

CHAPTER 1

The Perfect Dog?

Nine-year-old Kyla Hanton jumped up on the doorstep and ran her fingers through her short brown hair. Normally Kyla didn't care how she looked, but this was an important day!

Kyla's mother stepped up beside her and smiled. "You look fine," she said.

"Good," Kyla said. She reached out one finger and pushed the doorbell. "I want to look nice for my pug," she told her mother and older brother, Jason, "because my dog is going to be wonderful."

Jason rolled his eyes.

"My dog," Kyla continued, "is going to be beautiful."

"It'll probably look better than you do," Jason teased, tugging on a strand of Kyla's hair.

"My dog," Kyla said, ignoring her brother, "is going to be smart."

"Fm coming," a voice called from inside the house. A dog began to bark loudly in the background.

Kyla squirmed impatiently and glanced at the sign by the door. The paint was peeling, and the sign was crooked, but Kyla could still make out the words - Rosewood Kennels.

"My dog - " Kyla began.

There was a thump, and then the door swung open.

Just inside the door stood an elderly woman wearing a faded yellow dress. Her hair was gray, and bits of it stood on

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end as though she had just gotten out of bed a few moments before. But Kyla wasn't interested in the woman - all she wanted to see was the small black dog that the woman held in her arms.

"My dog - " Kyla said eagerly, reaching out to touch and pet and hold it.

But then she stopped and looked at the dog again.

Something was wrong. Surely this wasn't the wonderful, beautiful, smart pug that Kyla had come all these miles for. There must be some terrible mistake!

"Come in, come in!" the woman said, waving at them with her free hand.

"My dog?" Kyla asked, her eyes darting back and forth.

"Your dog!" Jason hissed in her ear. "Your dog is UGLY!"

The Hanton family filed into the house.

"Welcome," the woman said, smiling sweetly. "Welcome to Rosewood Kennels. Mind you, we're really not a kennel anymore. All my babies are gone, except for this one. Here, have a seat, Dearie. And here's a chair for you, Young Man. You must be tired after your long drive here today."

Mrs. Hanton nodded her head but didn't say anything.

The woman then realized that everyone was staring at the dog.

"Oh, my," the woman said. "Here you've come all this distance, and I haven't shown you your baby yet. This," she said, shifting the dog to her other arm, "is Petunia."

Mrs. Hanton nodded again and cleared her throat.

Kyla looked around the room quickly. Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe there was another black pug in the room,

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another dog that was as wonderful and beautiful and smart as she had been expecting. Any other dog would be fine, just not the one that lay limply in the woman's hands.

"And I understand that Petunia is going to be all yours, Young Lady," the woman said. "Aren't you a lucky girl - a doggy of your very own!"

The woman held the dog out toward Kyla. Kyla just stared at it.

One of Mr. Hanton's friends had a pug puppy, so Kyla knew what to expect. She knew that pugs had funny flat faces and wrinkled foreheads and tight curly tails. But there was something wrong with this pug. Its flat face was covered with brown scabs. Sticky green drainage crusted around its eyes. One ear was hairless and flopped listlessly. The dog was so skinny that its ribs showed, and there was a large bald spot on its neck. No, this was not a normal pug.

Kyla turned from the dog and looked at her mother. Mrs. Hanton's face was covered by an enormous frown, and her eyebrows were raised.

"She's such a darling little thing, aren't you, Petunia Baby?" the woman cooed. "But she's been so sad since her puppies died. She needs someone to take good care of her, don't you, Petunia Baby?"

The lady thrust the dog into Kyla's hands and took a step backward.

"What stinks?" Jason muttered, backing up a step.

Kyla knew what smelled so terrible. It was the dog. The smell now was overpowering - not just a normal wet-doggy smell but the smell of garbage or rotten fruit.

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Poor thing! Kyla thought in horror. But I'd never want a pet like this. I want a perfect dog.

The black dog had been lying without movement in Kyla's arms. But now she raised her face to look at Kyla.

Two bright brown eyes fastened firmly on Kyla. The dog studied her carefully, and then slowly the small tail began to wag.

Kyla couldn't look away from the dog's eyes. They seemed to speak to her. Help me, they said. Care for me. Love me. The tail began to wag faster - and then faster again.

Kyla reached down one finger and gingerly touched the dog.

Petunia licked Kyla's hand and then snuggled close into her arms. Petunia's tail continued to thump happily.

Suddenly Kyla didn't care if the dog was ugly or skinny or smelled bad. She knew this dog needed her.

Mrs. Hanton was talking quietly to the woman. "I don't think we're interested," her mother said.

Kyla touched her mom's shoulder. "I want her," Kyla said.

Jason hooted in the background.

"Pardon me?" Mrs. Hanton asked. Her eyebrows shot even higher.

"I want her," Kyla said, firmer this time.

"Of course you do, Dearie," the woman said. She fussed around, gathering a faded pink leash and a frayed collar. "I have all of her things packed. Here's her bowl and her blanket, and here's a book I have on pugs. I won't be needing it anymore, and I thought maybe you'd like it."

"You want this dog?" Mrs. Hanton asked in a tight voice.

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“I want her,” Kyla said. “And she wants me.

The lady passed the blanket and leash to Jason, who held them at arm’s length. “I’m so glad my darling is going to a good home,” the woman bubbled. “She’s such a dear doggy. But my son doesn’t think I should be living alone anymore, and they won’t let me keep a pet in the retirement home.”

“I’ll take good care of her,” Kyla promised. The dog wagged its tail again when it heard Kyla’s voice.

Mrs. Hanton slowly pulled out her checkbook.

“That will be one hundred dollars,” the woman said. “A very good deal, I can tell you. You won’t find a dog like this just anywhere.”

“I hope not!” Jason whispered. Kyla glared at him, but the dog’s tail continued to wag gently.

The family was halfway down the sidewalk when the woman called from the doorsteps.

“Come back, Dearie,” she said.

Kyla tightened her grip. She wasn’t going to let Petunia return to that house, no matter what the woman wanted.

But the woman wasn’t calling for Petunia. Instead, she waved a piece of paper in the air. “Don’t forget your baby’s registration papers,” the woman called. “Her real name is Black Petunia Lass.”