfully pulled toward the other small dogs. They walked along the fence to look for the motor home where Amy and her family stayed. When she found Amy, she was brushing her dog.

“I see you found us. Are you ready?” Amy asked.

“So, I think I’m ready, but a bit nervous. I just hope I don’t fall on my face. I want Dad to be proud,” Madison replied.

“It will be fun, worrywart. Let’s go. We have to get our arm band numbers.” They found the ring steward’s table and fastened the bands on their arms.

Madison waited until her number, twelve, was called. She advanced around the ring, and lifted Cash to the table, when instructed. As the judge approached, Cash ducked his head, folded his ears back, and gave a look as if to say, *is this over yet?*

Taking his head gently in her hands, the judge looked at Cash’s expression. Then she ran her hands down his back to his tail and felt the musculature of his rear legs. When directed, Madison put Cash on the ground, adjusted his leash, and positioned him correctly in front of the judge. His tail curled over his back. His head went up, and he progressed around their ring. All their practice in the weeks before now made it seem easy. Maybe it was overconfidence, but Madison made a turn and brought Cash back to the judge on the wrong side. Her heart sank as she realized her mistake.

“Such a basic rule for a junior handler. How could I forget? Darn!” she grumbled beneath her breath.

At the end of the judging, they announced the winners. As they lined up next to the numbers that indicated their assigned placements, Madison congratulated the first-place winner, a girl showing a black-and-white Shetland Sheepdog. Amy and Bella were in second place, followed by a boy with a Springer Spaniel in third, and a girl with a Maltese in fourth. Madison congratulated the winners and trudged away from the ring next to Amy and Bella. So, it was not quite what Madison had wished for, but she hugged Cash and said, “Next time, Cash, we will do better. We had to start somewhere. I screwed up.”



Mrs. Anderson watched from the sidelines as the girls competed. Madison's smile did not match the way she carried herself. She put her hand on Madison's shoulder and said, "For your first time in the ring, you two did well. I'm very proud of you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Anderson. That means a lot," Madison said. "What happened in the Toy Group? Did you win?"

"Not this time. Maybe next time. There were some great dogs in there today. There's always another show," Mrs. Anderson replied.

CHAPTER 16



That summer, Madison and Amy spent a lot of time together. They laughed at funny things their dogs had done and talked about the next shows, toys they had bought for their dogs, or places they wanted to go.

A few weeks later, more advanced classes began at the training center. When Madison saw a new student with her dog, she remembered how it felt to be new to something and try to figure it out. This time, instead of waiting for someone to speak to her first, she crossed the mat and stood next to the girl with the Basset Hound. “Hi. Do you want me to show you an easy way to get him to do that?” Madison held a treat above the dog’s head, far enough back that he had to sit to be able to see it. “So, try this,” she said, as she demonstrated. The dog quickly sat, and Madison dropped the treat into its eager mouth. “He’s a cute dog.”

The girl smiled. Madison had discovered that asking someone a question or giving an honest compliment were good ways to start a conversation.

“We just moved here. My name is Stacy, and this is Brutus,” the girl said as she patted the head of her dog.

“Hi, Stacy! I haven’t lived here long, either, but I’ve learned to love this place. There is a lot to do here if you’re athletic—hiking, basketball, and such. Most of our school activities revolve around the athletics department. I played a little soccer but discovered it’s not my thing.”

“Does this town have a skateboard park? I used to do it all the time. There’s a sense of freedom with wind in your face and that element of risk thing.”

“I don’t know of one, and I don’t know if I could do that, but it sounds like fun. Maybe my friend Amy will know of a place. Would you like to meet her?” Madison gave a nod to the girl at the end of the line.

“Sure, I’d like that. Anyway, I bet you could do it with practice and a good board,” Stacy said.

Seconds later, after introductions, Madison, Amy, and Stacy moved toward the exit.

The three stood talking for a while, with dogs at their sides. Occasionally, they were interrupted by Stacy’s dog wanting to explore the others. When her ride pulled up, Stacy sheepishly waved goodbye. Amy and Madison sat on the bench to wait for their own escorts when Amy said, “Wow! Look at you talking to strangers and showing them the ropes. That’s so cool.”



The smell of popcorn permeated the air of Amy’s bedroom. The half-empty bowl and strewn bits sat next to Stacy on the floor. Madison and Amy draped themselves across the bed, cellphones in their hands.

“Did you see this?” Stacy passed her phone to Amy. The screen was filled with photos from a tattoo artist. “I think I’ll get a tattoo,” Stacy said.

“Yuck. No. That’s like putting something out on the web. It’s hard to remove and it really never goes away.” Amy shuttered.

“Well, I like ‘em. My brother’s friend paints, and he says they are really fine art,” defended Stacy.

Amy passed the phone to Madison, who scrolled through the designs. “I might think about it. What would you get?”

“Maybe a tiger or a dragon. Something wild and free,” Stacy answered.

“Really? If I ever, and I don’t intend to, but if I ever, I’d get hearts, flowers, or a butterfly.

No, I'd get one of Cash. Not that I could; Dad wouldn't let me," Madison replied.

Amy scrambled from the bed and adjusted her waistband. "Mom wouldn't let me either. It's against our religion. You'll have to get your parents' permission, anyway. There are laws about it, and I think you have to be at least eighteen." She stretched and yawned. "So, I'm still hungry. Let's go to the kitchen and see what's there."

The thumping sound of their feet as they descended the stairway was followed by the sound of the fridge and cupboard doors opening. Madison and Stacy took seats at the table while Amy searched for something more substantial than popcorn.

"Mom bought me those leopard pattern leggings yesterday. She let me order a coral-colored purse from Amazon," Amy boasted. "I'll show you on my phone."

"Oh, man, I love those! They'd look great with my boots. But I'm more of a dark horse because I like black," Stacy commented.

"You have the cutest clothes," Madison complimented.

"You could borrow them. You're about my size," Amy offered.

Madison shook her head. "I like clothes, but they aren't that important to me. So, have you heard about the preview of the movie 'Little Women'? It looks good."

"I wonder how much it will be like the book? I loved that story," Amy declared.

Stacy Googled it and read about it. "I'm more of an action movie fan. I like strong women who can kick butt. Or science fiction because some of that stuff really happens in the future."

"I just want a good story. Something to laugh or cry in. But that's easy. I cry when the dog gets hurt, the boy leaves the girl, or the chicken dies." Madison joked. "Soft touch, I guess."

"That's funny." Stacy quipped. "I wouldn't have guessed that just by looking at ya. You seem to have a tougher side."

"Thanks, I think."

The kitchen door burst open to reveal Amy's mother struggling with bags of groceries. "On the phones again I see," she said with the look of

a traffic cop about to write a ticket. “Amy, please put your phone away and help me get the rest of the stuff out of the car so I can get supper on the table before my bridge club meeting tonight,” she said. The girls quickly complied.

In the following weeks, the three girls spent more time together. They swam at the indoor pool, watched movies, ate pizza, took long walks with their dogs, and signed up for more training classes.

CHAPTER 17



Crimson leaves crunched beneath her feet, and Madison pulled her sweatshirt from her shoulders. Why does summer always seem to go by so fast, she wondered, as she rushed to the school cafeteria in Skyview High where Stacy and Amy were already seated. Stacy, being energetic and persistent, immediately commandeered the conversation. She was always joking around, but this time, she was serious.

“So, I wish you guys would try robotics club. They have a good one here. You should see the cool stuff we made at my old school,” Stacy said, then attacked her sandwich, hardly waiting for a reply.

“I might think about it if it wasn’t for debate team,” Amy replied between sips from her straw and glances at her phone.

“Yeah, she should be a lawyer or a detective. She knows how to get someone to spill the beans,” Madison chirped, grinning at Amy.

“Oh, Stacy, I asked like you suggested. Mom said I can have friends over for a Halloween party,” Amy said.

“Super. I love costumes. What do you think, Madison?”

“Awesome! I’m in. We can help you plan and decorate.”

“I have some ideas, but can use your help,” Stacy said.

Amy held up her phone. “I’ll look for some games. I can go online at home to find some other ideas. We can figure out who to invite later.”

“I think we had a box of decorations when we moved, if you want them,” said Stacy.

“I’m up for whatever you need me for,” Madison joined in.

“It’s a deal. I’m excited. Can’t wait. It’s gonna be epic.”

Then the bell rang, and the students scattered back to class.

What a trio we are, Madison thought as she headed to her locker. *Amy seems older than her years. Stacy is always the first to offer to help with homework. I just wish she’d stop trying to get me to join her robotics club, but I wish I had some of her carefree attitude. At least we all like dogs,* she mused.



The month slipped away like a moon behind a cloud.

Madison, Amy, and Stacy lounged in lawn chairs beneath the awning of Amy’s motorhome at the Lake City Dog Show.

“It’s so much fun that we all get to show our dogs, even though we each like different parts of the sport,” Madison quipped.

“I was so proud of Bella when she was chosen from her class and won points toward her championship,” Amy bragged.

“You should be; that was a big class, and you showed her so well,” Madison encouraged.

“Keep gabbing. I’m headed to watch the rally and obedience, and those rings are way across the grounds,” Stacy said as she rose from her chair. “See ya after.”

Cash sat at Madison’s feet and plucked a mouthful of grass. Suddenly, he stood and tugged at the leash when another Papillion was led past. Madison reached for him and placed him in her lap.

“Well, at least now he wants to play. He’s gotten over his stage fright,” Amy joked.

Madison stood and put Cash on the grooming table and combed him. He arched his back as if to direct her comb to the left, then lifted his hind foot and tried to scratch.

“Not now, Cash,” Madison scolded before turning back to Amy. “I’m still trying to figure him out. Sometimes he glides in the ring, head and tail up, his ears fluttering as if he can fly. Next time he wants to play around and act silly, just when I think I’ve gained his trust and am in

control. I'm beginning to accept second-place ribbons with less enthusiasm."

"I think he just gets excited when people applaud. He must think it's just for him," Amy joked. "Anyway, Bella and I are due in the ring. I know it's tougher to place now that you've graduated to the more advanced class. Second out of a tough class is still pretty good."

Madison watched Amy and Bella weave their way toward ring six when Mrs. Anderson strode up carrying her dog.

"Couldn't help but overhear a bit of that conversation. What's up? Oh, I see, another brown second-place ribbon. Don't forget you've also placed first before. Keep working, and soon you'll join the master class. I know you've got it in you."

"I'm not happy with the blonde girl with the Shetland Sheepdog. She beats me almost every time," Madison said with a disgusted tone, as Mrs. Anderson was putting a dog in its carrier.

Mrs. Anderson straightened up and tugged her jacket back in place. "Don't allow yourself to think like that. You get to choose how you think, and that will affect how you feel." She leaned against the grooming table and put the comb and brush back into the compartments of the grooming box. "Madison, showing dogs is called a sport. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. It's important to handle either with grace. What I hope for you is that you learn from the more skilled and develop a discerning eye to appreciate the finer attributes of each dog. Don't give up, my dear. Your time will come."

Madison put her arm around Mrs. Anderson's waist and hugged her. A sense of comfort and peace settled over her. "Thanks. I needed to hear that. I'm glad I have someone like you to talk to about all of this. Back to the practice ring, I guess."

"Well, we talk a lot about the little stuff, so we can talk about the big stuff too. I will always be here for you when you need me, and so will your folks."

Madison took a soda from the cooler and sat in the canvas folding chair as Mrs. Anderson continued. "I think that, sometimes, it is easier to talk to someone besides your parents, and other times, they are the ones

who need to hear your concerns. You are smart enough to know which time is right for each,” Mrs. Anderson said. She stood and removed a dog from the crate and slipped a lead over its head. “I’m glad they let me take you to these shows. You help me get my dogs to the breed ring on time. And I make sure you get to your showmanship ring when you should.”

CHAPTER 18



The red truck pulled to a stop in front of Amy's home. A brilliant harvest moon illuminated the night. Madison jumped out and grabbed her rolling suitcase from behind the cab. She waved to Amy peering out the huge picture window.

Amy flung open the door. "Hi! I've been waiting for you. I'm excited about our sleepover, but we've got quite a bit left to do. I wanted you to help me with the final touches."

"Where's Stacy?" Madison asked. "This party was her idea, after all."

"She'll be late. Her dog was at the vet. They just picked him up."

"I'm putting my stuff in your room," Madison said as she rushed down the hall. "I'll be right back. How many people will be here, anyway?" she called over her shoulder.

"Not sure. Maybe a dozen."

Amy picked up a bag of Gummy Worms and arranged them across the chocolate cupcakes on the refreshment table. When Madison returned, Amy handed Madison a bag of candies.

"Put those in that pumpkin dish, will you? There are a few more things to put up before everyone gets here."

The windows of the Craftsman-style home gleamed as the girls draped a silken spiderweb between the pillars of the front porch. Jack-o'-lanterns glared from the steps.

Finished decorating, they went to Amy's room at the top of the stairs. They laid their costumes across the bed. Amy said, "I forgot to ask you; some of us are going to the movies tomorrow afternoon. Stacy and Josh are going."

"Josh? All the more reason not to go!" Madison said, avoiding Amy's questioning look.

"Didn't you see that touchdown he scored last Friday? All the girls are still talking about it. So, what's the deal? I know he likes you."

Madison ducked her head. "A few months ago, he tried to kiss me. I wanted him to. Then I felt all funny, and I knew I just wasn't ready," she stammered and blushed.

"I knew there was more to that story!"

"Well, look at what happened with my folks. I didn't want things to change between us, but like, I guess it did anyway."

Noticing Madison's dejected look, Amy gave her a quick hug. "Oh, Madison, it doesn't have to be that way. Look at my mom and dad." Amy sat on the bed and put her shoes back on. "The pastor leading my youth group says it's natural to be attracted to boys, but we should stick together as a group to avoid temptation."

"I suppose. Let's drop it. I told you you should be a detective or something. You always get me to spill everything. Anyway, I'm not going. I saw that movie already. I'll go next time."

Amy and Madison put on costumes and scampered downstairs when the bell rang. "Wow, look who just arrived. It's Officer Stacy herself!" Madison blurted when Amy opened the door.

"Yes! I came to save you from having a boring party," Stacy said, as she spun to show off her costume.

"Well, most police officers I know don't have purple and blue streaks in their hair. But you can save me from being uncivil to Josh," Madison grumbled.

"Maybe Amy should take that assignment. Police women should have more color in their hair. By the way; there's a witch, a pirate, and a penguin getting out of another car at the end of the drive," Stacy said.

The doorbell rang again. The three girls nearly collided as they

rushed to the door. Guests filtered in. A few minutes later, Madison answered the door. It was Josh and a friend, dressed as a mummy and a skeleton, respectively. She felt compelled to say hello.

“Hi Madison—great costume.”

“Thanks.”

“We’ll have a prize for the best costume. There are games to play,” Amy said as she greeted more of her friends.

While some guests engaged in the card games, others hung in clusters at the refreshment table, outside on the deck, or around the pool, despite a nip in the air.

Madison organized the teams for the balloon sweep race. “Each team must use a broom to race with an air-filled balloon around an obstacle course. If it pops, the team must start again,” she explained.

“There are more than a dozen people here,” Amy told Madison as they lined up the teams.

“Who is the kid in the mask? The one with shorts?” Madison asked.

“I don’t know,” Amy said. “Do you know the one in the skinny jeans and high tops?”

“Maybe Stacy does. She knows everybody. They came in with others from her robotics club.”

In no time, participants in the race got into the competitive spirit, encouraging each other with cheers and laughter.

Next came the candy corn toss. Teams took turns tossing the candies, trying to get them in the plastic pumpkins.

When time was up, Madison counted the candies in the pumpkins. “I think you guys are eating more candy than trying to hit the target.”

They moved to the area where the next games were set up.

“In this area, we are playing a game called Pass the Peanut on a Spoon. The spoon handle goes in your mouth and you pass the peanut to the next person. The trick is, you can’t use your hands,” Madison explained. “Or you can go over by Amy and bob for apples.”

Most of the boys headed in Amy’s direction, where apples floated in a tub of water. In seconds, the light-hearted rivalry between the boys took over and things took a turn for the worse.

Madison offered to help Amy mop up water splashed from the tub. “Thanks, but I’ve got this. Things were going just fine, until one boy pushed Josh’s head deeper into the tub. At least he was a good sport about it, but things are not going quite according to plan here,” Amy told Madison. “There are more people here than we invited.”

Someone turned the music volume up.

“Madison, go turn that down. The neighbors might complain,” Amy said.

She did as she was asked, but was feeling like the party might be getting out of control. She grabbed Amy, returning from putting the mop away, and they cornered Stacy.

“Stacy, you help me announce and organize the costume contest. Madison, can you manage the punch bowl? It’s got a crowd. Whew, this party is more work than fun!” The three friends laughed and had a quick hug.

‘Officer’ Stacy pretended to take people into custody and pulled costumed attendees to the middle of the floor. Amy prepared the rest of the crowd for a vote.

Madison headed to the table where she noticed the three kids that she had surmised were Stacy’s friends. They were clustered around the bowl of orange sherbet punch.

The largest of the three had something in his hand and was holding it above the bowl. Madison recognized the shape of the bottle and the color of the label. It was vodka. She strode over to them. “That’s not going to happen,” she said.

“Aw, come on, Madison. We just want to liven up the place.”

“Not here, you won’t! And look, if anybody here gets drunk and starts to break things, we’ll know exactly who to blame, right?” she said.

“I don’t think Stacy would care,” another of the boys argued.

“I think you’re wrong about that. Besides, I care, and we aren’t going to take any chances,” Madison said firmly.

“Something going on here, Madison?” Josh asked as he stepped between Stacy and the three.

“No, I think we have an understanding.”

“Come on guys, let’s just go,” the leader of the group snarled as he put the bottle away. “This party is lame, anyway.”

Madison and Josh went to the punch bowl and poured themselves a cup. It tasted normal. “Whew!” she said. They heard the cheers and laughter from the costume contest.

“You handled that really well,” Josh said, as he sat his cup on the counter.

“Thanks. Before I moved here, I learned that when I’m somewhere, if someone’s doing the wrong thing, I can leave, speak up, or suffer any consequence. So...” She winced at the memory. “Go have some fun now. The contest is starting.” Madison motioned toward the assembled group, but she fixed her eyes on Josh.

“Ok, but I have your back,” he said, looking over his shoulder at Madison as he blended into the crowd.

She took a deep breath, watched him cross the floor and splashed punch on the counter as she refilled the punch bowl.

Stacy held a magic wand that she absconded from a costumed witch. She pointed to the finalists in the costume contest. “Make some noise. Who thinks this is the winner of the funniest costume?” Repeating the same phrase, she then pointed to the second finalist. Applause and whoops followed. “And the winner is Andy, as the Crazy Cat Lady! Here is your gift certificate for one large pizza.”

“Now, we’ll choose the scariest costume! Our two finalists are: the bleeding ghost and the unchained skeleton. Number one or number two?”

“Whoop, whoop,” Josh yelled when Stacy waved the wand at his best friend in the skeleton costume.

“Our bleeding ghost wins! You get to haunt the local theater. Here are your two tickets, Mr. Ghost.”

“Finally, we choose the most creative costume,” and she held her wand over the gladiator. He grinned and poked at Stacy with his sword. A mock wand to sword fight followed.

At the center of the circle was Jake, in a shark costume. “Wait,” he said. His arm appeared through a slit at the side and he waved his empty hand. Suddenly, four cards appeared. “Card shark,” he said. Laughter and

groans were followed by applause. “Well, that’s appropriate. You win a gift certificate for the burger place. They also have fish sandwiches,” laughed Amy.

After all the guests left, Amy, Madison, and Stacy picked up paper plates and cups. They put things in order before climbing the stairs to take off their costumes and settle in for their sleepover. The girls shim-mied into their nightclothes.

“I saw a help-wanted sign at the grooming salon today. I wonder what kind of help they need. If I didn’t have so much to do, I’d check it out,” said Stacy.

Hmm, thought Madison.

Madison was nearly asleep when she heard Amy’s parents return. Bella crept into the room and lay beside Amy’s bed. Bella snored.

Madison’s thoughts drifted. *What a night. I thought I’d be asleep by now. There is just too much to think about.*

Her curiosity about the sign Stacy had mentioned didn’t help.

CHAPTER 19



Madison's father loaded her belongings into the pickup while she stood on the bottom step of Amy's porch. Amy sat on the top step with her arm around Bella as they said their slow goodbye.

"All right girls, I need food. Let's go!"

Madison hopped in the truck, and he drove off to his favorite waffle house.

The usual crowd had already dispersed. As he opened the door, the aroma of bacon and freshly brewed coffee wafted into the air, and his stomach grumbled. A waitress greeted them and led them to a table.

"Coffee, black, please," he said. He watched as a toddler at a nearby table threw bits of waffle to the floor and a lady and her companion were sipping glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice. He ordered a waffle to go with his coffee, but Madison only asked for a hot chocolate since she had already eaten. When their order arrived, they sat in silence for a few minutes. Maple syrup dripped from Mr. Taylor's mouth as he shoveled in a big bite of waffle.

Madison scooped off a bit of the whipped cream with her spoon and sipped her hot chocolate.

"Dad, I want to stop by the grooming salon. I heard about a new conditioning spray that I think I'd like to try."

"Sure. It's on the way home. We need to pick up more food for Cash, anyway."

After filling his belly, Madison's father paid the bill and drove to the grooming salon. Madison led the way in.

"Hey, Madison," Max said. "I was just going to call you."

"What's up?" Madison asked.

"Well, the yard work business must have slowed by now, and I was wondering if you'd like to give us a hand here. Just a few hours or so after school."

Madison, looking at her father for approval, said, "I'd love that. What do you think, Dad?"

"Your call, if you think it won't interfere with school."

"Thanks, Max! I'll start Monday."

"Dad?" Madison looked to him for the ride she knew she'd need.

"Sure. But right now, let's get home." He patted his stomach. "I need a Sunday nap after all those waffles."



Later that week, Madison was working at the kennel. She was lost in thought about a talk she needed to have with Mrs. Anderson. The stainless-steel bowls clattered, dogs barked, and steam from the hot water in the sink tickled her nose. Madison whirled, water splashing as the door banged open behind her. Madison's hand flew to her heaving chest.

Mrs. Anderson's voice was a pitch higher, and her words came in a volley. "I have great news! A dog show, to be held in a few months, will have scholarships for winners in the Junior Showmanship category!" She exclaimed shrilly as her words tumbled over each other.

Madison dried her hands on the apron at her waist. She put down the dish in her hands and stared at Mrs. Anderson.

"Cash and I have done okay so far, but I moved to the more advanced Open Senior class. Do you think we have a chance?" Madison said.

"Question is, do *you* think you have a chance? See it in your mind's eye and make it happen."

Madison was sorting her options as she went about feeding the smaller dogs. Mrs. Anderson tended to the larger dogs on the other side. When the dogs had been fed, the kennel closed for the night. Madison

followed Mrs. Anderson into the office at the front of the kennels.

With her back to Mrs. Anderson, she took a deep breath. “I really need to talk to you about something, and I’m almost afraid to do it.” Her voice broke as she finished, “I saw Max this week and she offered me a chance to work at the grooming salon, but I’m not sure I can do it all—school, volunteering, and working here.” Madison turned to face Mrs. Anderson, still afraid of seeing Mrs. Anderson’s reaction.

“I would really like to try it, but I don’t want to like make you mad or hurt your feelings.” Madison’s voice broke. She fidgeted as she waited for a response.

“Oh, Madison, Maxine talked to me about offering you the job. I want you to do what is best for you.” Mrs. Anderson took one of Madison’s hands and held it between her own and smiled at her.

“Come on, Madison. I want you to have a chance to say goodbye to the pups. They’re eight weeks old now, and about to go to their new homes.”

Madison and Mrs. Anderson opened the gate to the whelping room and were ambushed by the three Papillon pups. They sat on the floor and each held a wriggling ball of fluff.

“It’s nice to see you relax. You’re always so busy, Mrs. Anderson.”

“I spend a lot of time here after hours.” She put down the pup she’d held and picked up another. “This one leaves tomorrow.”

“Bet you’ll be glad about that. A little more cash for your pocket.”

“That’s never my goal, and that’s good, because it usually doesn’t happen. Testing, vaccines, food, vet bills, and entry fees all add up. I do it because I love seeing the pups develop. I have a need to answer the challenge of seeing how I can improve each litter, though I don’t raise that many, as you know.”

Mrs. Anderson released the puppy she had been holding and watched the three puppies tumble and play. They took turns bouncing into and out of Madison’s lap.

“Well, they’ll be gone soon. I bet you’ll miss them.”

“Yes, but they all get great homes. The best one is going to a show home.”

“Why don’t you keep him?”

“I don’t always have enough time to travel and to promote this pup through advertising. That little guy is special. He deserves more than I can give him right now.”

Mrs. Anderson retrieved the pup she’d held earlier and stroked his ear. “I’ve learned that whether it’s a friend or family member you’ve quarreled with, or even a puppy, if you really love them, you want them to be happy even if it’s not with you. This little male is going to be picked up tomorrow morning. He will be sitting in a new lap loving someone else then.” She picked up the black-and-white bundle, held it to her face and inhaled. “I love the smell of puppy breath—isn’t that crazy?”

“Me too! It’s fun watching them play. They are so full of energy. I could sit here all night,” Madison said, beaming at Mrs. Anderson.

“Sometimes I do, and pay for it in the morning. Let’s lock up and I’ll drive you home.”

That evening, Madison stood in her bedroom staring at her ribbon board. “The blue and purple ones are yours, Cash, and these are mine.” She gazed at a variety of ribbon styles and colors in pink, brown, light green, or silver gray. She pulled down the rose-colored first place rosette and ran her fingers across the gold embossed detail. Then she took a trophy from the shelf above and dusted it.

“It’s been a year now, and we’ve won quite a few second places, Cash.” Her brow furrowed for a moment. She would never forget when she brought her dog back to the judge on the wrong side and finished without a ribbon, or when she crowded the handler in front.

Wow! I’ve learned from my mistakes both inside and outside of the show ring. I’m glad Amy found a rescue group and we can both do some work there. The fundraiser we volunteered for will be fun. Helping others gives me satisfaction and I like to share things I’ve learned. Even my grades have improved. Madison sorted her thoughts, stood a little taller, and smiled at her reflection in the mirror. Then she snapped off the light and crawled beneath the covers.

CHAPTER 20



Morning sun filtered through the gauzy curtains in Madison's room. She slapped the button on the snooze alarm for the second time and wiped the sleep from her eyes. Cash stood on his hind feet at the side of her bed. She lifted him up for a snuggle, stroked his furry ear, and gave him a smooch as he settled in next to her. Her father rapped on the door and peeked into the bedroom. Madison pulled the quilt over her head and wriggled into the darkness. She heard her father cross the room and felt him pull the covers back.

"Come on, Maddie. We've got to get going. We're going to be late."

"I'm not going, Dad. I just can't."

"Come on. You know you want to see your mom." He sat down on the bed, took Cash from beneath the covers and placed him on his lap. "Honey, I know this is difficult, but you've done hard things before and handled them just fine. We have to remember the good times and think positively."

Madison turned her face away from her father as she reached from beneath the covers and repositioned the misaligned clock on the nightstand.

"Well, sometimes I feel like she's the kid and I'm the adult." Madison stretched her legs and adjusted the covers, wiggling her toes beneath them. She rolled her eyes. "It was so humiliating when she got pulled over the second time for drunk driving with me in the car. I was scared."

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Sitting next to her father, she stroked Cash as he sat on her dad's broad lap.

"Your mom made some bad choices. We've got to remember that alcoholism is a disease, and she is going to Alcoholics Anonymous. Give her a chance." He patted Maddie's knee, then rubbed his huge hand across his forehead.

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?" Madison asked in her most sarcastic voice. Her father sighed as if he wasn't sure himself but was going to give it his best shot.

He hugged her and handed Cash back as he rose to his feet. He left the room, gently closing the door. Madison sat on the bed for several minutes before she put Cash on the floor. Hesitantly, Madison crossed the room to her dresser and selected her favorite shirt. Within minutes, she was off toward the kitchen to grab a banana on her way to the truck.

The engine was already running when Madison pulled herself up and onto the seat. They drove in silence for several miles as she jiggled her leg and tapped her fingers. She checked her phone several times.

"She's trying, Maddie, and we can't stand in the way of her progress." He kept his eyes on the road, but his voice was more persuasive than before.

"Even after everything that's happened, you still care about her, don't you, Dad?"

"Yes, I do Maddie. She gave me you."

Madison tugged at the skin of the banana and then placed it on the seat beside her instead of taking a bite, as she had intended. A police car passed them with its lights ablaze and siren screaming. She silently watched it streak up the road ahead.

"The morning of the accident, I missed the bus. I guess I always thought it might have been my fault, because she insisted on driving me to school."

"It wasn't your fault, Madison, but that was almost two years ago. It's time to move on, honey."

"I know that now, but at first, there was all the drama. Then I just felt sick and couldn't figure out why. I wasn't sure if I was mad at myself,

the car, the tree, or her. I'm not sure I even knew I was mad."

"Well, you know it now, so you get to decide if you're ready to let it go." He glanced in his rearview mirror and pulled into the parking lot of the coffee shop instead of the drive-through. He parked the truck and could see that Madison needed a minute to compose herself.

He handed her some money from his billfold to buy some time. "It may not be the same as before," he said, as he squeezed her shoulder, "but we can still treat one another as family."

Madison slid over to give him a tentative hug. Why she couldn't stay mad at him, she would never understand. She put the money in her purse and slung the strap over her shoulder. She waited while people unloaded from a car that had just parked alongside them and then glanced back at her father before pulling the door handle.

As she slid from the truck, she noticed college kids inside the coffee shop with their computers already lit. The huge windows were as good for peering in as they were for watching passing pedestrians and busy traffic from the other side. Backpacks littered the floor as students hunched over the tables, nursing beverages and staring at screens.

Madison slipped through the door of the coffee shop, and the aroma of fresh pastry and espresso relieved some of her apprehension. Glancing at the crowd, she saw a nice mix of students and seniors before she spotted her mother at a corner table. Madison waved and then stopped at the counter to order a mocha and a muffin. She stared at the worn paint on the concrete floor and perused a basket of individually wrapped chocolates.

Her thoughts still churned as she waited in line. Sometimes she felt happy to be with her mom and, other times, she just felt like she had earlier this morning: conflicted. Madison wrinkled her forehead as she mentally explored what she was feeling. As she thought about the situation, she grudgingly had to accept the fact that Daniel even existed, and at times, bit her tongue to be civil when he was present.

Credit is due to him for insisting that Mom participate in an alcohol treatment program. Hopefully, Mom is no longer hiding bottles of vodka, because I didn't see any there on my last visit, she remembered.

She had delayed for as long as she could, so she picked up the ceramic cup of mocha and stared at the heart-shaped design on the top. As she made her way to join her mother, it felt as if her brain had been working overtime for months. She was so weary of it.

Lately, though, she had spent more time with her mother. Sometimes it felt awkward, and sometimes it felt as though they had never been apart. At first, they went to the coffee shop and sipped mochas as they talked. Then, occasionally, they had dinner together. She had even spent a weekend at her mother's new house, and Daniel left them alone. How would it be today? Madison pondered. At least her mother was smiling. She seemed to do that more often these days.

Having used every delay tactic she could think of, Madison pulled out a chair and said a silent prayer that the tension and resentment she felt would disappear. She took a seat across from her mother and unwrapped the blueberry muffin. A fat berry popped from the pastry and rolled across the table toward her mother.

After an awkward silence, Madison's mother said, "So, how are things going for you, Madison?"

"Fine, I guess. My grades are good, if that's what you mean," Madison muttered.

Madison saw her mother flinch at the tone of her voice before she draped her sweater over an adjacent chair. She pointed to a painting of a waterfall that hung on the wall next to the table. "Look, honey. It's done by a local artist."

Madison only nodded but thought their lives had been just as turbulent as the water in the painting.

Her mother adjusted her chair to sit directly across from her. She rested each manicured hand softly on the table and her eyes gazed tenderly on Madison's face as she asked, "Well, how about that pup? How is he?"

Madison leaned forward in her chair and told her mom about Cash's escapades. Her face grew more animated and the creases in her forehead ironed out when she spoke of her funny little dog.

Her mother laughed when she heard Cash had been fearful of a

pinecone. “I guess we’re all afraid of something.”

When she ran out of stories about Cash, she rested her elbow on the table and propped her head against her hand.

Madison sipped her mocha. She picked at the crumbs of her muffin that were still attached to the wrapper. “Maybe next time we could try that new restaurant. I heard it was pretty good.”

“Well, I can afford to take you to better places now, since I just got a promotion at my job, Maddie.” She pulled on a strand of her thin blonde hair.

Madison noticed a trace of new color in her mother’s skin.

“Oh, Mom, that’s great. I’m so happy for you.”

They quietly chit-chatted about the new job and Madison’s work at the kennel for a while longer. The earlier crowd had thinned out and the student nearest them put her tablet into her backpack and departed.

Madison watched her mother glance nervously around the coffee shop. The tables nearby had emptied, and the barista had escaped into the restroom. The only sound remaining was the hiss of the espresso machine.

They both rested comfortably, having satisfied their morning hunger. Her mother sat silently for a few minutes; her position now mirrored Madison. Then she said, “Maddie, there’s more that I want to say, and some of it feels uncomfortable. It’s kind of funny that you mentioned pinecones.” She shifted in her chair and, with both elbows on the table, she covered her eyes with her hands. “The last thing I remember about the wreck, before I lost consciousness, was that pinecones from the tree that we hit were falling onto the rumpled hood of our car.”

There was an awkward pause. She removed her hands from her eyes and looked again, directly at Madison. “Oh, honey, I want you to know that I’m truly sorry for everything I put you through. I know I was wrong. I was so unhappy with myself and didn’t know how to fix me, so I drank, which only added more guilt. My decisions and behavior caused us harm; financially, socially, and spiritually. I own that. I made bad decisions that hurt us all, and I’d do anything if I could change them.”

Madison sat silently.

There was something in her mother's eyes this time that seemed different, a softness mixed with pain. Madison had heard it before, but this time, it seemed like she really meant it. She was stunned as her mother continued, "I can't change what happened, Maddie, but I hope you'll give me another chance." She reached across the table and took Madison's hand, still warm from its grasp on the ceramic cup she had cradled. "I hope you can forgive me."

Madison's lips turned gently up into a hesitant smile. "I forgive you, Mom."

When her dad's red pickup cruised into the parking lot, Madison and her mother stood and pushed their chairs beneath the table as they prepared to leave. Her mother circled the table and cupped Madison's face in her hands, tipping it up until their eyes engaged. "I love you, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll see you again soon." Madison hugged her quickly, ducked her head to hide the swirling emotion, and hurried out the door to the pickup. She smiled broadly when she noticed the 'thumbs up' he gave her as she opened the door of the truck.

CHAPTER 21



Madison accepted the job at the grooming salon.

Entry fees and travel expenses for dog shows cost a bit, like any other entertainment, and Madison decided she wanted to be more responsible. *Now I can pay for some of them. I don't want Dad to pay for everything*, was her positive thought.

Since the salon was close to her new school, she could walk there when classes were over. She could answer the phone, clean and sanitize holding areas, and stock shelves. She liked to mix the shampoos with warm water, so the dogs would not be chilled when it was applied. The variety of products used in the salon surprised her. There were some shampoos for flea treatments, dry skin, oily coats, and even one that was hypoallergenic. She would unscrew the lid and deeply inhale the scent of the crème rinse she liked.

After a few weeks, Madison learned how to brush out matted coats and dry some of the dogs after their baths. She remembered different kinds of coats require different brushes, and she picked just the right one for the job at hand. “When can I use the scissors and clippers?” she asked.

Max said, “You always start at the bottom and work up. That’s just the way it is in life, unless you get a good education. Then you have a better chance. The more you know or learn, the more you earn. There are schools that teach grooming.”

The groomer at a nearby table overheard and winked at Madison. “I

can bring my Standard Poodle in tomorrow, if you don't mind, Max. We could let her try running the clippers on the body with a finishing blade. I'll help guide her. It wouldn't hurt to have extra hands doing some of that during the busy Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons."

Sometimes you must ask for what you want, Madison thought to herself.

The next day, the assistant brought in her Poodle. She showed Madison how to properly hold the clipper. With the clipper turned off, she practiced moving it over the Poodle's body in long, smooth strokes while she shifted herself around the stationary dog. Madison hadn't expected how much vibration she would feel when the clipper was switched on. She went over the dog several times to get a smooth finish. After about twenty minutes, she looked at the dog and was proud of herself. She exclaimed, "Max, check this out! What do you think?"

"Madison, I'm amazed at how quickly you picked up the technique. Most people don't get it that easily," Max said.

The following week, Madison was working on a Scottish Terrier that kept pulling its foot from her grasp as she tried to clip the nails. Suddenly, a drop of blood appeared on the rubber mat below its foot. "Max, I've hurt him. He's bleeding. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to," Madison groaned, apologizing to the squirming dog.

Max came to the table and took the dog's foot in her hands. She applied a powder and the bleeding quickly stopped. The nail had been clipped too short and was cut slightly into the vein.

"Oh! I feel awful. I feel so bad for him." Madison backed away from the table in tears. Max gave her a hug.

Madison's face drained of color. She leaned against the grooming table as Max worked on the dog. Max patted the dog, placed its foot back on the table and said, "These toenails are so black, it's hard to know where to cut, and, with him tugging, I can see how this happened. Don't beat yourself up. He's alright."



The Christmas season arrived, and they had decorated the pet grooming

salon with green and white paw prints, stockings with dog treats, and a basket filled with calendars featuring dog photos. The scent of cinnamon spice wafted from a huge candle sitting on the reception desk.

The table in the break room was filled with boxes of candy and homemade cookies and Christmas decorations. Busy groomers hardly made time to take a break, but periodically grabbed a snack and continued with the job at hand. Grateful clients were generous with both tips and gifts.

A light, drifting snow covered the street outside. Where the dust from the pavement was exposed, the ruts turned the color of milk chocolate.

The holiday-themed rug at the door was often covered in muddy tracks, and wet floors had to be cleaned frequently so no one would slip and fall. The compartments for the dogs needed cleaning more often, too, because people would not let their dogs out for their bathroom break before bringing them to the shop. It would be a welcome relief when the busy season allowed for respite.

Tired from trying to balance study, parties, and work, Madison walked as if her feet were encased in concrete. She sat on a stool as she hung new bandanas, collars, and dog toys at the bottom of the display. Max cruised through the frosted doors carrying a small box wrapped in red foil paper. “When you’ve finished hanging those, you might like to look at this. Most of our clients have picked up their pet’s Christmas gifts by now.” The golden ribbon on top had little bells attached that jingled as Max handed her the package. “I got you something. This is special, so keep a close eye on it. I hope it brings you good luck.”

It was a rolled leather leash made of the thinnest, softest, most pliable white leather she had ever seen. Attached to the lead were crystal beads in the colors of the ocean: lapis blue and turquoise. “This matches my new jacket perfectly! I love turquoise!” Madison gathered the leash in her hands, then let it unfurl to admire it. “It’s perfect for Cash, too.” Madison bolted from the stool and squeezed Max around the waist.

CHAPTER 22



On the morning before Christmas Eve, Madison's mother picked her up. Her house was decorated with lights, silver garlands, a lighted snowman, and a Christmas tree. They brushed snow from their feet and hung their coats near the back door. Madison put her suitcase in the room that she had learned to call her own. After settling in, they played some video games and then took a break.

"You've gotten rusty, Madison. You used to beat me every time," her mother teased.

"Well, I don't play much now. Too many other things to do," Madison replied. She got up from the floor and wandered to the Christmas tree. She picked up a small package and shook it before settling back down on the sofa next to her mother.

"Something smells good in there," Madison said, nodding towards the kitchen. "You should've seen the cake I tried to bake," she confided. "It smelled divine, but it fell apart when I tried to get it out of the pan."

"Well, did you grease and flour the pan first, or put parchment paper on the bottom of it?" Madison's mother asked.

Madison smiled. "Maybe..." Her mother laughed as she moved to the kitchen and rummaged through the spices in their rack.

"Let's have some practice, just in case."

Madison and her mother were cutting sugar cookies from the buttery dough, a hint of vanilla in the air, when Daniel came through the kitchen

doorway holding his hands behind his back. His face had a playful smile. “Well, should I put these under the tree, or do you girls want to open them now?” He brought his hands forward and there were two small, bright green jewelry boxes with gold ribbons.

Madison looked away, so her mother said, “Under the tree. We’ll open them after dinner.”

After a delicious dinner of turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, and many other goodies, the three of them settled in the living room. Madison gave her gifts first: a silk scarf in brilliant pink with silver stars for her mother, and a pair of socks for the guy she liked to call sarcastically, “Mr. Wrong.” Then Daniel bent to pick up the gifts that he had placed beneath the glittering tree earlier.

He perched on the arm of the chair next to her mother and handed the first present to her. She was all smiles as she tore open the box and saw a brilliant heart-shaped diamond necklace. Then he handed Madison the second box.

“You are next, kiddo. Good things come in small packages, and this seemed perfect for you. I hope you’ll like it.” Madison gingerly pulled the ribbon on the box and gently opened it to see a pendant in the shape of a dog’s paw print. She gasped.

“I don’t know what to say. It’s beautiful.”

“Let’s put it on!” With that, he stood up, slid behind her, and placed it gently around her neck.

Madison turned to him. “Thank you. Sincerely, thank you. I love it!” She looked him in the eyes intently as she spoke.

Daniel put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

The next day was Christmas. Madison spent it with her father, most of it driving to his parent’s house. Cash dozed in his carrier, which kept him from being a distraction, protected him in case of an accident, and would give him a safe place when he needed to rest.

“I’m looking forward to seeing everyone,” Madison said. *It’s still hard having to divide the holiday between the people I love*, she thought.

The house was decorated with Christmas lights, evergreen garlands with red bows, and colorful crystal icicles hanging from the eaves. The

guys were huddled around the TV watching football, and the women were in the kitchen when they arrived. After Cash's crate was placed on the floor of the mudroom, he bolted free, spun in circles, and jumped on Madison, before investigating several of her cousins. He dashed over to the Christmas tree and pulled on the package ribbons. Madison took a picture to post. Then she took a selfie with the Christmas decorations and her cousins.

People passed him from one to another, telling Madison how cute he was, each giving him a pat or a kiss. The only one not amused by Cash's antics at pulling at the packages was Aunt Susan, but she was a hard one to get to smile about anything, so Madison didn't care. The family downed the usual turkey dinner. Though it smelled amazing, Madison ate a little less than she had the day before. Turkey two days in a row seemed a little less special on the second day, and she was eager to go sledding with her cousins later. Cash sat at her feet and begged for slivers of the savory bird, delighting in a repeat of yesterday's menu before Madison decided he should be in his carrier.

Madison and her grandmother cleared the table and carried the china to the kitchen. Her grandmother noticed her new necklace and lifted it with her fingers. "My, that's pretty."

"Mom's boyfriend gave it to me yesterday. I actually like it, and I guess he's not such a bad guy after all," Madison said.

"You mean, he buys you an expensive gift and you change your mind—just like that?"

Madison scraped a plate as she answered. "It wasn't that it was expensive. It was the words he said and the tone he used that changed my feelings. He said, 'Good things come in small packages, and I hope you like this, because it seemed perfect for you.'" Madison gulped and continued. "I really didn't expect anything from him, especially since I have been kind of mean. Now I understand why people say it's the thought that counts."

Madison gently placed a plate into the lower dishwasher rack. She loved the wild rose pattern that bordered the edges, and even one chip was not an option. Despite being ready to return to the celebration in the

adjacent room, there was one more thing she had told no one—a thought that had rolled over and over in her head for the past few days, but was never voiced —*I'm over my divided loyalty and family division. I want them all to know.* She stuck a finger into the chocolate icing on the cake plate as she decided to share her thoughts. From the corner of her eye, she watched her grandmother busily arrange the leftovers in the fridge.

“Gram, I know you were mad at mom even though you never said that to me. We all were, but I learned one more thing. When you love someone, really love someone, you want them to be happy even if that isn’t with you.”

“Oh, Maddie, what a beautiful thing to say and for someone so young to understand. You never cease to amaze me.”

A brunette girl wearing a tasseled knit hat pierced the quiet moment with her laughter when she threw open the back door. “Come on, Madison, let’s hit it. I’ve got the sled. Move it, girl, move it.” The screen door slammed, and Madison’s cousin disappeared.

“Go, Maddie, go. I’ll finish up here, but give me a hug first,” Grandma said as she wiped her hands on a dish towel.

After a quick embrace, she kissed Madison on the forehead and pushed her toward the door.

“Thanks, Gram. I love ya.” Madison struggled to pull her boots over her Merino wool socks, then jerked her coat from the hook and shrugged into it. She blew her grandmother a kiss. The door clattered as she rushed away.

Madison’s grandmother shook her head. “How many times have I told those kids not to slam the door? Not enough, I guess,” she cheerfully grumbled. She stood at the sink, watching the kids from between the curtains.

Madison and her cousins slogged away with the sleds. The snow crunched beneath their feet as they tramped to the top of the hill. From this vantage point, they gazed over the snow-covered valley that glittered below; the creek that ran through it appeared like a blackened ribbon. They laughed as they took a tumble on the bump in the middle of the hill, despite trying to steer away from it. Cousin Matt landed face-first in the

big snowbank and barely missed a collision with a nearby tree when his sled became airborne. Shrieks of laughter arose as they pulled sleds back up the hill and careened down again and again until darkness slowly settled in. Afterwards, they sat around the big table in the dining room with mugs of hot cocoa and peppermint sticks. They scrolled through their phones and shared posts.

“Hate to interrupt you guys,” Madison’s father said, “But there’s still something left to do here.” He grinned mischievously before he handed her an envelope with a gold seal. “I almost forgot to give you this.”

Her quizzical expression fled when she opened it. Her eyes scanned the printed confirmation of airline tickets and hotel reservations. The word ‘Westminster’ was printed in red ink. Her eyes widened and darted between the papers in her hand and her father’s face.

“Oh, Daddy, do you mean it? We are going to New York City to watch the Westminster dog show? This is huge!” Madison jumped from the chair and embraced her dad. “You are the best. I can’t wait until February. 2020 is going to be a fabulous year.”

Mr. Taylor put his arm around his daughter’s shoulder. “Since you’ve improved your grades so much, I talked with your principal at school. He said it would be okay for you to miss a few days. Travel can be an education.”

“I’ll get to see the most beautiful dogs in the world being shown at Westminster,” Madison chirped. Excited to share the news with her friends, she took a photo of the tickets with her ever present phone.

The trip home the next day seemed shorter than the one she’d taken the day earlier. She would have liked to stay longer. Now that her dad was an independent contractor, he worked harder than before and needed to be home for work the next day. He promised that when this job was done, things would slow down a bit. The drive home was filled with constant chatter about the upcoming trip. Madison peppered her dad with questions most of the way home. “How long is the flight? How many days are we staying? Does Mrs. Anderson know? Will we have time to sightsee?” Madison mined for every detail of the trip, while her father barely finished answering one question before she delved into the next.

Madison and Cash fell asleep as soon as they got home and into bed.

With school in recess, and the grooming shop closed for two extra days after Christmas, Madison had time for a visit with Mrs. Anderson. She was bursting to share her big news. She and Amy planned to see a movie, and she invited Amy to go with her to see Mrs. Anderson afterwards.

“I wish Stacy was here, too,” said Amy.

“Me, too, but I bet she’s glad she’s on that ski trip instead,” Madison said. Amy drove a banged-up Jeep her uncle had given her. *At least she has wheels*, Madison thought. *I hope I get some on my next birthday.*

The girls stopped by the local supermarket, where Madison picked out a plant with a label that said, “Shooting Star hydrangea.” The individual florets looked like stars, and it was wrapped in foil with a red bow. Madison added a box of Belgian chocolates as well. Amy helped her pick out a card to attach to the flowers. Madison grabbed two cans of pop and headed for the cashier, passing two cute boys on the way. Amy nodded to them, then grinned at Madison. Madison poked Amy in the ribs and kept walking. They paid for their items, placed them in the Jeep, and left the parking lot, still chattering about those boys.

Mrs. Anderson warmly greeted the pair upon their arrival, though her hair was askew and her clothing a bit ruffled. Her face lit up when Madison gave her the chocolates and the plant. “What a nice surprise! It’s always so busy here during the holidays. Sorry if I’m a bit of a mess. Please come in.” Mrs. Anderson poured cinnamon spice tea into three porcelain cups and placed one in front of each of them on the big kitchen table. Butter cookies spilled from several trays on the counter. “These are gifts from clients. Would you girls like some?” she asked.

“Yes, please!” they both said.

“Did you hear Bella won three points towards her championship at the last show?” Madison asked. “Her show photo with the judge is beautiful. She now has twelve of the fifteen points she needs to receive her championship award.”

“I have it on my phone. I’ll show you.” Amy searched the pocket of her jacket. “I guess I left it in the Jeep. I’ll be right back.” Amy rushed

out the door, then stopped and backed up as she noticed it hadn't latched. Madison and Mrs. Anderson laughed as Amy pulled on the heavy door once again.

They sipped tea and munched on cookies until Madison asked a question that she'd been aching to ask for a long time. "Do you think you'll ever get married again?"

Mrs. Anderson paused before she replied. Her eyes turned to the photograph that was visible in the adjacent room. "No, but it could happen. I'm not looking. I've had a few beaus in my time, but I saved the best for last." She paused, as if savoring the memory. Her expression softened. "If I found another man, I'm not sure I wouldn't make comparisons—even though I once warned you about doing so. That wouldn't be fair." Mrs. Anderson grinned at Madison as if she had just discovered a secret. "Tell me, why this question? Do you have a crush?"

Madison laughed, and her cheeks reddened. "No, I don't, but I was thinking it would be nice if my dad thought about it. Mom seems so much happier. I hope he will be, too."

"Well, he's young. He will. Just give him some time." Mrs. Anderson stared out of the adjacent window.

Amy returned and Mrs. Anderson admired the photo of Bella. Madison peered over her shoulder for another look as well.

"Now, you girls better go. The snow is starting, and I'd like you home before it gets slick." The girls piled into the Jeep. Madison looked back. Through the big picture window, she saw Mrs. Anderson embracing a picture frame. Snowflakes about the size of dimes now littered the windshield. The wipers clapped in a struggle to clear them. Madison turned the music up as loud as it would go, and they did their best to keep up with rhyme and rhythm of a rap song on their playlist as they inched down the long driveway.

As they neared the highway, a green SUV pulled up next to their Jeep. "Alpine School for Dogs" was written on the side. "Isn't that Mr. Baker, the owner?" asked Amy. When he rolled down the window, he smiled and waved.

"What are you doing out here?" Madison asked.

“Well, you know our Katy. She gets so busy taking care of critters that she doesn’t take very good care of herself. So, I brought her some supper to remind her. Anyway, I just wanted to wish you girls a Happy New Year!”

“Thanks! Same to you,” the girls said in unison, as Amy rolled up the window and continued.

“Do you think?” giggled Madison.

“No! Maybe! He is single,” Amy said, and then both girls joined in to chorus, “Katy’s got a boyfriend,” and laughed uproariously.

CHAPTER 23



After the holidays, school resumed. Madison noticed Cash watching her as she slung her backpack over her shoulder and headed toward the door. He followed. “Sorry, boy, you’re on your own today.” His eyes pled for a few more moments of her attention. “I’ll be back, don’t worry,” she said, but stooped to give him another pat before she left. When the door closed, he trotted to the kitchen for a drink, picked up his chew bone and wandered to Madison’s room, where he crept into his bed to wait.

All the students were animated, pushing and laughing in the halls as they made their way from class to class. Madison’s English class was given an assignment to explore potential careers and make an oral presentation. There were so many possibilities she never knew existed before she got Cash.

She had seen the photographer at the shows, who posed the dogs for pictures to help advertise wins. She could become a professional trainer or pet stylist. Maybe she’d own a kennel, become a professional dog show handler, or even become a dog show judge. There were jobs for writers who submitted articles about dogs to magazines. Dogs even have massage therapists. Veterinarians treated the dogs, vet techs checked the bone structure, and examined eyes. The veterinary field was something she had considered even before she got Cash. Yet, she changed her mind about what career she would choose regularly.

There are so many things to think about. Dogs will always be a part

of my life, even if they are not a part of my job, she reflected. So many great options. Too bad I can only pick one to present, she thought.

On the morning that the English assignments were due, Stacy gave her speech about the future of robotics in agriculture and industry. “I had a neighbor who lost a limb in an accident. I was so impressed with the latest innovative use of robotic inventions that create better prosthetics for humans. I could end up in bioengineering. I want a career that will help give others a leg up or a hand. Thank you,” she finished, as she took her seat.

Madison fidgeted in her seat and winced at Stacy’s attempt at humor. She studied the notes for her presentation. She was scheduled last. As she stood in front of the class, her hands shook, and her throat was dry. Stacy grinned at her and winked. Madison took a deep breath. Josh was in the front row. *Rats! This doesn’t make it any easier, she thought.*

Madison began, “I’ve decided to study animal behavior as a career. This interests me because of all the options available, such as research, pet training, even working in zoos and aquariums.”

Next, she detailed educational choices. She explained some training techniques and was enthusiastic about gentle reward methods and the need for repetition and consistency. “It is important to maintain the comfort and health of the animals at all times. With special permission, I have a guest to help me.”

She beckoned to Amy, who brought Cash from his carrier and handed him to Madison.

“I’ll demonstrate a few behaviors that Cash has learned.” She paced back and forth with Cash by her side. Upon command, he sat, stood, and stayed in place. She asked Cash to fetch a glove from a basket. “Get the toy. Now shake it.” Then she told him, “Play dead.” Madison plopped down next to Cash. “Give a high five. Now, scratch my back.” He scratched the lower part of her back.

“No, higher.”

The class laughed when Cash reared up and pawed again as directed. “Take a bow, Cash.”

“Maybe, in the future, I’ll be working with dolphins or tigers,”

Madison finished.

“You crushed it,” Amy said after class was dismissed. Students gathered belongings.

Madison knelt to put Cash inside the carrier and close the door. Josh approached.

“Nice job. The idea of working with lions and tigers sounds cool,” he said before his buddies swept him away.

CHAPTER 24



It was mid-February. Maddie and her dad left Cash at the boarding facility.

“Don’t you worry about him,” said Mrs. Anderson.

“Because he’s with you, we won’t. Thanks.”

With Cash settled at the kennel, Madison and her father soon boarded the plane to fly to New York. Madison’s face shone with excitement in anticipation of her first flight. Her hands trembled as the engines rumbled. When the wheels retracted with a thud, it startled Madison. She looked at her father and squeezed his hand as the runway streamed by. The plane lurched as it took to the air.

“And, we’re off,” he said.

Now, in flight, Madison leaned back into the seat, took a deep breath, and marveled at the clouds that formed a carpet below. She watched a movie, glanced through the magazine in the seat pocket in front of her, and fell asleep.

When she woke, Madison realized that her head rested on her father’s shoulder. *It reminds me of when he used to carry me from the car when I was little;* she thought.

As she sat up, Madison’s father said, “Almost there, sleepyhead. You missed your snack, so I saved it for you.” He handed her a package of savory snack mix. “I have a few more, if you want them. We can also order food when we get to the hotel.”

An hour later, they landed, found their baggage carousel, retrieved

their luggage, and were on the streets of New York.

Madison stood at the curb and stared. "It looks like an ant's nest that has been stirred with all the traffic and the people, except for the noise, of course," she said, looking up at her father. "I don't think I've ever felt so small."

Madison stuck to her dad like Velcro. He squeezed her hand to reassure her. They ducked into their hotel.

As Mr. Taylor checked in, Madison perused racks of colorful brochures featuring tourist attractions. She selected several. "Look, Dad. Let's see what fits with our schedule," she said.

"Sure," he agreed.

The next day, they caught a double-decked bus and toured. They took the elevator to the observation deck at the Empire State Building, saw the Hudson River and Central Park, and took a ferry to the Statue of Liberty. "Somehow, I really didn't realize the statue would be this big. As many times as I have seen her picture, I should have known." As they departed the ferry, the dampness from the misty water began to penetrate. "Wait, Dad. I need to take a couple more selfies to post." She watched him slow but continue ahead. Madison quickened her pace next to her dad. "Sorry, I just couldn't resist taking a couple more."

"Let's go eat. I'm starving," her dad declared.

The scent of savory spices that came from a small café enticed them. Like something from a movie, the place was decorated with checkered tablecloths and wine bottles with candles melted into the tops. *Garlic could be the next big perfume*, Madison thought. *Right now, it smells great.*

The server brought them heaping plates of pasta and garlic bread, which disappeared quickly. Afterwards, they found their way back to the hotel and collapsed into the crisp, white sheets. Madison didn't remember closing her eyes before the music from her alarm signaled a new day. By the time she struggled from bed, her father had showered and ordered breakfast.

Wrinkling her nose at his offering, Madison took the bagel, cream cheese, and smoked salmon that her father held. Her hunger overrode her

initial qualms. “That’s better than I expected,” she said, taking a bigger bite.

“Maybe I’ll have this again tomorrow.”

Following her father’s direction to stay close as they walked the streets of New York, Madison marveled at street musicians and artist displays. She tightened the belt on her jacket and pulled her knit cap over her ears. They caught a ride to the Breed Judging and Junior Showmanship site.

The Westminster Dog Show had been held annually since 1877. The number of entries dictated classes were sometimes divided, and breed judging was held in two enormous buildings on Pier 92 and 94 in midtown Manhattan. Madison’s heart was in her throat as she and her father found their way through the building and maneuvered for a position to watch their favorite breeds. The carnival atmosphere added to her excitement. They bought a show catalog filled with information about the dogs being shown, which included their names, ages, and breeders.

“There are so many beautiful dogs. I’ve never seen so many in one place. There are dog breeds here that I have only seen in pictures,” she said. “I don’t want to miss the Papillons and Basset Hounds today. Golden Retrievers aren’t shown until tomorrow. I need to tell Stacy and Amy about them and get some good pictures if I can.”

She checked her show catalog to determine the time and ring numbers where those breeds would appear. Winding through the crowd, they looked for ring markers and found their way to seats to view the parade of dogs nearing the entrances.

Handlers with special identification were allowed into the exhibition area. Ring stewards busily checked off the numbers assigned to dogs that were present and organized their entry to the ring. Judges presided over the rings and directed dogs and handlers once they were ready for competition. Despite careful organization, the building swarmed with people and dogs. Everyone rushed around. Noise, from so many people and dogs all in one place, echoed in their ears. “It feels like a celebration,” Madison remarked.

They found their seats. Madison diligently marked her catalog to

record the winners of the classes she watched. Those winners would compete in Group Competition at Madison Square Garden later that evening. After watching several classes, Madison's father shuffled his feet and squirmed in his seat. "Let's go look at some of the goodies in the vendor area and maybe grab a soda," Madison suggested.

As she wandered through the vendor areas, she inspected tools and toys and peered into a case of beautiful jewelry made in the image of a variety of breeds. "Please, can I see that one?" she asked. The lady behind the display case unlocked it and handed Madison the pendant she had admired.

"I like that necklace you're wearing, too." the clerk said.

"Thanks. It was a special gift." Madison held the pendant from the case—a silver Papillon with sapphire eyes. She ran her fingers across it in admiration. Upon checking the price, she put it back into the box and readjusted the necklace she already wore. "Thanks for letting me look, but maybe next time," she told the clerk.

She looked and her dad and said, "We'd best get back. The preliminary judging for Junior Showmanship will begin soon."

Madison watched as over ninety entries in the advanced Junior Showmanship classes began competition. Because of the large entry, the classes were divided between two days. Madison wanted to see both classes. She noted the slight differences in presentation, depending on the breed. They presented some dogs for exam on a table; others were posed attentively without one as the judge evaluates the dog's teeth, shape of eye, length of skull, coat, and bone structure. Different breeds also travel about the ring at varying speeds. "These are some of the best of the best," Madison said. "They have to be, because it's an invitational."

She wandered through the grooming area and saw professional handlers fixing Poodle topknots and using clippers on Cocker Spaniel ears. Nearly every dog had a comb running through their fur, even though they looked as if it had already been done several times that day.

Tired of walking, gawking, and talking, Madison and her father went back to the hotel to freshen up before Group Judging.

After supper, they went to the show site. "I'm glad you got us

reserved seats, Dad,” she said. They watched as the winner from each Breed in the Toy Group paraded. The Havanese won.

The winners from the Hound Group came next. Madison frowned after her favorite, the Basset Hound, was defeated. “Well, it’s not a beauty contest. The judge has to evaluate dogs and select the ones best suited to produce future generations,” she said. “Tomorrow is another day and a different judge. Maybe I’ll like her choices better.”

After two days of judging nearly 3,000 purebred dogs, seven dogs remained undefeated. One would be chosen as Best in Show. Tension filled the air. Shrieks and thunderous applause erupted as announcers introduced each dog and handler. The finalists paraded across the green-carpeted ring. The judge examined each dog, checking musculature, structure, and coat condition with just a brief touch. Then he gave handlers direction for a pattern to travel so he could examine the movement of each dog. Spectators applauded and cheered for their favorites. Madison rooted for the Golden Retriever, though she also liked the Wire Fox Terrier.

“I think that one will win,” she said to her father, pointing to Standard Poodle, who had commanded her attention. “See how she holds her head up and the movement is so powerful. It’s as if she’s asking to be chosen. She’s magnificent.”

The judge picked up the purple and gold ribbon, strode down the lineup and pointed to his selection for Best in Show. The regal Standard Poodle was his choice. The crowd exploded with cheers, and the dogs in the ring seemed just as excited.

“See, Dad, I told you,” Madison shouted while she stood to applaud. After a few minutes, Madison could finally breathe normally, though her heart was still pounding with excitement as they made their way through the maze of people exiting the show.

The next day, Madison and her father slept in, since their flight wouldn’t depart until three. Still, by the time they got a bite to eat, repacked, and caught their Uber ride to the airport, there was little time left.

Madison stared at skyscrapers blocking the sun and said, “You know, Dad, there’s no place like home.”

CHAPTER 25



The months of March and April breezed past, and the month of May seemed unseasonably warm. The time for the show that Madison had been anticipating was almost here. She stirred beneath the quilt as she woke. A puff of warm air crossed her forehead and soft fur brushed against her cheek. It was as if Cash had just taken her temperature before returning to his usual position at the foot of the bed.

Quietly sliding the glass door shut, she wandered past the wooden porch. She soon stood barefoot in the soft grass and felt the warmth of the earth below. *There's something grounding here*, she thought. She tilted her chin up and looked at the infinite tapestry of the disappearing stars. Cash leaned against her leg and looked up, too. "We'd better get some things ready before we leave for the dog show, Cash." Then they slipped silently back into her bedroom.

Later that morning, Mrs. Anderson and Madison carefully loaded the dog crates into the van and secured them well. Exercise pens were placed in a rack on the front of the cab. They threw in a bag with dog food and some bottled water. "I think we have everything the dogs need. Their stuff takes up more room than ours!" Madison chirped.

"Let's hit the road. We have a bit of a drive ahead of us," Mrs. Anderson said. "We've got to get there a day early to set up the grooming area and exercise pens. Then I need to set up the booth for the meet the breed day, so people can learn more about Papillons. Your folks will

come up when it's closer to show time." The big van shuddered, then rumbled down the highway. Mrs. Anderson played CDs, and Madison played some video games as they travelled. Then they rode in silence while Madison texted until she brought up a subject she'd been thinking about for some time.

"My mother said that you like dogs more than people, and some people don't know why you like me so much, but I'm so glad you do," Madison almost whispered.

"Well, you remind me a bit of my younger self. You are willing to accept a challenge. You always work hard at learning." She looked over at Madison. "You take risks, and even though you don't always win, it doesn't stop you from trying." She took a sip of a peach iced tea as she steered with one hand. "Both of us can be downright stubborn, but that's not necessarily a bad thing."

Mrs. Anderson drove in silence for a while, lost in thought.

"It's not that I don't like people," Mrs. Anderson continued, slowing the van as they neared a caution light. "A number of years back, my husband and our daughter were in a bad car accident." Mrs. Anderson braked and pulled the van to a complete stop. There was a traffic delay, and a flagman held them in place with a lineup of other cars. She continued. "There were no survivors." Mrs. Anderson looked away and sagged into the seat.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know," Madison said.

Mrs. Anderson took a moment before she continued. "A teen driver who had been drinking hit them. He was driving in the wrong lane without headlights. Turns out, that driver was the son of my best friend at the time."

Traffic started to move. Mrs. Anderson put her iced tea bottle back into the cup holder and gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

"I sold the big house in town and bought the old kennel with a house on the property. I guess the isolation and the work I put into its renovation gave me time to heal."

Madison put her hand over her mouth and wished she had never brought the subject up, but Mrs. Anderson held her composure and

continued the story.

“After that, it never bothered me that other people had family gatherings during the holidays, and I didn’t. The kennel was always full then.” Spotting an exit with a service station at the base of the turnoff, Mrs. Anderson slowed the van again. “In a way, the dogs helped me keep it all together.” She sighed as she pulled up next to the gas pump. She patted Madison on the knee, as if she were comforting herself.

Madison noticed that while Mrs. Anderson had kept her eyes on the road, her voice somehow belied her calm demeanor. “Really, I’m so sorry,” Madison said.

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago.”

Madison gave Mrs. Anderson a quick hug, then headed off to the restroom, after which she lingered inside the station looking at key chains, t-shirts, and magnets. Mrs. Anderson swung her key chain as she came through the doors of the station and motioned Madison to the hamburger stand next door.

Having eaten their fill, the pair hit the road again. The pass was free of snow this time of year. The apple orchards still bloomed, and the vineyards had leafed out. They drove in silence for miles, each of them lost in thoughts.

Madison broke the silence. “I remember when Mom and Dad divorced, I was so sad. I was angry, too. I missed everything: having them in the same house, the same routine.” Madison chewed on the last chip from the bag. “Sometimes, even with a room full of people, I felt lonely.”

Mrs. Anderson slowed the van, peering through the darkness for the hotel sign. She waited patiently for Madison to finish.

“It’s better now. At least now they aren’t yelling at each other, and they both seem happier. I think their need for each other became less, and their love for each other no longer existed, either.” Madison said. They parked below the red arrow of the hotel sign. “People think kids don’t notice things like that. Maybe some do and some don’t, but most of us are smarter than people give us credit for.”

The engine clicked, cooling as they sat before they got their room keys. “I used to hope they would make up, but I guess that’s not going to

happen.” Madison lowered one foot to the running board. With the door half open, she looked toward Mrs. Anderson. “For a while, I thought the divorce was my fault. Half of the stuff they fought over was about me—because of things I’d been doing. I was different then than I am now.” Madison fished her backpack from behind the seat. “They didn’t like my friends.”

Mrs. Anderson rounded the back of the van and stood next to Madison. “I guess it was stupid, but sometimes, I got all mixed up inside. I didn’t know who to trust or who to talk to,” said Madison. They headed toward the hotel.

“You could’ve chosen to keep doing the same things with the same kind of people. Why do you think you decided differently?” Mrs. Anderson said as she put her arm around Madison’s shoulder.

“Well, for one reason, you trusted me with Cash, and I didn’t want to disappoint you. I learned they were not real friends. Sometimes you cut the bad ones out of your life. My youth group at the church helped, too.”

“You are a born leader, my dear, not just a follower. See how Cash trusts you to lead? Other people will follow you, too, when you are certain of the direction.”

“I’m happy I have you in my life, too,” Madison said, and she gave Mrs. Anderson a hug.

“Aren’t we lucky? Change is going to happen, so we might as well decide we like it. Love you, kitten. Now let’s get this stuff unloaded so we can hit the hay and get some rest before the show tomorrow. We need to get up by seven in the morning.”

CHAPTER 26



Morning came, and the show was only hours away. Madison put Cash in the tub. Cotton balls in his ears kept water out and dulled the noise of the dryer. She saturated his coat with warm water, protected his eyes with her hand, and poured diluted shampoo over him. This time, she chose a shampoo with a whitening agent that would brighten his already brilliant coat. The conditioner she applied made him smell like lavender. She scrubbed him with her fingers, then rinsed and rinsed. Using her hands, she stroked as much water from his body and his feathering as she could. She could clearly see the outline of his slightly rounded chest, the taper as his ribs ended, and his spine where it continued toward his hip bones. “You might be just a little thin,” she told him as she wrapped him in a warm towel. She snuggled him close for a while, then placed him on another towel. She used her blow dryer to get him dry. She combed and brushed his hair gently in the direction she wanted it to lie. *Max has taught me well*, she thought.

Cash closed his eyes and dozed as he was being pampered. It was their special time together, and he seemed to like it. He sometimes licked and nibbled Madison’s fingertips. “No bite, Cash,” she said.

Cash looked different now. His body was conditioned, and muscle rippled beneath his skin. His frill of longer hair began behind his ears and fell forward to form a deep V that nearly ended at the point of his fluffy chest and continued with a narrower ridge of long hair extending beneath

his front legs. The coat lay smooth across his back and draped below his elbows on the sides. His tail carriage brought a beautiful silky plume over his back and down one side. He carried himself with elegance.

Madison pampered herself this time. She had decided to get her hair cut in a style that cupped the back of her neck and curled gently at her cheeks. A fringe of bangs hung just above her eyebrows. "We look fabulous," she told Cash. "It is a beautiful day, and I can't wait for Amy and Stacy to see my new look."



Stacy and her dog were nearly finished in the obedience ring when Amy met Madison, who was picking up her arm band with identifying numbers.

"I love your hair, Maddie," said Amy. "I had to decide between Junior Showmanship and Breed. Since Bella only needs one point to finish her championship, you are on your own today. Luckily, we can watch."

"Thanks. Wish me luck!"

Madison accepted her arm band from the ring attendant. She deftly placed it on her left arm and tore a notch into it to catch the rubber band. "I got my lucky number, Cash—five. It's my lucky number because I was born on May fifth."

Her excitement sent a jolt of energy down the leash and into Cash. The blue beads on the leash Max had given her accentuated the whiteness of Cash's coat and provided a nice accent to her own apparel. The softness of the lead made it easy to gather into her hand and gave her good control of the tiny dog below. His eyes were bright and his tail up. He pulled on the lead. She tugged him back. "We have to wait our turn, Cash."

She knelt in the grass and grasped Cash gently by both ears. She pointed his face so that he looked directly into her eyes. "We can do this. I have a picture in my head of what we are going to do together, exactly how we will move, and exactly where we will stand when it is over. This is our day; Cash, yours and mine. We are a team." The once timid dog stared at her, his eyes blinking. She loved the way his eyelashes fringed

his eyes. She loved everything about this little guy. She had been right; he was perfect for her.

Madison caught a glimpse of her mom and Daniel. Her dad sat on the second level of the viewing stands. It was nice to see her parents here. At one time, it might have made her nervous. Today, she just smiled and was glad they were there to support her and watch. Mrs. Anderson had invited Jill, and they sat in the row below.

Cash and Madison's class entered the ring. "Take them around," the judge requested as he pointed to a spot on the opposite side. An Afghan hound was in the lead, then a Springer Spaniel. Other smaller dogs and their handlers followed. Madison and Cash were near the end of the line because he was the smallest dog in the ring.

"Down and back. Face them forward." The judge directed dogs and their young owners with instructions by voice and motion.

If Madison felt any traces of nervousness, she showed no sign of it. She and Cash calmly did all the movements they had practiced so many times before. It was as if a precision time clock had gone off in her head. Every movement had a purpose, and every request was followed with exact results. They looked proud and gaited in an easy rhythm. The sudden noise of a loudspeaker, or the crash of a chair nearby, did not spook Cash. He had to trust someone, and Madison was that someone. His eyes hardly left her face, except for the moment when the judge approached her to examine Cash's expression.

"Take them around once more," said the judge. The young handlers rose to their feet, adjusted their leads, and circled the dogs again. The judge pointed to contestants and declared, "First, Second, Third, Fourth."

Madison's heart pounded as the judge pointed to her as the first-place winner. Madison quickly led Cash to the marker labeled with a number one. She had won her class. Now, she had to compete with the winners of other classes chosen by the same judge, in order to win the top prize.

The spectators applauded. Some left the viewing stands while others remained in their seats, awaiting the finish of another class and the results. Madison's supporters seemed glued in place. Jill chatted with Madison's parents. Mrs. Anderson followed Madison to the grooming table

because earlier she had left her show catalog behind. One competition remained. Madison had a chance to win Best Junior Handler in show. Madison recognized one of her remaining competitors. She was the girl with a Belgian Sheepdog. That dog always stood perfectly, and the girl was considered a real showman. Added to that, her parents were professional handlers. Although the girl was younger than Madison, she was more experienced. She had beaten Madison at previous shows.

Mrs. Anderson watched while Madison combed Cash one last time before she went in the ring for the final judging.

“What’s wrong?” Mrs. Anderson asked with a furrowed brow. “You just walked out aglow, and now the color is gone from your face.”

“I didn’t expect to compete against the girl with the Belgian. I was so sure we would win today, and we won our class, but we have one more to go.”

“Oh, Madison, you’ll do just fine. If you must look back, do it to remember how much you’ve improved. You are your only competition.” Mrs. Anderson took the comb from Madison, put it back into the grooming box, and gave her a quick pat.

Madison picked up Cash and went to ringside.

As they entered the ring for final judging, the Wire Fox Terrier in front of Cash whirled around to snarl at Cash. The hair on the back of its neck stood up and its tail was erect and stiff. The fierce look in its eyes was menacing. Cash halted in place, puffed himself up and stood his ground.

Madison gave a quick correction with the leash, gaining control and composure. She encouraged him forward when the line of dogs began to move.

Cash kept moving his back leg after she posed him, but Madison gently put it back in place. She kept her eye on the judge, positioned herself so the judge always had a clear view of Cash, and placed him to his best advantage. As they were directed around the circle for the last time before the judge’s decision, Madison was uncertain they would win.

The judge marched to the judging table and marked the record book. She had finished her assessment and would now award the trophy.

The ring steward handed the judge the ribbon rosette, and the judge took one last walk past the seven finalists, one from each class. Even though she had marked her book, the judge appeared to be reconsidering each contestant, which increased the suspense. The judge passed Cash and Madison and continued down the line. Then she turned abruptly and pointed to Cash and Madison.

Stacy nudged Amy, who nearly fell off the edge of the bleachers. Madison's father threw his head back and pumped his fist in the air, then gave Daniel a playful tap on the shoulder. Mrs. Anderson and Jill hugged, each unabashed by their welling tears. Madison's mother smiled and applauded.

Madison covered her face with her hands. She picked up Cash and held him close. The spectators cheered. She thanked the judge as she received the ribbon, accepted the trophy from the club's representative, and stumbled to the ring exit as tears of joy streamed down her face. It was then that she knelt and put Cash beside her.

"We did it, Cash. We did it!"

CHAPTER 27



At Alpine School for Dogs, the students and instructors looked at the images on Madison's phone taken at the dog show and examined the ribbon she'd won. The class shared in the excitement of her accomplishment.

The head trainer motioned to the equipment against the wall, and they set up weave poles, the tunnel, and some ramps. "Dogs need both mental stimulation and the right amount of exercise. This fits the bill." He handed Madison the bars for the jumps. "Is Amy going to join you in this class?" he asked.

"No, she's too busy with shelter dogs. Amy said rescue would be her focus for now. We saw the news about fires in Australia. She's busy making pouches for their animal rescue and planning a fundraiser. I'll even make some stuff for her bake sale this time, maybe a cake. Mom taught me to make a white chocolate cake with raspberry filling. It's pretty when it's done," Madison replied. "Anyway, Stacy will be here."

"Wow! I'm impressed. We'll miss Amy, but I'm glad the two of you will still be here," the trainer said. "Agility is next for you and Cash. With those ears and his speed, that dog was born to fly. Let's see how you do."

"This is going to be so much fun for us. I can't wait to see him try it," Madison blurted. Her face was flushed with excitement.

"That's what I love about you, kiddo. You're always up for a challenge." As the trainer and Madison set up the tunnels, he continued, "Oh,

and you will have a couple of new people for your basic obedience class tomorrow. Interestingly, one of the kids has a dog like yours. I guess you really started something.”

Madison and Cash examined the equipment. Cash would have to learn to weave quickly between each pole, climb a ramp, zoom through tunnels, and jump different heights. She began assembling the items and had to laugh. “Cash, when I first saw these my first time at the training center a year ago, I thought they were just like daycare toys! I didn’t realize how important they would be for dog show performance events and fun in our future.”

Madison went down on her knees, and Cash snuggled under her chin for a tight hug. “My life has changed so much because of you. Thank you, Cash.”

As they set the equipment in place, Cash barked and trembled. Madison could tell that this time he was not afraid. He was just so excited that he could not contain his exuberance. Madison glanced down at Cash, and his eyes met hers.

“New toys, Cash! New tools, new adventures, and more places to go are yet ahead,” said Madison.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hazel Christiansen grew up living with a variety of animals, but dogs became her passion. Her career as a professional pet stylist led her to being a multifaceted pet pro in many areas of the industry. She has been an award-winning master groomer, judge, show breeder and exhibitor, and is past-president of the former American Grooming Shop Association. She shares knowledge with others through speaking, teaching seminars, and writing for trade magazines and newspapers. Her love of the

Papillon dogs, encouraging and inspiring youth, and the art of writing, led her to create *“Cash” the Dog with Butterfly Ears*. In her spare time, she likes to sculpt—dogs, of course. She lives in Lewiston, Idaho, with Whisper, her own special dog with the butterfly ears.