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As gently as she could, she picked up the wee bundle and cuddled it to her. Now she could hear the faintest whimper. It was a tiny puppy, and it was barely alive.

CAGED

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SCHOLASTIC

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CHAPTER 1

BREAKING IN

DEFTLY, SAM UNPICKED the lock to the back door of the vape shop and dashed inside to disable the alarm. She worked swiftly, trying to ignore her thudding heart.

“Gotcha,” she breathed with relief when the lights of the alarm flickered and died a quiet death. She dug the torch out of her backpack and shone it around the shop. It lit up the colourfully labelled e-liquids and glittering vape pens and pods lining the shelves.

The guys had told her what to grab and stuff into her pack. They knew its worth on the streets. They’d also said a fourteen-year-old girl like Sam wouldn’t go down for robbery.

Sam wasn’t so sure.

She shoved as much gear into her pack as she could

until it bulged out like a gorged snake. She was about to swing the pack on her back when she heard the sirens. They wailed down the street, approaching at tsunami speed. Sam only had time to switch off her torch and rush out the back door into the dark alleyway.

She sprinted down the alley, the pack bouncing furiously on her back. Her old sneakers smacked against the pavement, the flaps working loose, threatening to topple her.

She kept on running. Suddenly, the sirens fell silent.

Then she heard a dog baying, hot on her trail.

No way could she outrun a police dog! She knew it could track her to the ends of the earth if it wanted to. She had to be clever.

Racing on down the alleyway, she shone her torch all around. The dog would be using its keen sense of smell to follow her. She needed a high fence to climb, one that a dog couldn't scale even if it could smell her on the other side.

It was the noise that first alerted Sam to an escape route. She heard desperate whining and whimpering. The sound came from behind a high wire fence hidden behind a thick hedge. Sam scrambled through the hedge, which scratched her face and arms. She didn't have time to care. The fence loomed above her, at least four metres high. She reckoned she could climb it. And, more importantly, the police dog couldn't.

She flung her pack over the fence, hearing it plonk down on the other side. Okay, now it was her turn.

She clutched the metal fence with her bare hands and clambered up the rungs. As she started to climb, she heard the police dog sprint by beneath her. It kept on going. Surely it must've heard all the noises – and smells – on the other side? Much later, Sam would wonder whether the dog had actually wanted her to escape.

Sam kept climbing, thankful for her training as a gymnast, until she reached sharp metal barbs on the top of the fence, barring her way. Her hands were already bleeding but she didn't stop. The police dog might return, and safety lay on the other side.

Carefully, she swung one leg over the barbed wire. She wondered if it might be electrified. Luckily, nothing zapped her. She now had to swing her whole body over to the other side. It sounded simple. But not so easy once she began.

Firstly, she snagged one jean-clad leg on the barbed wire. Then the other. In the end, she simply had to tear her legs away from the wire, ripping her jeans. Oh, well, a few more rips in her already tattered jeans wouldn't matter.

Now she had to climb down the other side of the fence to meet who-knew-what on the ground. Again, she heard whining and whimpering, and a ghastly stench rolled up her nostrils. What was that smell?

She fell the last metre, landing with a thud on hard concrete. Before she could catch her breath, warm furry creatures scampered all over her, smothering her with hot wet kisses.

“Eww, gross,” she giggled, remembering the licks of a puppy. But there were oodles of them! “Let me up,” she laughed, trying to scramble to her feet.

Sam shone her torch on the ground and counted at least thirty squirming puppies scabbling at her legs and nibbling at her ankles.

“Hey-y-y, no,” she said, trying to keep the noise down because of the lurking police dog. She raised the torch and lit up a large concrete yard surrounded by wooden kennels. The kennels were piled four high, their fronts covered in wire. Dog poo smothered the yard; the smell was sickening. The place looked like the inside of a prison without plumbing.

Warily, she walked towards the layered kennels, with puppies tumbling over her feet, trying to follow. She shone the torch inside each kennel. Dogs looked back at her with haunted faces. They moaned, some holding their paws up to the bars as if begging for help.

Sam gazed down at the puppies running around and back at the desperate faces of the adult dogs. This must be a puppy farm!

Sam had learnt about puppy farms at school. A lady from an animal protection place had explained how people were making loads of money breeding puppies in places like this. "Backyard breeding," she'd called it, and "puppy farming," or "puppy milling." They sold the puppies online for huge prices, while the dogs and puppies didn't get the proper care they needed. They were only there to make money for their owners. She said the authorities didn't have much power to control it as there were no strong regulations in place to stop it.

Sam tried to take in all that she saw. Dogs cried out from behind their cages and the puppies on the ground tried to clamber up for affection. How could she help them?

Taking out her phone, Sam took photos of the dogs in their kennels, one by one. Some looked elderly; all were thin. She noticed most were specific breeds such as spaniels, poodles, terriers, and retrievers. All the cute and pretty dogs. The puppies milling beneath her were a variety of breeds. They all seemed stressed and overexcited, and when she felt beneath their knotted fur, they were nothing but skin and bone.

The cages had water containers fixed to the wire, though they were empty. Sam searched the stinking yard for a tap, worrying that someone might see her torch shining and demand to know what she was doing. Behind the fence

she'd spotted a two-storied house looming over the yard. But it was in darkness. Hopefully, at this hour, anybody inside would be fast asleep.

Sam found a tap attached to the side of a sagging shed, and a rusted watering can lay nearby. She filled all the containers in the kennels, and the dogs madly lapped up the water. The puppies followed her everywhere, whining and rolling across her ankles. They were hungry and thirsty too.

Sam was placing the watering can back next to the shed when she noticed a tiny grey, furry bundle huddled against the wall. Bending down, she touched the small shape. It was cold.

As gently as she could, she picked up the wee bundle and cuddled it to her. Now she could hear the faintest whimper. It was a tiny puppy, and it was barely alive.

CHAPTER 2

VISITING THE VET

SAM STARED AT THE WEE PUPPY cupped in her hand. She shone her phone over its little body and saw matted grey fur and eyes squeezed shut. Beneath her fingertips, she felt brittle ribs and only a weak heartbeat.

She realised the puppy was starving. She had to get help, or it would die. But help, where? She couldn't afford a vet, and only the emergency vet would be open at this hour anyway. But she had to do something.

Unzipping her puffer jacket, Sam tucked the pup against her warm tummy and zipped the jacket back up. She now had to climb the fence again, worrying she might hurt the pup. But if she left it here, it would die anyway. Sam took a deep breath and ran at the fence.

She leapt up the wire and scaled the top as quick as

a cat, clambering safely back down the other side. “You okay?” she asked the pup on landing, peeking inside the jacket. It whimpered.

Sam sprinted down the alleyway, holding the jacket and its precious cargo against her. She knew the emergency vet was blocks away. How she’d pay, she’d worry about later.



Sam felt she was running the biggest endurance event of her life as she raced along the empty city streets. Finally, she saw the red sign flashing on the emergency vet clinic’s door – **OPEN**.

She crashed through the door. “I’ve got a starving puppy,” she garbled. “It’ll die if it doesn’t get help.”

“And your name?” asked the older woman receptionist.

Sam quickly scanned the woman’s name tag. “It doesn’t matter, Mrs Zhang. I can pay.” She rubbed the small mound beneath her jacket.

“We still need your contact details. The animal might require long-term treatment,” the receptionist said, smiling politely. But Sam noticed she’d already looked her up and down, taking in Sam’s broken sneakers, torn and tattered jeans, and long blonde hair falling loose and unruly about her pale face. She must wonder what a young teen like Sam

was doing out so late at night, and with a puppy.

“I found it lying on the street,” Sam said, improvising. “It must be a stray. It has no collar and it’s half-starved. Here, feel,” she said, holding the puppy out for her to touch.

“I still need your details,” the receptionist insisted, though kindly, Sam hoped.

Digging into the faded pocket of her jeans, Sam tugged out a wad of twenty-dollar notes. It was her family’s weekly rent money, but she’d just have to make it up again somehow. “Here, take this – it should cover everything,” she said, passing across half the wad of cash. “Please help.”

Li Zhang looked at the money, then stared into Sam’s worried green eyes. Sam could feel tears welling, but no way was she going to cry.

“Okay,” the receptionist said at last, sighing. “Hand the pup to me. But you’ll have to wait here while Mr Andrews examines it.”

“Thanks,” Sam said, passing the puppy to her and collapsing on a red vinyl sofa nearby. The receptionist disappeared through a door, calling, “Sean, can you have a look at this pup, please?”

Sam flicked aimlessly through a pet magazine while keeping an eye on the ticking clock on the wall: 11.45 p.m. Surely her parents would’ve noticed her gone by now? But

no, they had their own worries, and her mother probably wouldn't even be back from work yet. She tried to read an article about a pampered poodle and its prissy owner, but they both looked silly. All the while, she worried about the skinny puppy behind the closed door.

"Okay!" A red-headed middle-aged man finally burst through the door holding the puppy. "You're right, this pup's undernourished and riddled with parasites. I've treated the worms and given it its first feed for a long while, I'd say. We can save it, but it needs constant feeding, warmth and care. Li," he addressed the receptionist, "you said this young lady found the pup on the street?"

"That's what she told me," Mrs Zhang replied, smiling again at Sam.

"Well, we can't expect you to look after a stray," he said kindly to Sam. "It takes a lot of time, money and energy. We'll contact the animal shelter on your behalf."

"No!" Sam cried out before she had time to think. "I have to look after it." She thought of all the other dogs and puppies back at that horrible place. She wanted to tell this nice vet about them, but then she'd have to explain why she'd broken into the property in the first place. She had to care for at least one of those poor pups.

"Are you sure?" the vet asked doubtfully. "What will your parents say? And how will you pay for its care?"

"I have an after-school job," Sam said over-brightly. "And we just lost our old dog, Fred, so Mum, Dad and my kid brothers will love a puppy."

Both the vet and the receptionist looked closely at Sam, taking in her scruffy clothes and appearance. But they must've seen something else too, because after exchanging glances, the vet said, "Okay, then. Pup will need feeding with special milk powder about every four to six hours for the next week or so, then gradually weaned onto soft food. And you'll need to bring him in again for his shots. I will, of course, write all this down for you."

"He's a boy?" Sam said, as she listened carefully to the vet's instructions.

"Aye, a wee boy, only about four or five weeks old, I'd say. Too young to be away from his mother. You'll have to be his mother now," the vet said.

"I can do that. Though I've never had a dog ... I mean, not since Fred passed away, that is ..." Sam stammered, feeling her face redden.

"Of course," the vet said, as if he hadn't noticed her blunder, "and we can give you some bags of puppy formula, bottles, and teats for feeding. They were part of, um, ah – a raffle prize – that nobody's claimed."

This time, Sam pretended she didn't notice *his* blunder. She knew he was giving her the food; it had nothing to do

with a raffle. "Thank you, I promise I'll look after him," she said. She felt embarrassed, like she did when her family picked up meals from the Food Bank.

"What will you call him?" the receptionist asked, stepping in to ease the awkwardness.

"Bobby," Sam said, without a beat. She'd already named him when she'd first held him in her hands: a shaggy grey pup with a sweet face, floppy ears and sad brown eyes. She imagined he'd grow up to look just like the little dog in the story her granddad used to read to her. "Bobby was a famous terrier who lived in Scotland yonks ago."

"Ah, Greyfriars Bobby," the vet said, nodding. "The loyal wee Skye terrier that wouldn't leave his master's graveside."

"Yes!" Sam's face lit up. "You know the story?"

"Aye, I've even seen his statue in Edinburgh." The vet smiled. "And remember, if you have any questions or worries about his care, you can come here any time."

Sam gently took Bobby from the vet, popping him back beneath her warm puffer jacket. The vet passed her a bag of puppy formula, a plastic bottle and teats, telling her to return for anything else as she needed it. She tucked the food under her arm, thanked him again, and walked out of the clinic into the dark empty night.

CHAPTER 3

BACK TO CAMP

SAM FACED A LONG HIKE through dimly lit city streets to the urban caravan park where she lived with her family in emergency housing. As she strolled, she cuddled Bobby to her. He was breathing steadily and he felt warm. Thankfully, his first meal for a long time must've helped revive him.

It would be difficult to sneak him into her family's one-room cabin without waking her father and brothers. At least her mother would still be at work.

Usually, when Sam went out at night and came home late, she'd scramble up the gnarled rimu tree growing against their cabin and slip quietly through the open window onto the top bunk where she slept. Nobody heard her coming and going.

But with a puppy tucked inside her jacket it might not be so easy. She reassured herself she was an expert cat burglar and could climb anything, anywhere, anytime. After all, that's why the guys on the street employed her. So, when she reached the caravan park, she simply dodged past the glaring entrance lights and whipped around the back of the long row of caravans and cabins. She knew their cabin by the old trusty tree.

"Up we go," she whispered to Bobby as they hightailed it up the tree.

The window was open just as she'd left it. Before trying to crawl in as usual, she placed Bobby onto her top bunk. She then passed in his food and bottles and squeezed through herself.

There wasn't much room on the single top bunk, but she managed to cuddle under the blanket with Bobby. She lay on her side, the pup snuggling up to her for warmth. "That's a good boy, you be quiet, okay?" she murmured.

The cabin was darker than the night outside. She heard her father snoring loudly from the double mattress on the floor, and her brothers in the bunk below her slept soundly.

Curled up next to Bobby, she began to think about how she'd care for him. She thought of the dogs and puppies back at that ghastly back yard and wished she could help them all.

She must've fallen asleep despite her concerns, because the next thing she saw was the morning light playing on her father's snoozing face and the door creaking open as her mother arrived home. Sam ducked beneath the blanket and tugged Bobby closer.

The puppy started to whimper and whine loudly. Sam suddenly realised it was time for his next feed. He was hungry!

"What's that noise?" her mother hollered.

Sam tried to quieten Bobby, but he wanted the world to know he was hungry.

"What have you got up there, Samantha?" her mother demanded.

"I'm still sleeping, May. Shush," Sam's father grumbled from the mattress.

"Sounds like a puppy!" Sam's youngest brother, Luca, cried with delight, leaping from his bunk followed by his older brother, Max, wiping sleep from his eyes.

Sam looked down from her bunk to see four sets of eyes staring up at her.

"Come on, Samantha, spit it out," her mother said, flicking her work apron up at her. "Get down here and tell me what you're hiding."

"Like I said, I'm trying to sleep," her father grumbled again. "Can't this wait till morning?"

"It is morning," her mother bit back. "When was the last time you even saw the sun, Johnno. For goodness' sake, get up off that mattress."

Sam was surprised; she'd never heard her mother speak to her father quite so abruptly. She knew worse was to come.

"Samantha!" her mother yelled again. "Get down here, now." She only called Sam by her full name when she was in trouble.

"Okay," Sam said, "I'm coming." She climbed carefully down the bunk ladder, holding Bobby. He whimpered and her brothers cried out, "Wow!" and "Awesome!" when they spotted him.

"What are you doing with that ... that ... animal?" her mother gasped.

"I found him on the street. He's lost and hungry. He'll die if we don't care for him," Sam murmured.

"But we can't care for it," her mother said, swiping her apron across her flushed face. "We can't even care for ourselves." She looked daggers at their father, who was still struggling up from the mattress on the floor.

"Please, Mum, it's so cute and tiny. It won't eat much," Luca begged.

Their mother twisted her apron in her hands. "You know we're not allowed to keep pets here. The park boss will evict us if he sees it, and then we'll be homeless."

“This isn’t much of a home anyway if the kids can’t even keep a small pup,” their father said, scratching his bulging belly as he scrambled to his feet.

“Thanks for backing me up, Johnno,” their mother said, tossing her apron to the ground. “How about *you* explain to the kids why we have to live in a lousy one-room cabin in the first place.”

Sam felt sick listening to her parents bicker over something she’d caused. “Sorry, Mum,” she said, reaching out to touch her hand. “I’ll try to find someone else to care for Bobby.”

“You’ve called him Bobby?” her mother asked, her eyes glistening. “After Bobby in the story your grandpa used to read to you?”

Sam saw her mother’s face softening as she spoke. But then it gradually crumpled until she looked sad. “They were happy times. I’m sorry we can’t keep your Bobby.”

Her mother turned and walked out of the cabin, heading for the toilet block to shower after her long night at work. Sam noticed she’d never once dared to look at the cute puppy cradled in her arms.