The Borrowed Puppy



Holly Webb
Illustrated by Sophy Williams

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For all the amazing dog lovers who borrow dogs every day

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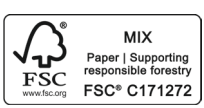
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Chapter One



"Jade. Jade. I want the dogs."

"I'm doing my homework," Jade pointed out as Toby shoved his book on top of her maths worksheet.

"Pleeeaaaase. Dog book."

Jade sighed. She would actually like a break. "Only once though," she warned her little brother. The dog picture book was Toby's absolute

favourite, and he'd beg for it over and over until Jade or Dad agreed to read it to him. "I've got to get this maths done. And it's nearly time for dinner – Dad's cooking pasta."

Toby wriggled into Jade's lap, sighing happily as she opened the book. It had been read so many times that the cover was starting to come away from the pages. Toby had lots of books – most of them passed down from Jade – but none of them had been loved as much as this one.



Jade leaned her chin against Toby's soft hair and started to read. She'd read the story so often she almost knew it off by heart – and so did Toby, even though he was only four.

"Good dog," Toby said blissfully as they reached the last page. "Again!"

"You tell it to yourself," Jade suggested. "I've got to finish my maths before dinner."

"Agaaain!" Toby wailed.

"Hey, Toby…" Dad appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Want to help me set the table? Carry the knives and forks for me?"

Toby nodded. He loved helping. Jade thought it made him feel grown up. He trotted importantly into the kitchen and Dad smiled at Jade.

"Thanks, love. You finish off that homework. Dinner will be ready in five minutes."

Jade plugged her fingers in her ears and tried to concentrate on the numbers on her worksheet, while Dad and Toby laid the other end of the table for dinner. She'd got an answer for the last question by the time Dad put the pasta and tomato sauce on the table – it would have to do, even though she wasn't convinced it added up properly.

Toby kept chattering about dogs all the way through dinner, and he persuaded Dad to read him the dog book again as his bedtime story. After she'd put the plates in the kitchen, Jade settled down on the sofa with a sigh.

It would be so nice to have a real dog instead of just reading about them…

She'd asked Dad if they could have a dog but he'd told her it would be just too difficult. Jade's mum had died not long after Toby was born, so Dad had to look after both of them *and* have a job. Although it was getting a bit easier now that Toby had started nursery, Dad said he didn't have time to take care of anyone else, and he'd shaken his head when Jade promised she'd do everything the dog needed. It wasn't as easy as that, he said.

He'd also pointed out that Toby was a bit too young for them to have a dog in the house. If Toby was messing around and accidentally hurt the dog, it might bite because it was scared.

They couldn't risk that. And dogs were expensive too, with food and vet bills…

Jade sighed again, thinking about it all. She supposed Dad was right, but it didn't seem very fair – she was sure they would be brilliant dog owners. Toby loved dogs just as much as she did. Jade had the TV on when Dad came downstairs, but she was still daydreaming about having a dog of her very own.

Dad sat next to her on the sofa, half watching the TV and half frowning at the laptop he had open on his knee. Jade glanced at what he was doing but it didn't look very exciting. He was on the local swap site, trying to find someone who wanted Toby's old pushchair. He was too tall for it now,

and his feet dragged on the floor. Plus, he walked everywhere anyway. Dad was uploading photos of the pushchair. It looked a bit battered, Jade thought.

"What's that?" She leaned over, suddenly interested. There was a photo of a dog on the website, jumbled in among all the toys and wardrobes and children's clothes. "Is somebody trying to swap a dog?"



Dad looked at it too. "Not quite. It's an ad for a website called Love My Pup, it helps dog owners find people who might like to help with their dogs."

"What sort of help?" Jade asked curiously.

"Um… Walking mostly, I think. So if the dog owner has to be out at work all day, they ask if someone would like to walk their dog at lunchtime, perhaps. Or just take them home and spend some time with them. Dogs get lonely by themselves. The people who take them love dogs but maybe can't have a dog of their own, so this means they can have one for a little bit."

"But – but –" Jade was so excited she was gabbling. Her words spilled

out on top of each other. "That's like us! It's us, Dad! We can't have a dog because Toby's too little and you're too busy working and looking after us. But maybe we could borrow a dog! Could we? Please?"

Dad blinked. He looked really shocked but Jade didn't understand why. It seemed obvious to her that they were the perfect people to sign up to the Love My Pup website. They always went for long walks at the weekends, either in the woods, or by the sea – they had to stop for snacks a lot, and the walks always had a playground in them somewhere, but Jade didn't think a dog would mind having a rest while Toby went on the swings.

"I don't know if we're the sort of

people they're looking for," Dad said slowly. "I don't think they mean children…"

"But why not?" Jade asked, pleading. "We like walking! We're fun! A dog would love us!"

Dad looked thoughtful. "I suppose maybe a friendly sort of dog. Not nervous. Not too big…"

"Yes!" Jade said eagerly. She could just imagine the dog now, racing ahead of her along the sandy beach, or snuffling eagerly at squirrels in the woods. "Please can we sign up, Dad? Please?"

Dad frowned at the screen for a moment and then he nodded. "All right. But this doesn't mean we're definitely going to be matched with a dog, Jade. It could take a while – and

we might never get a dog to walk. It'll depend on there being somebody close by who needs help. Just don't get too excited, all right?"



It was all very well for Dad to tell Jade she shouldn't get too excited. But how could she not? Dad had signed them up to the Love My Pup website, and they might finally be getting a dog – well, almost. It wouldn't be their *own* dog, of course, but they'd still be able to take it for walks and play with it. Jade could *pretend* it was theirs, just for a bit.

She raced out of school every day hoping someone had contacted Dad through the Love My Pup website

with a dog for them to look after. But after a whole week of waiting, Jade was starting to lose hope.

"I did say it might take a while," Dad said gently, seeing Jade's face fall when he picked her up on Friday afternoon.



"I know… It's just – it sounded so perfect for us," Jade murmured. "I really want to run along the beach with a dog. Wouldn't that be great?" She sighed, and Dad put his arm round her and gave her a hug.

"It would be brilliant. We just need to be patient, that's all. Are you hungry? What shall we have for a snack when we get home? We could make smoothies? There's some strawberries going a bit squishy in the fridge."

Dad was trying to distract her, Jade could tell. "Maybe," she said, trying not to sound miserable. It wasn't Dad's fault there wasn't a dog nearby needing walks. She smiled at him and listened to Toby telling her all about the

dinosaurs and mud he'd played with at nursery that morning.

Back at home, Dad started finding the fruit they needed for the smoothies while Jade went upstairs to change out of her uniform. She was dawdling – it was the weekend, there was no hurry – when Dad yelled from downstairs.

"Hey! Jade! Come down here, quick!"

Jade dragged her sweatshirt over her head and made for the stairs. "Sorry. Was I taking ages? What is it?" she added, seeing the huge grin on Dad's face. "What are you looking like that for?"

"Guess!"

Jade gulped excitedly. "Not … not a dog?" she whispered.

"Yes, a dog!"