

A dog named

RANDALL



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A Dog Named
Randall

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Illustrations by
Marc Chalvin

Based on a true story.

This book is dedicated to the O'Connor family
Kieran, Christine, Jonathan, Alanna, Aine.

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The Somebody and the Dog

My dad thought he was a dog. He was friendly to everyone and never held a grudge. Sometimes, just for fun, he'd bark at the neighbors. They didn't really enjoy that, but I thought it was great. He and I and Gonzo (our real St. Bernard) always played together, just us three guys.

Dad, like most dogs, couldn't earn a living. He was a writer, but for some reason, his work didn't sell, which made him sadder and mom madder. Finally dad ditched New York City for Mexico. He ditched us too, though. Now I guess he's living the

life of a dog down there in the Mexican sun.

Mom kept me but got rid of Gonzo. It was just about the time when her new boyfriend moved in. I didn't rag her about it, but it left me wondering.

Years ago, mom thought she was a nobody, so she tried with all her heart to be a somebody. She went to an orthodontist for braces to straighten her teeth, bought special underthings for a curvier shape, performed exercises for a tummy more flat and designed and sewed her own clothes. She spent hours pouring over fashion and art magazines, and she practiced being gracious and charming by watching YouTube videos of Jackie Kennedy and Laura Bush. Sometimes, she even absentmindedly wore pearls to bed.

After all this, she became a successful interior designer and made over people's homes with curves and colors. But somehow for her, life was never quite right.

The dishes were always too dirty, no matter how hard they were cleaned, and the rooms were never tidy enough. I told myself that I would understand when I was older.

Five years later, I still didn't understand, but I thought that by the time I was an adult, I would have life figured out. I was only twelve, so that was a long way off. In the meantime, with Gonzo out of the picture, I searched for a new best friend and found him. Or he found me. Charlie was a mix between a German Shepherd and a Doberman. Dogs were my favorite animals, and I thought of them as dad's relatives. Most of my classmates were into sports and video games, of course, but I stuck to canines. They were just more reliable.

Poor Charlie was running loose in Central Park when we met, and he was little more than a scruffy skeleton. I caught him, nursed him back to health, and put

him up for adoption, but nobody wanted him. I couldn't figure that out, either. He looked fierce, I guess, with all that thick brown-and-black fur, and he barked a lot with a deep guard-dog voice. I begged mom to let us to keep him, and pretty soon he was family.

Without Charlie, I would have never met Randall. My adventures with Randall began one sunny autumn afternoon, when I took Charlie out on our usual walk in Central Park. Gene, mom's boyfriend—who, by the way, I thought mom was going to marry—came with us. He didn't pretend to be a dog, and he did earn a living. He used to work for an advertising agency on Madison Avenue. Now he was working with mom and creating some original artwork. They'd just purchased the old Hooper Cooper mansion as a showcase for their new decorating and antique business, and that was also where we lived. The Hooper Cooper was a landmark

building. It was even showcased once in New York City tourist books. When the Coopers passed on, nobody wanted to touch the property, let alone live there. The place was too big, too grand, and too expensive to keep up, but it was really beautiful. People thought the mansion looked like a church; to me, it was more like Disney. Charlie seemed to love it. He had a lot of space to run around.

Gene didn't come on our walks very often. To be honest, I thought he was angling for brownie points with me. He'd never been married before, and he wasn't used to kids or dogs, so Charlie and I were some kind of practice. He'd been practicing for five years now, but I guess some people are slow to catch on.

I can't explain why, but I had a hunch something would happen on our walk—and it did. We went into the park at Eighty-Fourth Street near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A frizzy white dog came

trotting toward us. A pink bow bobbed on top of its head, and it wore a rhinestone collar attached to a pink leash. It was a bit over the top, but it did look cute.

A small old woman with graying hair that matched her gray tweed suit held the other end of the leash. She stared at Charlie and me with piercing blue eyes, and I realized that I'd seen her before. Charlie and I had passed her and the frizzy dog all summer long on our walks. Today she stopped Gene and said, "Excuse me. My name is Olga, Olga Frankfurt. And this is my dog, Muffy."

"Hi," Gene said. "I'm Gene and—"

"And I'm Ned, and this is Charlie," I added.

Gene tickled the frizzy white dog along its back. "Muffy wuffy," he said. I thought that comment was pretty corny, but I kept my mouth shut. The guy was trying to impress Olga.

"Muffy goes with me everywhere," Olga

said. "I can carry her in my handbag."

Gene laughed. "We all need portable pets."

Then Olga turned to me. "I'm desperate; otherwise, I wouldn't have started talking like this. I've seen you walking your dog all summer. So I feel in a way that I know you. They say at the dog run in the park that you rescued your dog. Didn't you also rescue an injured pigeon?"

"Yeah, that's me," I said. "I'm into lost-and-found."

"I'm a diplomat for the German government, and I'm leaving next week. I need someone to take my place."

"Oh, I don't speak German," I said.

Olga laughed and handed Gene her business card. "You can check my credentials on the United Nations website. Ned, I wonder if you would come with me tomorrow to meet Randall. He's an abandoned dog. I make sure he has food and water and that he's doing okay. If you

can't take over, maybe you'd know someone who can."

"I don't know..."

"Randall's special. One of a kind. After you meet him, you'll understand. There's wisdom in him but, he's a lost soul." Her eyes began to tear up a little. "I haven't had any luck with him, but you seem to have a rapport with animals."

"That means you have a connection with animals," Gene explained.

"Could you come at seven o'clock sharp?" Olga asked. "Right at the entrance to the park, here at Eighty-Fourth Street, tomorrow morning?"

Charlie pulled at the leash. "I can't promise, but I'll try," I said, and then Gene and I and Charlie went on our way.

Gene handed me Olga's card. "Imagine," he said. "Diplomats crying and talking to strangers in the park."

"She's okay," I said.

Gene, Charlie, and I finished our long

walk to Bethesda Fountain, which I had seen many times. My gym teacher took us jogging in the park because he said it was better than the indoor laps on the gym track. I loved that fountain. At the very top was the statue of the Angel of the Waters. Gene and I threw in a couple of coins for good luck, and then we went home. I couldn't remember exactly what I'd wished for.

Chapter 2

Meet the Chow

The next morning was chilly and gray. Mom grumbled. “A deal’s a deal,” I reminded her. She and Gene had bargained with me. They’d take me to see the dog if I’d study fifteen minutes extra every day. We sat in our Chevy at Eighty-Fourth Street and Fifth Avenue and waited for Olga.

“You sure she said this morning?” mom asked, just as a sleek gray Mercedes with UN plates pulled up alongside us. The driver was Olga, there at seven o’clock sharp as promised. She flashed us a big teeth-whitened smile. “I knew you

wouldn't let Randall down. Follow me."

Trailing behind Olga was a cinch as there was no traffic. We drove east and then up First Avenue. At 110th Street, I spotted an animal shelter and perked up. "Mom, maybe we could visit there later!"

"We don't need another pet, Ned," she said.

"I just wanted to look."

"You shouldn't be so excited about that place, Ned, especially with how much you love dogs," Gene said. He hadn't eaten yet and was cranky.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Gene, don't..."

"Oh, c'mon, the kid's old enough," he said to her, and then he turned around to me. "If the dogs and cats there don't get adopted, they get put to sleep. Hundreds of them in their cages are waiting for love or death."

I felt a hollow feeling sink inside me. "Is that where Gonzo went?" I asked. I knew

Gonzo had gone away, but I hadn't really thought about how or where, and mom had never given me a straight answer.

"That's enough talk, guys. Let's just listen to the radio."

We went uptown into Harlem and turned at 124th Street to the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge and down a curvy ramp. A bit further, Olga signaled for us to stop. She rolled down her window. "We're here," she said in a loud whisper. "Randall's home."

Gene and mom stayed in the car and told me to go ahead. I got out of the car quietly, stood by Olga, and took a look around. Randall's Island was a park with some trees, stubbly grass, and a bush or two. "Ohhh, I get it," I said, "*Randall's Island*." I rubbed my hands together and did some knee bends to stay warm.

"Quiet. You don't want to scare him." Olga pulled a bag of food from the trunk of her car and pointed toward a big poof of rust-brown fur that was making its way

toward us. I squinted. The shape got bigger and bigger until it was about six feet away. Then it just stopped and stared.

“Randall,” Olga whispered.

“Geez!” I sucked the breath in through my teeth. He looked like a shrunken lion. A scraggly mane burst out from around his head. He had a dull, rust-colored coat with brown patches of dirt, and his hair was full of burrs. His fur stood on end like he’d caught his paw in an electric socket. He took a few steps sideways toward Olga.

“He’s a Chow, right?”

“Right.”

“How’d you find him?”

“I come out here to write poetry. One day last fall, I caught a glimpse of him. I’ve come three times a week to feed him ever since.”

“Wow, Olga, he’s some dog.”

“He’s raggle-taggle and bedraggled.”

Randall looked into my eyes and seemed to say, “I’m ruler of these parts, and lost

within them.” He stretched his whole body toward Olga like a rubber band.

“Here,” she said. “Food’s the way to earn his trust.”

“What’s this?”

“Cooked broccoli.”

I stared at Olga; had she gone bonkers? She smiled knowingly. “Why not dog food, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

She took out a beef treat from her purse and handed it to me. “Go ahead, try it.”

I took the dog treat and held it out to Randall. He put his head down and began to step sideways, whining a little. Then Olga handed me the vegetable. “Go on, give him this now. Throw it.” I tossed it toward Randall. It landed with a squish. “Here’s another,” she said. “Throw it closer to him.” I did, and that time the broccoli hit his front paws. He gulped it down. I wondered if he thought vegetables were colored bones. I took a step toward him, and

he showed his teeth and growled, slinking down into the stubbly grass. Maybe, just maybe, he was doing that for show.

“Watch out, Ned,” Olga said. “He sticks to your heart like peanut butter.”

“Olga, why does he go for broccoli?”



“Dogs can eat almost anything we can. Besides, being vegan is healthier for him.”

“What’s vegan?”

“Vegan is a plant-based diet without any meat or dairy in it. Muffy and I have eaten green for years. Randall’s taken to it like a “reincarnated Buddha!” He’s my vegan baby.”

I couldn’t wait to tell my friend Hersch that I’d found a vegan dog. Or better yet, a reincarnated Buddha.

“You see, Ned, as a diplomat, it’s my job to be friendly,” Olga said. “Then I got to thinking one day, why not be friendly to cows and chickens and lambs and pigs?”

“And vegan’s friendly?”

“Dining on fruits, veggies, legumes, and nuts doesn’t require killing. I believe we’re meant to be friendly to one another. But sometimes we forget. Even Randall, when given the chance, prefers friendly... at least in his diet.”

“Can I throw more?”

Olga gave me more veggies. “I almost caught him one day,” she said. “I got close enough to grab his collar. He got scared and growled. I got scared and let go. Now he’s facing another winter alone.”

Geez, I thought, *all he needed was a little hamburger and he’d be ready to go home.* Meanwhile, Olga reached out her hand to Randall, but he edged away. She started crying and took a tissue from her coat pocket.

I understood. Randall had something powerful that went beyond how crazy he looked. It went beyond his wary attitude; it just went beyond. It must have been *soul*. That was beyond everything.

I remembered that dad had this glimmer, this light. No matter how bad things got, he had a light in his eyes. Randall was like that.

Gene opened the car door. “Time to go, Ned.”

“I gotta go, Olga. I’ll see if I can help,” I

said. She set out the rest of the food and a pail of water. “If I can’t, I’ll try to find someone.” I started toward the car, and then I heard this sound. It was pitiful and eerie, like an old man crying.

“What’s that?”

“That’s Randall,” Olga said.

I turned around. Sure enough, it was Randall. He was standing alone and looked very small in the stubbly grass.

“He doesn’t want us to leave,” Olga said.

I made up my mind right then and there. I took a picture of Randall with my cell phone and texted it to Hersch. “Check out my new project! —N”

Chapter 3

A Little Persuasion

“Randall needs us, mom.”

Mom, Gene, and I were in the basement kitchen. The basement was like a separate apartment that housed mom and Gene’s offices and was where we would live until the renovation was over. Mom had really rolled the dice with redoing the Hooper Cooper mansion. It was high class, sure, but it was a high price, too.

Mom stood at the sink, peeling potatoes for dinner. Gene sat at the table, watching her and eating an apple. I leaned against the refrigerator.

“I’m sure someone else will feed him,”
mom said.

“Olga says she’s the only one.”

“He looked dangerous to me. Didn’t he,
Gene?”

“Ned knows his dogs, don’t you, kid?”
Gene said, chewing his apple.

“He has to put up a tough front,” I said.
“He’s out there all alone. He’s hungry,
scared, and lonely.”

“There are dogs right here in the city,”
mom said.

“It’s a sign, mom, Olga talking to us last
week out of the blue.”

“A sign, Ned? That’s how you make de-
cisions? Do you think Gene and I bought
this old mansion because of a sign?”

“You bought the Hooper Cooper to res-
cue it. It was worn out and needed help
big-time. Just like Randall. Except Ran-
dall won’t cost so much.”

Mom dropped a potato in the sink.
“Comparing Randall to this house isn’t

fair, Ned, and you know it.” She picked up the potato again. “Gene and I work for the money, and this place is part of—ouch!” She cut her finger with the peeling knife. She ran the cold water over it. “It’s part of our business and we’re working to pay off the loan.”

Gene jumped up. “I’ll get a bandage, babe.”

Mom held her finger tight.

“All you have to do is open your heart,” I said as she dried her finger and put on the bandage. “All Gene has to do is drive me three times a week.” Gene looked startled and stopped chewing the apple. “I’ll clean your office. I’ll study extra.”

Mom shook her head. “I don’t understand it. Why this wild dog?” She was softening.

“Gene won’t mind. Would you, Gene?”

“Ah, well...”

“It’d be our chance to do something together. Like you said.”

“I was thinking of a football game or a movie or—”

“This could be our project. You and me.”

“Three times a week is a lot, Ned.”

“This wreck of a mansion is your dream, and I live in it seven days a week. What about my dream?”

“What’s your dream, Ned?”

I had to say something. “That people would care.”

Gene looked at mom. “I’m happy to drive the kid.”

Chapter 4

Getting to Know Him

Gene and I got in the car for our first of many trips to visit Randall. I was nervous, and my stomach was churning. When we got there, Gene stayed in the car while I got the box of food and a pail of water from the trunk. I tried to be quiet, like Olga had showed me, but my shoes crunched on the brush under my feet. I whistled and looked. Nothing. I whistled a couple more times.

No Randall.

The box of food was heavy, so I sat it down with the water. I started to wonder

if Randall was gone. I saw nothing but stubbly grass and bushes. Maybe he only showed himself for Olga. I was ready to leave, but then I saw a flash of rust-colored fur. Randall! His head poked up from behind a bush and looked my way.

“Hey, Randall!” I grabbed a Big Mac from the box. “This is what you’ve been waiting for.” I threw the hamburger toward him. He stayed his ground. “It’s okay. Olga sent me,” I said. Then I bit into my peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, tempting him to eat.

“Mmm!”

Randall stared me down. I’d brought some veggies along just in case, so I threw them to him. He went for them right away. Habit, probably. I moved his box of food down into the brush and put the rest of my sandwich in for good luck. In the box I had put carrots, broccoli, and another Big Mac. I set the water next to the box and took a deep breath. Randall and I had

broken the ice. He'd be a pushover for me by the next visit after those Big Macs.

I walked back to the car. Gene had a broad smile. "Hey, kid! You did good."

When we went back to see Randall a couple of days later, I had a surprise in store for me. This dog was a really picky eater. He'd eaten all the vegetables and the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, but the burgers hadn't been touched—at least not by Randall. He'd knocked one over, and some icky bugs crawled in and out of it, having a McDonald's party.

My secret weapon when I tamed Charlie had been bacon, but meat wasn't the magic bullet for Randall. "The vegan baby," as Olga called Randall, was the real thing. I texted Hersch on the drive back home, "Chow's green only.—N."

All through the fall and winter, Gene and I went to Randall's Island three times a week.



We turned Randall into a group project: mom bought the food, I prepared it, and Gene drove. Somehow, Randall was always waiting. Mom was happy that Gene

and I were getting along, but she started to complain about the expense.

“Feeding him is much cheaper than buying a new dog,” I pointed out. Besides, at the beginning, I had asked mom to buy steak.

“Steak?” mom had asked. “Does he want it on a silver platter, too?” But soon I switched to the Olga diet plan. Mom didn’t get that, either. “Ned, most dogs eat dog food,” she reminded me.

“We’ll do that, Mom,” I said. “Go to Vegan Essentials online. Get enough for Charlie too.”

“Vegan Essentials?”

“They have canned vegan dog food,” I said. “And I’ll make more of those peanut-butter-and-jellies. I’ll eat with him. It’ll help us bond.”

“A vegan dog?”

“Mom, I swear, every time I offer him bacon or a Big Mac, he just whimpers and scampers off sideways, and his hair

stands on end.”

She had been going over some paperwork on the mansion, and I was bothering her a little. She sighed. “Reminds me of your father.”

“How’s that?”

“You were too young to remember,” she said. “But your dad couldn’t stand meat. He ate fish sometimes, but he never liked it.” She got lost in thought for a moment and then looked at me. “Ned, can you be thrifty and give the dog PB&Js with the vegan dog food?”

“I can give him PB&Js and PB&Bs.”

“What’s PB&B?”

“Peanut butter and banana.”

Chapter 5

Hersch

Winter was approaching. The longer Randall lived in the wilds of New York City, the less chance he had of surviving. So I felt pushed to make this project work. Gene and mom were busy restoring the house, and so Gene wasn't happy about driving me to Randall's Island. One day in late October when the wind was blustery, I had to beg him into taking me.

I went through the routine. I got the food and water from the trunk and walked crunch, crunch, crunch to the edge of the brush, stepping on the hardened leaves.

I whistled. Nothing. I whistled again. Randall! His head popped up from the tall grass, halfway closer. I threw handfuls of veggies and he went for them. I unwrapped and bit into one of my sandwiches. Randall had been rushing off the moment he got his food, but lately he'd begun to trust me long enough to hang around. He parked himself in the grass while Gene sat in the car.

I walked slowly and softly towards him and stood nearer to him than ever before. "Maybe we can talk a little, Randall. Just you and me. Guess what I lie awake at nights wondering." Randall looked up with his deep brown eyes. "How in the world did you ever get to Randall's Island? Maybe someday you'll tell me. Huh?" Randall was very still. I threw him a piece of my sandwich. "You know, I go out of the way for you. My best friend, Hersch, is getting mad at me. Well, think about it, Randall. If you were a human and chose to be with

a dog instead of your best human friend, how you would feel? And I used to hang out with Hersch all the time. Football after school. Movies. Xbox. Laser tag...”

Randall didn't understand my words, but I could tell he understood heart to heart. Or maybe the weather was getting to me. “Hersch is a big guy, you know,” I went on. “A real all-star athlete. And he loves to draw. He draws everything, everywhere, all the time. I caught him one day in study hall. He was drawing the insides of a frog for science class, because he didn't believe in cutting them open.”



“Maybe he’ll draw you one day, Randall. That’d be fun. Drawing’s considered sissy stuff, though, so he doesn’t show his drawings to anybody. He plays football, but he’s really a kid Picasso. His dad wants him to take over his shoe business, so Hersch draws people with no feet. Crazy, huh?”

I threw Randall the rest of the sand-

wich. He gulped it down and started to lick his paw and whine a little. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “*You* still have feet. Did anybody ever teach you to shake paws?” I bent down toward Randall’s front paw.



He stiffened, so I left it alone. “I love you, Randall, and I don’t want to lose Hersch. We’re very different. He’s funny—I’m serious. Hersch has a dad, and mine’s in Mexico.”

Suddenly, Randall scampered off sideways. “Randall?” At least he’d stayed for a visit. Olga had said he *ate* friendly, but so far he wasn’t winning any medals in the friendly-to-Ned department.

Olga told me that Randall’s menu was not only good for animals. If folks would eat like Randall, it would save our water and land from being messed up by animal waste from billions and billions of farm animals. It was weird to think that fruits and veggies could make our planet healthier. Simple really.

Randall sure had made me see things in a different way. If I could trap him, maybe I could spend more time with him at home and help him be more friendly. I decided to check it out with Hersch.

“Hersch, I need your help.”

“With what?”

He was sketching the football field while we hung out on the bleachers. Practice was over, and the rest of the team had cleared off.

“I wanna trap him.”

“Trap who?”

“Randall.”

Hersch stopped drawing and looked up at me, annoyed.

“The Chow. Is that what we’re talking about again?”

“Stop calling him ‘the Chow.’ His name is Randall.”

“You talk about him all the time. You’re like a broken record.”

“Will you help me trap him?”

“Ned, I’m really busy with practice.”

“With practice or drawing?”

“Either one,” he said.

I could tell Hersch wasn’t in a good mood. “Look,” I said, “I know we haven’t

hung out lately, but Randall...he means a lot to me. I—I don't know why, really.” Hersch didn't look up. “He sorta trusts me now. I bet if he stayed still long enough, he'd make a good drawing. And if we trap him—”

“Why can't your mom and Gene do it?”

“They're busy and starting to get a little tired of him. Hersch, I need your help. Are you in or out?”

Hersch kept drawing the goal post, trying to make it as detailed as possible. “I'll think about it, man. Look, Morgan and I are going to a party on Halloween. Why don't you come along and spend some time with humans for a change?” Morgan was Hersch's girlfriend, and they did make a cute couple. The next week, we went trick-or-treating and then to a party at Morgan's house. Hersch dressed as Salvador Dali, and Morgan went as Princess Leia, and I dressed up as Randall. Hersch spent most of the time help-

ing Morgan pour sodas and cut pizzas. They acted like Randall and me—Morgan played hard to get, and Hersch twisted himself out of shape for some attention. I went home early to walk Charlie, and I felt a bit down in the dumps. When I got back to my room, I looked at the spoils of the trick-or-treating: Snickers, Reese's Pieces, Gummy Bears, Chuckles, and Slim Jims. I gulped them down. Then I threw up in the middle of the night.

Halloween was the start of the holiday season, and November was the beginning of the cold weather. Somehow Randall was still going strong. I was amazed at how well he held up, and it got me thinking. Before Thanksgiving break, I did a report in school about Randall's green-friendly diet. I told the class how strong and healthy he seemed to be, even though he lived in the wild. How funny it was to watch this big guard dog gulping down broccoli, carrots, leafy greens, and sweet

potatoes instead of hamburger. If a vegan diet was good enough for Randall and Billie Eilish and Paul McCartney, it might be right for us.

I played a video of rescued farm animals at Happy Heart's Animal Rescue in New Jersey. There was a beautiful calf. Her name was Beatrice. She was sweet and friendly. She ran after the caregiver like a dog. There were baby chicks all fluffy and peeping and a lamb named Sweetie with her mother. It would be great if our class could take a field trip and meet the animals. To see the pigs, cows, chickens, turkeys, lambs and goats being cared for and living their lives in peace would be a good thing. Hersch seemed to like the report, which was great, because his opinion meant the most to me.

“Hey, Ned, good job,” he said afterwards.

“Thanks, Hersch. Do you think it made a difference?”

“It made a difference to me,” he said,

but then he checked his iPhone. “Hey, see ya later. I’m getting a hot cider with Morgan.”

“Yeah, see ya.” Pfft. She had him on a short leash.

For dinner that night, mom served veal scallopini with mashed potatoes, peas, and a salad. I stared at the veal patty. The veal patty stared back. It had been a baby cow like Beatrice, the one in the Happy Hearts video. Her life had been taken away for five minutes of my chewing.

Mom and Gene were talking about an Egyptian chaise lounge that was being delivered tomorrow. Suddenly, they turned to look at me. “Ned!” mom exclaimed. “What are you doing with your head in your plate? Are you sick?”

“I’m kissing meat good-bye!”

“You’re what?”

“I’m going ‘green friendly’.”

Chapter 6

Nightmare

That night I went to my room after dinner and after walking Charlie. I felt washed out. I crawled into to bed and turned on the TV. My eyes kept closing, so I just listened.

Next thing I knew, I found myself at the reservoir with Hersch. “Let’s do the reservoir once around,” Hersch said. “You’re the jock. Go ahead of me; you’re faster,” I said. “It’s a beautiful day. Funny no one else is here.” We went into the park at Ninety-Fourth street and onto the lane that goes round the reservoir. The sun glistened on the smooth glassy water where

usually ducks swam...but not today.

“Uh-oh,” Hersch said. “I forgot my pad and pencil.”

“Ah, Hersch, don’t look now, but I think you’ve got hooves on.”

“What?”

“Hooves.”

“Man, you’re right, and so do you!” We headed uptown on the narrow path. But I could see from behind that Hersch had also grown ears and horns.

“Hersch!”

“Yeah?”

“Turn around.”

“Hersch, I don’t know how to put this... but your face...your face is magnificently steer.”

“Yeah that ‘Clear’ cream really knocks out the blemishes.”

“Steer, Hersch! Steer,” I said. “Not clear.”

“Hey man!” Hersch said. “Yours, too! And you’ve finally got muscle...been hitting the gym, huh?”

“Not really. They seemed to be there suddenly.”

“I never noticed before, but there are a lot of trees. I’ll be right back,” Hersch said. “I gotta draw this.”

“You could use your tail as a paint brush,” I laughed. “You’d need some paint for color...” My voice began sounding hollow and faraway like I was talking into a chamber that echoed. “Hersch? Where’dya go?” But then everything began changing. The skies shaded to dark and the reservoir pond turned red. I heard a thud behind me, and I jumped forward. A tall steel door blocked the path. Then I heard another thud in front of me...another steel door...I was sandwiched between steel. A scary feeling was coming over me. The trees alongside me started crying a pitiful, eerie cry like Randall made when I first met him.

“Hersch?”

Coming here was a bad idea. I began

sweating. My heart was beating fast. A strength and power surged through me. I readied myself and rammed open the steel door.

Out of the opened door, a large warehouse of farm animals of every kind—cows, chickens, pigs, ducks, turkeys, rabbits, sheep, baby calves, baby chicks—came running, flapping, and hobbling toward me. “Help us, help us! Please tell them to stop the killing!” Ghosts of the dead and dying floated in the air.

“Don’t let them out, stupid!” A raspy voice yelled. “Shut the damn door.” And then I saw it was the Animal Protein King. He was on a throne of bones and gristle in the middle of the warehouse. He looked like an old clown. His hair was red and curly. The pupils of his eyes were large dollar signs. His face was white and pasty. His crown of steer teeth and diamonds kept falling off. He was constantly yelling at the amino acids to pick it up.

“Throw him away!” the AP King yelled. “Throw him away!” Men in white coats came and held onto me.

“Please, your majesty, I haven’t done anything,” I said. “The animals are begging for their lives and you haven’t done anything to help them. We’re asking you for a little mercy.”

“You selfish beast,” he said. “Be thankful that you’ll be contributing to the world. How else would people get their protein?” He began laughing hysterically, “And their clogged arteries and obesity. Ha! Ha! Ha! Throw him away! Throw him away!”

One worker yelled. “You heard the king! Throw him away!” I went into another world filled with blazing pain. I saw a light in the distance and found myself floating toward it. I could faintly see the outline of a majestic steer ahead of me —hooves and horns and all.

Hersch! Oh, Hersch, where have you been?”



“Hey, Ned,” Hersch whispered.” I got my pencil and paper, but they caught me. They put out my eyes. They don’t want the world to know...but I drew a blind drawing with my heart...here.”

Hersch! I’ll get my dad. My dad’ll help us...hang on a minute...Dad? You gotta see this...you gotta stop it...DAD! *Where are you?*

“Ned! Wake up! Ned!”

I woke up to see Gene sitting on my bed. I was gasping for air. The covers were on the floor. I had turned on my back with my head hanging over the bed. I righted myself, put the covers back, and scrunched down into the warmth.

“You okay, Ned?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” I said. “Just a bad dream is all.”

Charlie was sitting up, wagging his tail.

“Can I get you something?”

“No, Gene, I’ll be fine. Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

“Do you want me to leave the light on?”

“That’s okay.”

“We’re here if you need us.”

“Thanks, Gene.” I said. “See ya in the morning.”

“See ya then.”

Charlie made three turns, put his nose on his paws, and went back to sleep. In spite of Charlie’s snoring, I could hear Gene and mom talking.

“Is he all right?”

“He had a scary dream,” Gene said. “He’ll be okay.”

“I worry about him,” mom said. “I wish he was like other boys his age.”

“He wouldn’t be Ned then.”

Chapter 7

The Holiday Season

A hawk! I was with Randall when I heard a loud, shrill “Kye, kye, kye.” I looked up through the gray glare of the November skies.

Hawks are beautiful but fierce. They can attack dogs. Luckily, Randall wasn’t a small dog. Still, many dangers lurked in the outdoors, and not just the weather. I took my jacket off and waved it around. The hawk circled and then flew toward Central Park.

After Gene drove me home, I went to tell mom about it. She sat at her desk, pol-

ishing her nails. Charlie was tied down to the desk at her feet, and they were listening to *Learn French in Ten Hours*. Mom always listened to that CD before meeting an important client. Her clients all spoke English, but she was prepping to throw in a word or two of French. It was supposed to make her seem fancy, like holding your pinky out while sipping from a teacup.

Mom looked up at me and started blowing on her nails. “Hi, uh, *bonjour!*”

“Mom, I chased a hawk away from Randall.”

“He’s one lucky dog.” Mom looked tired and seemed edgy. She rubbed her eyes, and her eyeliner made shadowy smudges.

“You’d feel better if you’d go green friendly like me, you know.”

“I’m not gonna be vegan, Ned.”

“Just a thought,” I said. “It feels really good. I feel happier and have more energy. I finish my homework in under an hour these days. It used to take me three.

You said dad ate that way.”

“Well, he’s not here, Ned.”

“Can I at least cook a Tofurky for Thanksgiving?”

“If you cook something edible and don’t burn the house down, you can cook whatever you like. I always thought men should learn how to cook.” She winked at me, a little happier.

So I cooked my Tofurky. Mom filled in by cooking the rest of the meal, of course. And she and Gene asked if I’d cook another one for our Christmas dinner.

The snowy weather came. Holiday lights made the New York skyline look like it was covered in glowing jellybeans. How could Randall sleep in the snow? He wasn’t an Alaskan sled dog.

“Why don’t you and I make Randall a doghouse?”

But Gene was an artist, not a carpenter. I don’t think he knew the difference between a hammer and a saw. The dog-

house we built looked like it had exploded. We decided to go to Target and buy one instead. The store-bought house was a big improvement on our homemade one. It had a dark green roof and off-white sides. It was heavy-duty, too, so the winds wouldn't blow it over. Gene and I both had to carry it, and it was the first time Gene came with me to greet Randall up close. We even put a sign inside the kennel that read, "Happy Holidays, Randall!"

That night I slept soundly with Charlie snoring by my bed and knowing that Randall had a roof over his head. My dad would have been pleased too. But a couple of days later when we went back to visit Randall, the house was gone. We didn't know who took it, but I kept thinking how wrong it was for someone to steal it. Randall was still half wild, but he was at risk in this weather without some sort of shelter. It was becoming a lot of work and worry caring for him.

Dad would have urged me keep on try-

ing, keep on going, keep on loving. Dad had changed a lot of situations into good ones with animals. And he'd created a lot of bad ones with mom. He would put on a funny hat and bring us dark chocolate whenever trouble stirred between him and mom. We all ate a lot of dark chocolate. I got practically chubby before Dad finally left for Mexico.

That night I dreamed I was visiting the Angel of the Waters statue. The angel told me to look in the bottom of the fountain. As I did, the waters turned to fire that didn't burn, but instead warmed Randall in the bitter cold. I felt better after that dream and had more hope. Maybe soon I'd be able to put a leash on Randall and bring him home. After all, I'd seen in a nature video where Jane Goodall had to sit near the chimps' space for three years before they accepted her. *Geez, Randall, don't take three years!*

Christmas flew by, the best one since

Dad left. I got a new red collar for Charlie and some veggie treats for Randall. I decided to make a New Year's resolution to lighten up. When you try to push people, they can push back just as hard. Maybe Randall felt pressured.

I would go with the flow. There was the Chinese way. I could choose from Tai Chi, Chi Gong, and the martial arts. I thought classes in one of those might help. I might be more patient about this Randall project and could connect with Randall's Chinese roots. But I decided on what I knew best: toys. I called Hersch. "You, me, Target, new video games for Wii. You in?"

"The day I turn that down, Ned, you can send me to juvenile hall."

So that day ended up being fun, and mom was happy to not hear about Randall for awhile. Truthfully, Randall wore me out. I mean, just how much did I have to do before he preferred me to the wind, cold, and menacing hawks?

“Just between friends,” I’d said to Randall once, “ya gotta try to loosen up. You’re a pedigree, a blueblood, and you’re acting like a surly mistake. Can you give it your all and try trusting more? Comfort and fun are waiting.”

Randall looked at me like he knew what I was saying, but he wasn’t telling.

Randall had changed my whole life. Except for Hersch, none of my friends seemed to understand, and I was beginning to be seen as a weird loner. My report on veganism hadn’t helped either, although I did notice some of my classmates getting a salad instead of their usual sloppy joe in the cafeteria.

Still, Hersch was always looking out for me, and he did his best to keep me in the mix. He wanted to hang out with both me and Morgan, so he gave me the number of Morgan’s pretty friend Dakota, hoping it would lead to a double date. That was a disaster in the making.

“She’s super smart,” he said. “She’s in the eighth grade and goes to Hunter.”

“Hunter?”

“Hunter High School for the intellectually gifted. She’s your age and you’re both brainiacs, so I figure you’ll have a lot in common.” Hersch always told it like it was.

I called Dakota on Facetime, but I was nervous and the entire thing seemed really stiff. We finally warmed up a bit.

“Ned,” Dakota said, “I’m heading to tennis practice tomorrow at the Yorkville club. I don’t really like it, but I’m planning ahead. I need to play a sport to get into college. You wanna come with me?”

Za-zoom! I saw myself in white Wimbledon shorts with a tennis trophy in one hand and a trophy girlfriend on the other. But during the imagined applause, a faint shadow of a Chow also waited for veggies. “Well, uh, actually, I can’t make it tomorrow.”

“Why not?”

“I have to feed Randall.”

“A sick relative?”

“A dog. Randall’s a dog.” I could see her face turn pale. “An *abandoned* dog.” An awkward silence hung in the air. “He has no one but me.”

“Oh.”

The conversation ended less than a minute later, and Hersch’s dream of a Morgan-Ned-Dakota double date went down the drain. The next week, Gene and mom were shocked when I decided not to go to Randall’s Island. Gene put four layers of clothing on to guard against the New York City cold and refueled the car anyway. When he knocked on the door of my room, I was on my PC playing World of Warcraft. Gene looked at me like he’d just seen me spraying graffiti on the walls. I ate lunch by my computer while he went and set food out for Randall without me.

He did this three times. But I didn’t stay away for long, ‘cause my heart was with Randall.

Chapter 8

Under Construction

Spring! I'd seen Randall a lot since falling under his spell, but sometimes it was only briefly. He was excited to see me when I dropped a box of food and water off for him. Then Gene and I drove to tennis practice. Hersch had convinced me that my wiry frame was built more for tennis than a sport like football, and baseball was just too boring.

One day a feeling came over me that something was wrong. I was lonely for Randall, and Gene was nice enough to take me an extra time to see him. I was in

for a bit of a shock. A huge mound of dirt was piled right on top of where quiet little Randall's Island used to be. Bulldozers and construction equipment surrounded the area, and huge sheets of metal were strewn on the grass and bushes.

"What's going on, Gene?" I asked.

"Hmm. Must be construction. Welcome to New York, Ned."

"Where's Randall? Is he here?"

I searched in a panic, hoping Randall hadn't been taken to animal control and put down. My heart began to race. I asked one of the construction workers in the orange hats if he'd seen a Chow dog around, but he hadn't seen any dogs at all. I started walking to the construction site when I heard a pleading whine coming from behind a large metal beam. I'd have known that sound anywhere.

"Randall! Hey, buddy!"

He sidled up toward me. I had some treats for him. Gene and I right away saw

that he was covered in concrete dust from the construction.

“Oh boy,” said Gene.

“What can we do?”

“The best thing would be to trap him,” Gene said. “But then what?”

“Let’s get mom to agree. The other part’s easier.”

Back home, mom said, “Ned, we can’t board one more thing. You have Charlie. You have the birds in the aviary. There’s Finnegan the goldfish. And if I go to the upstairs bathroom, there’s Tuggy the tortoise looking at me with those woozy eyes.”

“I’ll put Tuggy in my room, Mom. No problem.”

“It won’t matter. I’ll still know he’s around.”

“Mom—”

“Ned, we’re living in a special place. This is not only our home—it’s a show-place, a museum, and a New York land-

mark. There are precious antiques and priceless art here. Why you want it to be a zoo is beyond me. You're so concerned about animals. Why can't you care a little about Gene and me and our needs? We've taken in Charlie, who's not really all that tame yet. Now you want to bring in your Randall, who's like a wild lion. You want to trap him? Then take him to a sanctuary or let Victor the vet place him."

"Mom—"

"Enough's enough. What about a girlfriend or piano lessons?"

I knew that was the end of any discussion. So after dinner, cleaning up, and overhearing Gene take my side with mom, I tried again. I hung up a towel and turned the dishwasher on. I went back into the offices. Mom sat at her desk looking over floor plans. The TV news played without sound.

"Mom, don't make me lose Randall."

I remembered mom and dad's divorce

like it was yesterday. Things had been getting hairy when they started sleeping in separate rooms. Dad hung out with Gonzo more and more. But the final moment came one night at supper. Dad asked why mom had burned the cheese casserole. Mom stood and threw the casserole and the bowl of peas and carrots and everything from the table. That wasn't the final moment, though. The last straw came when mom couldn't get some of that food off her precious silk wallpaper. She screamed about the cost of having it redone. Then she stopped yelling, and very politely asked for a divorce in French. "*J'aimerais divorcer, s'il te plait!*"

Now mom turned to me. "I'm not making you lose Randall," she said, looking up from her plans.

"You divorced dad."

"You can't divorce a dog."

"Dad thought he was a dog."

"Thinking you're a dog and being one

are two different things.”

“Randall thinks he’s a person, mom.”

“He’s mistaken.”

“He loves me, and he loves veggies.”

“You can still love Randall,” she said. “A divorce means you can’t live with each other.”

“I haven’t tried living with him yet. Besides, Randall will work. Chows are guard dogs. He’ll guard the Hooper Cooper.”

“We have alarms, Ned.”

“We’ll have alarms *and* Charlie and Randall. No one will dare invade the old Hooper Cooper. It’ll be a fortress.”

Mom sighed. “Gene, would you leave us alone for a minute?”

“Why?” I said. “This is a family discussion. Isn’t Gene part of the family now?”

She had no quick answer for that one. “Nan,” Gene said, “why don’t we—”

“Don’t say anything. I know whose side you’re on.”

“I’m on all our sides,” Gene said.

“You have to promise this is the last one, Ned. I can’t take much more.”

“Promise.”

Gene and I called the parks department and they put us in touch with Francine, the forest ranger. Francine was terrific. I didn’t have to persuade her much to help us trap Randall. She understood. Gene and I sat in her small office, shaded by some trees on Randall’s Island. Francine’s eyes twinkled; she looked like a border collie with a lot of thick hair, and she was friendly and full of energy, too. She wore a funny hat, and she had pictures on the wall of her children.

“We’ve known about Randall for some time,” Francine said. “We didn’t want to trap him because New York law says we’d have to put him down. Wild animals can carry dangerous diseases. But I think I can work something out with my boss. I know you and your father love Randall.”

“He’s not my father, he’s...” I switched

the subject. “Really, Francine? That’s great!” The world was spinning, and my heart was pounding. Gene was smiling.

“Randall’s a lucky dog,” Francine said.

“Thanks.”

We all shook hands when we got up to leave.

“Can I ask you just one question?” I said.

“Fire away.”

“Why are you wearing a hat?”

Francine laughed. “It’s the law. Forest rangers wear this hat at all times.”

“Even inside?”

“Even inside.”

“There sure are a lot of strange laws.”

“The laws protect us,” Francine said.

I couldn’t figure out how wearing a funny hat would protect anyone.

“Just remember, if we trap Randall, you and Gene have to take him to a veterinarian right away for a checkup.”

Unbelievable! Olga’s and my dream was

coming true: Randall will have a home.

Francine planned to set the trap that evening and posted signs that read, DO NOT TOUCH! SUBJECT TO ARREST! She left Randall food that we had given her and, of course, some PB&Js.

I didn't sleep but dreamed wide awake about Randall coming to live with me. We'd run together, two healthy and happy creatures, through the Sheep's Meadow in Central Park. We'd race to Bethesda Fountain. We'd thank the Angel of the Waters for making all my dreams come true. I'd toss a quarter into the waters, and while it fluttered to the bottom of the fountain, we'd race back to the old Hooper Cooper. We didn't quite make it, because Charlie, who slept next to my bed, snored really loud.

No matter.

Chapter 9

A New Dog in Town

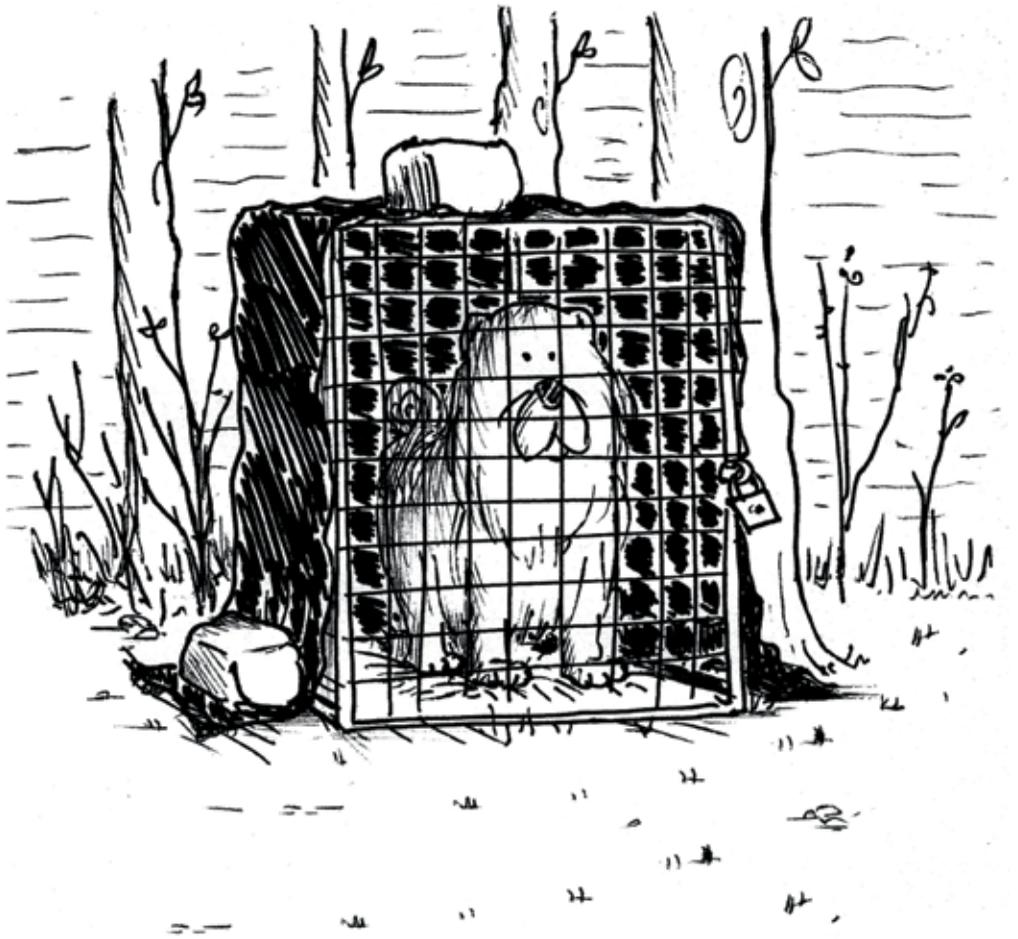
The next morning the telephone rang. It was Francine. “You’ve got your dog.”

“I’m on my way!” I ran out the door. Mom had stayed home to empty antiques from the guestroom. Shannon, the secretary, was just coming to work. She loved animals too. Her birthday was that morning, and she carried in a tray of pink vegan cupcakes.

“Happy birthday, Shannon!” I yelled. “Come on! We’re going to get Randall!” Shannon bounced into the car. One day she’d be a famous opera singer; for now,

she worked as a secretary for mom and Gene. She sang to Charlie, and he loved it.

With a screech, we came to a stop in the usual place. In the distance, Randall stared through the steel wires of the cage.



He looked almost relieved. Francine stood next to him and held her ranger hat. She

waved. We got out of the car and walked toward the cage. There was a moment of silence.

“That’s Randall?” Shannon sounded disappointed. Randall looked at me sadly.

“He’s kind of mellow right now,” she went on, “but he looks like he could turn any minute. What if he bites our fingers through the wires? He could snap them off like twigs.”

Randall gathered himself like a sumo wrestler. “Here’s your baby,” Francine said. Randall growled.

“There’s too many of us,” I said. “We’re scaring him. Maybe a cupcake would help?”

“Those are my birthday cupcakes!” Shannon protested.

“You’re really gonna eat seven of them?” I asked. Shannon was very weight-conscious, so she gave me two of them. I lifted one side of the cage. “Okay buddy,” I said to Randall. “You’re going home.”

He looked scared and angry. “Easy, man, easy.” I squeezed a cupcake through the wires. Randall gulped it down, paper and all.

“One, two, three, up!” Gene and I picked up the cage and race-walked it back to the car. We were halfway there when the cage clattered to the ground. Randall slid to the side, pressed against the bars. “Sorry, Randall.” I squeezed another cupcake through the wires, and another and another. By the time we got to the car, Randall was covered in pink icing and looked like a giant furry cupcake. Francine, still holding onto her hat, waved goodbye.

Caged Randall sat between Shannon and me in the back seat. Randall was a wary, wild thing when he was free outside, but now, in the car, he was a pussycat—or so it seemed. It was funny how the same person or animal could be different front moment to moment. Dad was sunshine and made the world glow, but

with mom, he was lost in the rain without an umbrella.

I thought I heard Randall purring. But dogs didn't purr. Maybe Randall was having an asthma attack from all the excitement. Or maybe he had pneumonia. I looked at him closer. He seemed happy. Then he began struggling a little bit. He licked a pink smear of cupcake frosting from his lips like he was getting juiced to break out. I put my arms around him to calm him down, even though I was putting them around the steel ribs of a cage.

We made it safely into the veterinarian's office, but by now he was twirling in the cage like a ballerina thanks to the sugar high.

Chapter 10

Vic the Vet

I prepared myself for the worst. What if Randall had rabies or some other scary disease? What if he freaked from being locked in a cage at the vet's? What would the vet do if he bit one of the handlers? To calm down, I took Charlie for a long walk in Central Park. That usually helped whatever needed helping. I went to Bethesda Fountain and threw in handfuls of coins over my shoulder. We really needed the good luck now. I told Charlie he'd have a new friend coming to live with us and that it didn't mean we loved him any less.



Three days passed, and finally Victor the veterinarian called. “Good news and bad news,” he stated right off the bat to

mom, while I listened in on a different phone. “The good news is that Randall has no major diseases. He’s in fair condition, considering all he’s been through. He needs to gain about ten pounds. He sort of remembers when he was a companion pet. But it took our strongest handler to jog his memory. He walks on a leash now.”

“Great!” mom said.

“The bad news is the fee. It’s a little more than our original estimate.” When he told her how much, I could almost feel her hit the roof. “He needed a thorough going-over,” the vet explained. “And it wasn’t easy. There were hot spots—itchy allergy areas we had to shave. He walks sideways, so we clipped his curled nails. He still walks sideways. We also scanned him. He’s microchipped.”

“So when can we get him?”

“I’ll have to contact Randall’s owner.”

“I’m Randall’s owner!” I chimed in.

“Whoever’s on the microchip register is

the legal owner,” he said.

“Randall was thrown away—”

“I’m sorry, Ned.” There was a click at the other end of the line.

“Mom!” I yelled. “We’ve gotta to talk to Victor in person.”

I guess she understood that this was serious, because she left the floor plans she was working on and drove us both to where Victor had his office. We sat across from Victor as he plopped down behind a large desk that had tooth and claw marks on its legs. Rows of licenses and awards with his name on them hung on the wall. I noticed that he’d bitten his fingernails way down. I guess working with jittery creatures like Randall would make anyone nervous.

“Doctor, you gotta help us help Randall. Look how you helped us with Charlie. He was near death from starvation and hardly had energy to breathe. You saved him.”

Victor, the veterinarian, wasn't impressed. "Charlie was much tamer. Randall looks at the rest of the world with mistrust. He's a guard dog in touch with his Chinese guard dog ancestral roots. It'll be hard for him to be a pet again. He needs a firm hand."

"I can be firm."

"Lion-tamer firm, Ned. No offense, but you're twelve years old. You'd have trouble taming a Poodle. Look, why not get an easier dog? Many rescues need good homes."

"But Randall's my buddy. We've gone through so much together."

"Let me give him to the ASPCA. It's a no-kill shelter. He'll be safe, they can deal with legal arrangements, and he may even get adopted by a trainer."

"He'll be thrown away again." I said. "And he'll have to start all over with trusting."

"Listen to the doctor, Ned," mom said. "You did a good deed in rescuing Randall."

Now it's time to let him go."

"I let go of Gonzo. I'm not letting go of Randall. Can you give us the other owner's phone number and address?"

"What for?" the vet asked.

"Randall's my friend. He's as much a friend as Hersch, and I wouldn't give Hersch away."

"Try to think of what's best for him," Victor said.

"For Hersch?"

"No, Ned! Not for Hersch. Hersch is gonna be just fine. Think about what's best for Randall!"

Mom fumbled for something in her purse and directed her attention back to Victor. "He loves him." She kind of laughed a little and shrugged. "Loves him."

Victor pushed a box of Kleenex across the desk toward me. "Your lip is bleeding." I had accidentally bit my lip in my excitement. Victor shook his head and handed me a slip of paper with a name and ad-

dress on it. "I'm giving you the address where the dog was sold. This is privileged information. You can take it from there. It's not going to be easy. But he's still a young dog. And Ned? Remember, you're racking up boarding fees here. Good luck."

"How much do we owe so far now?" mom asked.

"A little over a thousand dollars," Victor said. "Excuse me, folks. Tell Sandy, the receptionist, what you decide." He left the room to mom and me.

Mom and I just sat in silence for a few minutes. Finally, she spoke. "You know, Ned, you've gone completely nuts." She put a pill in her mouth from a small bottle in her purse. "We took out a huge loan to get the Hooper Cooper, and now because of you we're taking out loans to rescue wild dogs." She put a second pill in her mouth and had trouble swallowing.

"I'll be right back." I ran to the bathroom and got a paper cup full of water. Mom

gulped it, struggling to get the pill down.

“You should tell the doctor to call the ASPCA,” she said.

“No.”

“You’ll do what I say, Ned, or pretty soon—” She started coughing. “Pretty soon—”

“Pretty soon you’ll get rid of me like you got rid of dad and Gonzo?”

“That’s enough, Ned,” mom said in a seething whisper. She was coughing heavily. I think she was crying, too. There was silence for quite a while.

“I’m sorry, mom.”

“It’s okay, Ned.”

“Mom. Pleeeeeease?”

“No, Ned, I...no.”

“I’ll be a famous veterinarian one day and pay you back.”

“Your head’s in the clouds. Just like your father.”

“Just this one address, mom. We’ve come this far.”

Chapter 11

Pete's

I looked at the sign: PETE'S PET STORE. I checked the address. "This is it, Mom." Four brown-and-white puppies played in a fenced-in area in the store's window. "They're just too cute," mom said as we went inside.

"That's what they all say," said a weary voice. A short, balding, middle-aged man came up to mom. "And then they take them home. Now there's poop and pee to clean up, chewed slippers, the expense of medical care. Pretty soon half of them get dropped off at the pound or worse, aban-

done on the streets. Another life thrown away.”

“How cheery,” mom said.

“Lady, when you’ve been in this business as long as I have, you see the so-called ‘cute’ for what it is—a flash in the pan.”

“We’re looking for the owner of the store,” I said.

“You’re looking at him, kid.”

“You’re Pete?” I asked.

“The name on the sign says, Pete’s Pet Store. It would be kinda stupid if Pete wasn’t my name.”

“You ever sell Chows?” I asked.

“No medium or big dogs. They still grow if nobody buys ’em, end up squeezed in a cage here eating up my profits in dog food. Now you take these pups here. Poos are the hot new dogs of New York City. These here are Yorkie-poos, half Yorkshire terrier and half Poodle. And if you don’t favor those, I can get you Shih-Tzu

poos, Maltipoos, Cockapoos...who knows what poo will be next?”

“They’re in good hands with you,” I said.

“You bet, kid. Most pet stores sell puppy-mill pups. Not me. I—”

Mom took over. “Victor the vet says you might know who registered a Chow with a microchip company.”

“Why do you ask?”

I told Pete the whole story.

“Victor the vet...Chow dog...microchip... hmm.” Pete closed his eyes. “Oh, now I remember. Three years ago I special-ordered a Chow from a breeder in Ohio. For a rich dame—Jewel, I think her name was. Jewel Sabri. Lived in Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue. Wanted a Chow for her invalid mother. She was here from Morocco so her mother could get good medical care. Had some incurable disease. The Chow came just in time. And talk about cute—adorable. Looked like a fuzzy red fur ball. Gave your face a wash-

ing each time you picked it up. I've seen hundreds of dogs. This one was special. They named him Ra, after the Egyptian sun god. The mother had a happy time with Ra and played him Moroccan music all the time."

"So who owns Randall?" mom asked him.

"Randall! What, you named him after Randall's Island?"

"Yeah."

"It's an okay name, I guess."

"Just tell us about the microchip," I barked.

"Hey, simmer down, kid. I never updated the microchip. It's in my name. But I'd say you two are the rightful owners."

"Can you call Victor the veterinarian and tell him that?" I asked.

"Hold your horses, folks."

"What?"

"If I'm turning the dog over to you, there's gotta be..." Pete rubbed his fingers

together.

Mom started looking in her purse again.
“How much?”

“Chow puppy? These days? Twelve hundred bucks.”

Mom swallowed hard. Then she turned on her heels and almost ran to the door. I caught up with her and grabbed her arm. She yanked it away and opened the front door.

“Mom, listen.”

“I’ve heard enough.”

“Mom, please, wait a minute. Just a minute.”

“Pete,” I yelled from the door. “Do you want the dog?”

“I thought you wanted him.”

“We can’t afford him. Will you keep him?”

Pete thrust his jaw to one side. “Mm-hmm.”

“Pete, you won’t get money for the dog except from us. Unless you sell him to the

medical labs to be experimented on, or sell him as bait for training attack dogs. Do you want to do that, Pete?”

Pete thrust his jaw the other way.

“So, Pete, whaddya say?”

He paused and thought about it a moment. “Five hundred.”

Randall could come home.

Chapter 12

Out for a Stroll

Gene walked with me to the veterinarian's to pick up Randall. I had been listening to tapes of César Millan, the famous dog trainer. After going over his *Mastering Leadership* five times, I felt I was ready to handle Randall.

“Hi!” Sandy, the receptionist gave us the thumbs up and a big smile. Nancy the nurse handed me a worn brown leash with Randall on the other end. My stomach flip-flopped like a cement mixer. Did Randall recognize me? He did trot sideways over to me a little faster. He seemed

to be saying, “Get me the heck outta here, quick.” He was shivering. His right ear was smaller than the left and flopped down. He was bigger than he seemed out in the wild, upstaged by all that brush and grass. He had bare pink spots all over his body from where the vet had shaved the hot spots. He was a punk Chow. Where were his iPod and sunglasses?

Gene grumbled as he paid the bill. “Randall,” I said, “We’re going from grass and trees to a world of concrete and traffic. Let’s make tracks!” Randall yanked us out the door and went tearing sideways down the sidewalk. I tugged at the leash to slow him down, but he lunged forward. I yanked the leash back harder and stopped like Caesar Milan would; he calmed down a little. Finally, we got in a sort of rhythm. I was so proud, walking Randall for the first time—well, really, Randall was walking me. Looking back at all the times I visited him, I don’t know

which was harder—trying to tame Randall from afar or up close. We had about twenty blocks to get Randall to his new home, and it wasn't easy. The day was mild, and Randall continued to zigzag back and forth, trotting sideways up the street.

Suddenly an old lady stopped and peered at us. "Oh, my word! What happened to him?" Other folks stared and walked far around him. One guy ducked into a doorway until we passed.

"Hey, Ned! Where ya been?" Two guys from school rounded the corner. "Hey, Ned, I need ya to help me with—" They stopped dead once they saw Randall. "Ned, what dumpster did ya pull that garbage from?"

"Knock it off," I muttered. Randall dragged me on. At least he didn't bite them. We continued walking until we came upon Candle Café, a vegan restaurant. They sold three flavors of soy ice cream:

chocolate, vanilla, and mocha swirl.

“Let’s celebrate with a cone,” Gene said.

“I’m not sure about that. Randall will get a sugar high again.”

We walked up Third Avenue, Randall licking up gunk and even rocks from the sidewalk as he lunged forward. I almost lost my grip and ran into a big guy who was coming our way with a gym bag. Turned out it was Hersch. Boy, was I glad to see him! I introduced him to Gene and to Randall.

“Ned,” Hersch said. “That’s not the same dog you sent me a photo of, from Randall’s Island?”

“Yeah, the same. Meet Randall the Chow.”

“He looks like a Lady Gaga wanna-be.”

“You think so?” I looked at Gene.

“Definitely! Hold it a minute while I get my pad and pencil,” Hersch said. “I’ll do a two-minute sketch. Just a sec...” He put down his gym bag, reached into his jacket

pocket, and brought out a small pad and pencil. “Voilà!”

“That’s great, Hersch!” I said. “Your first portrait, Randall.”

“We’ll frame it,” Gene said.



“Okay, Ned,” Hersch said. “Don’t be a stranger.” My friend picked up his gym bag, gave a thumbs-up, and went towards Candle Café.

“Hey, Ned!” It was Sandy, the receptionist from the veterinarian. It must have been the lunch hour. She carried two bags full of groceries. Her daughter, Candy, who was about my age, was with her. Candy liked animals, too. Some creeps teased her and called her Punky Girl, because last year she’d dyed her bangs pink. The bangs didn’t last, but the name stuck.

“I’m so happy you have Randall,” Sandy said. “All of us in the office were rooting for you. Candy, put a flower in Randy’s collar to celebrate.”

Candy took one look at Randall and stepped back.

“He’s not winning any beauty contests right now,” I said to her.

“Candy, when you become a veterinarian, you’ll see all kinds,” Sandy said.

Candy shook her head. “A veterinarian for horses.”

“All right, I’ll do it then.” Before I could stop her, Sandy took a daisy from the bouquet in her grocery bag and slipped the stem under Randall’s collar. Randall held still and didn’t even growl.

Suddenly, a pit bull puppy came from out of nowhere and wriggled under Randall’s nose. I tried to pull Randall away, but he wanted to go with the puppy. The more I pulled, the more tangled the leashes got. The teenager holding the puppy’s leash was on his phone. I was spinning around and around. The leashes lassoed Sandy and Candy’s legs.

The teenager stopped. “Chill, dude, I’m on the phone.” He grabbed the puppy’s leash and untangled it. “Sorry, guys. C’mon, Jazz.” Then he turned to me. “Learn how to walk a dog, bro.”

“Hey, jerk,” I began to yell, but the kid was back on his phone.

“Ned, don’t let it get to you,” Candy said, brushing dirt from the leash. That was the most she’d said to me since I’d known her, but I didn’t get much time to chat. Randall was quite the handful. I held on to his collar as I scooped the spilled groceries back into the bags. Even as I did, he began licking up strawberries that had tumbled onto the sidewalk. Then he went after a broken box of oatmeal and some dinner rolls. I stood and handed Sandy the torn grocery bags.

“Do you want us to help you home?”

“You’ve got enough to take care of, Ned,” Sandy chuckled as she and Candy ran across the street.

“See ya, Candy!”

Candy waved a little...I think.

Gene and I continued up Third Avenue. Eventually Randall was more at ease; he seemed to enjoy being the alpha among us. I’d have to listen to more César Millan.

“Hey, Sonny!” shouted a short stubby

little man outside a jewelry shop. He was gripping a dirty broom. “Get your moth-eaten dog away from my flowers!”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking.”

“Excuse me, sir,” Gene said, “don’t talk to the kid like that.”

The man poked the broom at Randall. “The police’ll talk to you if you don’t move along.” Right then Randall attacked the broom.

“C’mon, boy,” I pleaded. “You win, you win.” The man dropped the broom and ran inside the shop. Randall gave the broom one good shake and then let go of it.

“Let’s go,” Gene said. “Quick. Maybe Randall needs a harness.”

I held on with both hands a little tighter. “Yeah, and maybe a muzzle,” I said. We walked a little further until finally we were at the old Hooper Cooper. We rounded the corner with Randall and headed for the door. A small group of tourists stepped back.

“What are you waiting for?” asked Gene.

“Randall has to finish throwing up. He got too excited.” Then the ancient carved wooden door creaked open.

Home!

Chapter 13

Strange New World

Randall didn't know what hit him.



The entrance hall was bare. A few giant pieces of antique furniture stood stiffly, like soldiers guarding the rooms, to the left and right. The wood floor was to be restored the next day. Doorway arches reached toward heaven and back down again. We faced a winding marble stairway that went up four flights. This could have been the inside of a castle. It sure trumped Trump Tower in my mind. And as he stood there, Randall seemed to remember the splendor of his puppyhood. He was no longer the ferocious lion of the jungle. His new life of comfort, vegan cuisine, doting love, and even sweet music was here at last.

“Hi, Randall! Welcome home!” Shannon came up from the basement with Charlie on a leash. Charlie looked at Randall. Randall looked at Charlie. World War III! Charlie growled and lunged. Shannon tried singing. “Old MacDonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-O,” but it was useless. She sat on

the ground to gain her grip on the leash. Randall lunged back at Charlie, his blue tongue poking through his pearly whites. The ferocious lion of the jungle had made a quick comeback!

I dragged Randall up the staircase. He came to a stop on the third floor and glanced at himself in the gilded curlicue mirror that hung on the landing. He puffed up his chest and turned his head this way and that. I saw pride bloom in his heart in spite of his punk fur coat. Ra, the sun-god was becoming lord of the mansion—or at least chief security officer. Then, to close the deal, he lifted his leg and peed on the mirror.

I gave a tug at the leash. With head held high, and still walking sideways, Randall followed me into the guest room. I leaned against the closed door. “We gotta give it time.” I ran to get a bunch of paper towels.

Later that evening I fed Randall, and

mom, Gene, and I tried taking him for a walk. The excursion proved to be a challenge, but I kept remembering the lesson of Cesar Millan—"I am leader of the pack." Then we brought Randall to the guest room. The room had different shades of green, like Randall's Island. We thought it the best place to ease Randall into being a pet again. Mom had newspapers all over her prized wood floor for protection. We couldn't expect him to be housetrained yet. I put a rope for tie-downs on top of the chest of drawers. Next to the puffy red bed that Gene bought him at Pete's, I laid a stuffed toy doggie and a Kong. Randall went right over to the other side of the room opposite the puffy bed and sat on the newspapers. He lay down, put his head between his paws, and looked at us. I wanted to pet him, but for some reason I didn't.

Randall closed his eyes. Was this the same dog from Randall's Island? "Your

hard days are over, boy,” I whispered to him. We got up to leave, and Randall raised his head. He wasn’t asleep, but we tiptoed out of the room anyway. Randall kept looking. “Get some shut-eye, Randall,” I said. “You had a big day. We’ll be here tomorrow.” I gently closed the door.

“Think we should tie him down like you do Charlie?” mom asked.

“Randall acted like a pet today. I think he’s bonding with us, mom.”

“Ned, for his sake, I’d like you to consider giving him over to a trainer.”

“Like Gonzo?”

“Why do you keep harping on the past?”

Gene started down the stairs. “Hey, this is a happy day. Why don’t we celebrate that Randall has a home? Let’s all go have a nice hot cup of something. Whad-dya say?”

I wanted to thank mom and Gene for letting Randall stay with us. Instead I said, “I’ll be right there. I’ll go and tie him down.”

This wasn't easy. I took the rope in one hand and I laid a treat on the floor with the other. Then real quick-like, when his head was down, I slipped the rope under his collar and tied the two ends together, with the leg of a chest of drawers in the middle. Afterwards I noticed I had been holding my breath. "We did it, Randall," I said. "One of the first steps towards being a 'gentleman doggie' indoors." Then we all went downstairs. It felt like we were a real family. I fell asleep that night with the mantra in my head: "I am leader of the pack."

Chapter 14

Randall's Loose

The next morning, I couldn't wait to see Randall. I swung open the door with the carved squares with flowers.

“Hi, buddy.”

Randall had chewed through his tie-down during the night. Part of the rope was still safely around the leg of the chest of drawers; the other hung limply at his neck. He had left his “calling card” in the middle of the room and a large wet spot next to a chair. I had to clean it up fast.

I started toward him to put on his leash. He puffed up like a sumo wrestler, as was

his habit, and pulled back his lips to show his pearly whites.



We were back in the jungle. I knew not to look him in the eyes. I turned my back, kept my arms down to my sides, and shuffled back toward the door. Randall lunged.

He tore right past me and dashed for the front stairs. The workmen had the main door open! If he ran out into the street...

I let loose a piercing whistle. Randall skidded to a stop and turned toward me. I ran down the back steps, hoping he'd chase me—and it worked! I could hear him close behind.

Second floor.

First floor.

Basement. This was where Finnegan the goldfish swam in his bowl. And this was where Randall stopped following me.

Randall checked out Finnegan and made a surprise turn into the carpentry shop. Wood chips, bent nails, and sawdust covered the floor. Tiles were stacked like sculptures throughout the room. He made a beeline for a workman bending over a box of lighting. He grabbed the workman by the pant's leg, growled, and yanked this way and that. The workman yelled and dropped a couple of lights.

The crash of glass scared Randall. He let go and ran around the room, picking up speed.

The workman chased after him, waving his arms and yelling for my mom.

“Mrs. Schmidt! Mrs. Schmidt!”

Stacks of tiles and boxes of equipment crashed, banged, and split open. He chased Randall into the main office where mom and Gene spent most of their days, but they must’ve stepped out. (There was half a muffin and warm coffee left on the desk.) Charlie was still tied up, but he went for Randall anyway. The desk toppled over, with Charlie tied onto it. Drawings and mom’s precious floor plan slid to the ground.

“Sandwiches!” I yelled. “Anybody have sandwiches?” I grabbed a bucket in the laundry room, ran back, and threw cold water over Randall, Charlie, and mom’s floor plans. Charlie was Randall’s equal in growling and teeth-gnashing. So far

there hadn't been any bloodshed.

The workman rushed in with sandwiches, taken from his buddies.

“Are they vegan? Oh, to heck with it.”

In desperation I threw a corner of tuna sandwich on the floor. One was peanut butter, and I held it out in front of me. The peanut butter caught Randall's nose. Dripping wet, he followed me. I backed out of the office and down the hall, tripping over carpentry rubbish. Behind Randall, Charlie gave a final sneer and then grabbed the fallen muffin.

Just as I reached the heavy steel door to the garden, one of the workman called out, “Mrs. Schmidt! Mrs. Schmidt! Mantel and mirror!”

Randall dashed back down the hall and out of sight. I tiptoed to the carpentry shop. The room looked like a tornado had struck, but Randall wasn't there. I picked up an empty box and closed the door.

“Where you want?” Two men were bal-

ancing an antique marble mantel on the basement steps. A third man held a large mirror.

“Mom isn’t here right now,” I said. “Just set it down.”

“My English no good,” the man with the mirror said.

So I pointed to the floor. The men set the furniture on the hallway floor. I tiptoed to the laundry room. No Randall. I shut the door. Finally, I checked the storage room. I took a deep breath while still holding the box. At the doorway, all was quiet. I could feel my heart beating quick-time. I took a step inside. Paintings stood on their sides against boxes of books pushed up against the wall. Antique chairs, tables, and a sofa were stacked on one another. Some outdoor furniture, along with some garden tools, were in the storage room too. I was panicking. The room began to swirl into furniture soup. I closed my eyes for a second. Maybe mom would forgive the office,

but if this room was trashed, it would be all over for Randall and me.

I slowly walked to the center of the floor. I heard something move. I walked toward the sound. Rust-colored fur and paws poked out from under a chair.

“Come on, buddy. It’s okay. You gotta come here, Randall. It’s for our future, boy.” He didn’t budge. “Sorry, buster, I gotta do this because you’re stupidly stubborn.” I kicked the chair aside and threw the box over Randall’s head.

“Storage room! Help!”

A folded net lay on top of a garden table. A hammock! I opened it and threw it over Randall, who bumped and thumped underneath the box.

“Storage room, help!” I called again.

I pulled Randall, box and all, down the hall past three men sitting on chairs.

“Where were you?” I shouted.

Three blank faces looked at me. Randall was going nuts beneath the box,

whirling and bouncing and tearing at the cardboard. My foot caught on something heavy. I kept pulling. One of the men jumped up and shouted in another language. It was too late. The antique mirror met our basement floor with a horrifying crash. Glittering pieces of silver light shot everywhere. At last I reached the steel door to the garden, opened it with one hand, and shoved the box out.

“There you go, buster.”

I pulled the net off and flung the sandwiches. Freed from his cardboard torture chamber, Randall ran ‘round and ‘round the garden like a crazed Energizer® bunny. The birds in the aviary flipped out, fluttered, and flapped. They whistled at the dog with a punk fur coat who was now throwing up in their garden. Bits and pieces of a peanut butter sandwich lay in the morning sun.

I stumbled inside and closed the door as gravity pulled me down to the cold, ce-

ment floor. I felt jagged shards of mirror cutting into my foot.

Randall and I were in deep, deep doggie doo.

Chapter 15

Having It Out

“It’s all my fault, Mom. We need just one more chance. I know better now. I should have tied him down with a chain leash so he couldn’t chew through it. He was scared. He’s used to trees and grass. He’s got to get used to antique furniture. It spooked him. Where were you, anyway?”

“I was at my client’s, and Gene went to get you a harness for Randall. But Ned, you were here, and *you couldn’t handle him!*” Her voice was calm and steady, but I could tell she was seething.

“You have to give me time,” I said.

“There’ll be mistakes.”

“Mistakes? That dog was a mistake. That mirror was from Napoleon’s era. Do you know who Napoleon was, Ned? Do you know how much it was worth? Do you care?”

“Don’t you have insurance?”

“Don’t get fresh with me. Until you start earning your own living, you won’t know how devastating it is that the floor plans and designs we were to show today are ruined. Completely ruined! Do you know how embarrassing that is? How unprofessional? It’s bad enough I have Charlie tied to my desk all day. Do you hear me, Ned?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Then listen to this: Get rid of that dog!”
mom stamped her feet.

“He’s a throwaway dog, mom, like Pete said. You don’t want me to throw him away again, do you?”

“Yes!”

“You’re heartless!”

“And you’re crazy, Ned, to value a dog over me. What have I done to you that you should hate me so?”

“Ned, your mother is very upset,” Gene said. “But she’s right. We can’t have a circus and a designer showplace at the same time. The only show would be Randall and Charlie going at each other. That’s not the right sales approach for antique furniture and interior design. Our home just isn’t the best one for Randall. He’d never be happy here. *We* wouldn’t be happy here.”

“You don’t care about me.” I could feel my chest heaving.

“We love you, Ned,” Gene said.

Mom spoke through clenched teeth. “Gene and I feed you, clothe you, send you to private school—and buy food for all your damn animals.”

Gene put his hand on her shoulder and then looked at me. “Go on up to your room, put an ad on Petfinder, and find Randall

a good home. You can always visit him.”

“This was our project, Gene.”

“Upstairs now, Ned.”

“Can’t we try a dog trainer living with us for a while—”

“NOW!” Gene yelled. “So help me, you will go upstairs this instant!”

I gritted my teeth and stood my ground. “You’re not my dad.”

Mom glowered and then stepped toward me. “But I’m your mother, Ned. Get up to your room, or I will cook every single meal you eat in this house with pork, beef, fish, Steak-Umms, and any type of fast food that I can think of. Get up to your room. Now.”

I shrunk back. “I—I’m calling dad. At least dad loved animals. He understood!”

“And where is he, Ned? Where is he?”

I ran up to my room. Hot lava pumped through my body. I stood and stared at the wooden molding around the middle of the walls. It seemed to morph into a wooden

rope that pulled tight and tighter, squeezing together everything in the room. Before it squeezed the life out me, I picked up the phone. Dad didn't use Facetime. The phone rang and rang. Right then, I saw him in my mind's eye. He was big and handsome and carefree. He was like Randall—a pedigreed dog gone wrong.

I was about to hang up when I heard, "Brad here."

"Dad!"

"Hey, Neddy!"

"Dad, I'm almost thirteen. It's Ned now. Just Ned."

"Sure, Neddy, sure. Ned it is. Hang on just a minute." I heard a door slam. "There we are—had to shut the front door, otherwise all the dogs from the street would be in here. What's up Neddy—Ned?"

I heard a lot of heavy coughing. "What's the matter, Dad?"

"Allergies. You gotta come down and help with the medicine." He laughed.

“What medicine?”

“New pills for the respiratory tract. They seem to do the trick if I remember to take them.” He laughed again but it turned into coughing.

“That’s a bummer, Dad.”

“You’re telling me. And there’s more dog fur down here than five Gonzos. But that’s what makes life interesting. Now, what’s happening up in the Big Apple? Everything okay?”

“Well, Dad, I...Dad, maybe you should try raw vegan and juices for a while. I hear it’s brought back a lot of folks from their sick bed.”

“Good to hear your voice, Ned.”

“Dad, I wanted...to say...hi.”

More coughing. “Hi back at you. I love you, Neddy. Ned.”

“I love you too. Don’t forget raw—”

“Woof woof.”

“Woof woof, Dad.” I hung up the phone and lay on the bed. My eyes traced the

shadows on the ceiling design. I counted the circles in the middle of the squares by the light of the street lamp. When I finished, maybe the world would come to an end.

It didn't.

On my wall was the quote that dad had given me from his friends at Abandoned Angels Dog Rescue: "It is our gift to see beyond the dirt, terror, sadness, and defeat and find the true soul that lies within. *We Are Rescue.*"

But Randall was special.

I went to the computer and placed the ad. Then I surfed the Web for Napoleon.

Chapter 16

Savage and Lollipop

The next day after school, I went up to the guest room. Randall was sitting next to his red bed. He was his pussycat self again. But I wasn't going to take any more chances. I had tied him down with a chain leash. I gave him his bowl of food and watched as he dove in. He kept a healthy appetite in spite of everything.

“We blew it, Randall. You freaked, and I should've used a chain leash and muzzle. We can't rewind the film and edit it. I'll make sure you get a good home. I told mom and Gene that there's a couple who

answered the ad already. They're coming to see you tonight. They just lost their Chow after fifteen years. They'll have to be special, because you're really special, you know. You're the poster boy for vegan dogs."

"I wanted to live with you. I wanted to watch you start having fun. I wanted for us to be buddies and look after one another." I started to choke up. "Come on, let's go for our walk before the people get here. The man says his mother raised Chows; that might make him a Chow too. Whaddaya think?"

I undid the chain and Randall followed my lead sideways out the door.

That evening, the doorbell rang at five o'clock. Gene and I opened the door.

"Savage Bill here. Gimme five." Gene did. Savage Bill, who looked thirty-something, had a big friendly smile. He wore a silver lamé shirt open to his chest and gold chains around his neck. "Ever catch

my radio show? I'm a DJ over in Jersey. This is my lady, Lollipop Sue, singer and dancer."

Lollipop was gorgeous. She had platinum blonde hair, a super-short white skirt, and white shoes with straps that made triangle shapes up to her knees. She looked like a disco Greek goddess. If I ever had a girlfriend, I hoped she'd look like Lollipop.

Savage looked at Gene, and then at me. "Ned...you're Ned, right?" Gene pushed me to the front. "Cool, man." Savage held out his fist. I bumped it with mine.

"He's Randall's owner," Gene said.

"Guardian," I said. "Randall's guardian."

Savage was looking at Charlie doubtfully. "Hey, we were talking about a Chow, right?"

"This is Charlie, our other rescue," I said.

Savage Bill peered in through the door.

“Nice little shack you have here.”

Lollipop laughed so hard that her pocketbook dog, a well-groomed Pekinese, began barking in shrill duet. “Shush your mouthy!” She pushed the dog’s head back down into her handbag.

“Come on in,” Gene said. “Let’s talk a bit.” We started to lead the way to the offices downstairs.

Lollipop’s eyes popped. “Ooo-eee! Look at that staircase! I could tap dance down that like they do on *Dancing with the Stars*.”

“You’re brighter than any star, baby,” Savage said.

“Aw, you’re sweet, Savvy—and look! A roller rink on stilts!”

“That’s the formal dining table,” Gene said.

“It’s bigger than our living room,” Savage said.

“Ooo-eee! I’m getting chilly vibes in these halls. You got a secret dungeon?”

Yikes!” Lollipop said. “What’s that, the family tombstone?”

“That’s a granite sculpture for the garden,” Gene said. “We have to move the aviary to the side first.”

“Aviary?” Savage asked.

“Nothing fancy,” Gene said. “Mostly rescued pigeons and doves.”

We met up with mom in the basement office. “Hi, I’m Ned’s mom, Nan. Please, have a seat.” I could see mom was surprised, but she put on a gracious Queen Nan of the Hooper Cooper front. While everyone was finding a place to sit, there was a growl.

“Oh my!” Lollipop gasped.

“Ned, why don’t you take Charlie into the other room?” mom said.

“Are you all righty-righty, sweetie-wee?” Lollipop cooed.

“Charlie will be just fine.” I pushed him into the other office and closed the door.

“I was speaking to Bonbon,” said Lol-

lipop.

“Bonbon?” mom’s cheeks were flushing red.

“My little treasure.” Lollipop peeled back the side of her handbag so mom could see Bonbon’s head.

“Didn’t the ad say that Randall wasn’t good with other dogs?” mom asked.

“Bonbon *loves* Chows. We lost ours a month ago. Bonbon hasn’t been the same since.” Lollipop’s lower lip turned down and she was close to tears.

Mom said, “Randall’s very high-strung and—”

“All the better. Fluffy likes to play.”

“Fluffy?”

“Our Persian cat,” Savage said.

Mom and Gene looked at each other.

“Let me tell you about Randall,” I said. I told them about meeting Olga in the park, feeding and trapping Randall, getting the go-ahead from the veterinarian, and how it wasn’t working out here. “Randall needs

special attention—attention we want to give, but with mom and Gene’s business and with Charlie...” Cripes, the last thing I wanted was to cry in front of Lollipop, but I was getting that terrible hollow feeling, and my lip was trembling.

“Let’s give him a shake,” Savage said.

“Randall isn’t easy,” I said. “He’s lost his inner pup. And about his food—he’s on a green friendly diet. He’s vegan.”

Savage Bill stood up. “Kid, if he’s vegan, he’s vegan. We know how to feed our dogs.” He didn’t want to hear more. “Life is short, and the Jersey Turnpike is long.” Lollipop joined in the laughter as Bonbon yapped from the handbag. Savage Bill headed for the stairs. “Let’s get this show on the road—or the Chow on the road. Whaddya say?”

I looked at Gene.

“He’s on the third floor in the guest room,” Gene said.

“How many floors you got here? Thirty-

five?”

Lollipop combed her hair. Then she fixed Bonbon’s ribbons.

“You can leave Bonbon down here with the door closed,” mom said.

“She’ll stay in my handbag, no problem.”

We all started up the stairs. “I was telling Savvy that this is a super-duper staircase, Nan. Each morning, like a queen, you float down in your pink negligee, calling to the servants to make your croissant and coffee,” Lollipop rattled on.

“Yes, that’s my life to a tee,” mom said.

After we got to the third floor, I pointed to the guest room. “Randall’s in there. He’s tied down, but—”

Savage Bill strode over and pushed open the carved door. “Hey, Randy, baby! Savage here. Give me five!”

HI RANDY
BOY!



Why hadn't I gotten Randall a muzzle? Too late now. Randall blinked and stared. Time stood still for a minute, and then he started growling.

"Hey, Randy, dude, none of that," Savage said in a strong loud voice. Randall stopped. He looked surprised. Savage

turned to us. “You gotta be alpha firm. I know Chows. My mother raised them.”

“Ohhh, how adorable! Cutie boy! It’s mommy Lollipop.” Lollipop bent over and Bonbon fell out of her handbag.



One bite from Randall and Bonbon would be calories—and not vegan ones. Bonbon went straight to Randall and wagged her tail. I held my breath and got ready to leap in and save Bonbon. But Randall became mush.

“That’s the first time he’s wagged his tail,” I mumbled grudgingly.

“Oh, isn’t that cute?” Lollipop said. “Bonbon thinks that’s Hunky. Bonbon and Hunky were soul mates.” Randall started making those purring sounds again. “I love that freaky fur ’do.”

“He hasn’t been groomed yet,” I said.

“Where’s his leash?” Savage asked.

“Leash?”

“Randall wants to see his new home. Don’tcha, boy?”

Was this really happening?

“You ought to know that Randall has two sides,” mom said. “There’s wild Randall and then there’s—”

“*Prince* Randall,” Lollipop said.

“Prince?”

Lollipop was crowning Randall with a glittering circle of diamonds and rubies. The imaginary crown sparkled so much that the room filled with light.

“Prince Randall! How about leaving all this luxury?” Savage Bill asked.

Randall shook himself and kept sniffing Bonbon.

“See? He’s ready,” Savage Bill said.

I felt the floor get all wavy under my feet. I handed Savage the new red leash.

“Come on, Prince Randall. Let’s go slumming.” Savage Bill hooked the red leash to Randall’s collar. I undid the chain tie-down. Randall followed Savage’s lead sideways out the door. Bonbon hopped back into Lollipop’s handbag. Lollipop blew all of us kisses goodbye. Only mom blew kisses back. And they were gone. I just stood there, stunned.

Five minutes later, the doorbell rang. It was Savage again.

“Ned, baby, Randy won’t move.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we got to the car, he put the brakes on. I don’t want to force him.”

Randall was straining at the leash, trying to get back inside the front door.

“That’s it, he’d better stay here,” I said.

“We all tried.” The nightmare was over, I began to think.

“Ned, remember what Olga said about food and trust?” mom said. And the bad dream continued. I went to the kitchen and got a case of Randall’s vegan dog food and five PB&J sandwiches from the fridge.

“This is his favorite food,” I explained.

Randall was still trying to paw his way inside. “Why don’t we do it together?” Savage Bill said.

“Make Randall leave?”

I looked at Gene. Maybe he’d come through after all. I started walking to the car while Randall stayed on the porch.

“Maybe if you used a little muscle, Sav-

age,” Gene said.

So much for Gene—I’d thought he might have a change of heart. Finally, we got Randall to the car, and Savage jumped into the driver’s seat. “I’ll start ’er up; you get him into the back seat, and we’ll take off. Ready?”

“Ready,” I said.

The motor screeched and went silent. He started the car again. The motor died. Was it a sign? Savage Bill tried again, and the car started. I willed myself into pulling Randall into the back seat. “Go on, boy.” I slammed the back door. I gave the food to Lollipop and slammed the front door. Lollipop was blowing kisses again. Savage Bill honked the horn all the way down the street. Mom and Gene waved.

I felt woozy and kind of sick. “He wanted to stay with us,” I said.

“I know,” mom said.

“I forced Randall to go against his will.”

“It was for his own good.”

“At least he has Bonbon,” Gene said.

“And you have your antiques.” I ran up to my room. “*Randall!*” I screamed. I knew he heard me even though my head was buried in the pillow. I was gonna hold that pillow over my head forever. Eventually I ran out of breath and threw the pillow against the wall, gasping. I socked the bed with my fists over and over. I had ended up pushing Randall away.

Chapter 17

Randall's Loose, Part II

Two days later the phone rang. “Ned, baby, this is Savage Bill. I’m calling because... I’ll put Lollipop on.”

“Hi, Ned. Is your mom there?”

Ugh, what did they want now? Maybe they wanted to take Charlie away too, along with my birds, Hersch, Tuggy, and everything else I held dear.

“With a client,” I said. “How’s Randall?”

“Wait just a minute, I’ll put Savage on.”

“What’s going on?”

“Ned, I don’t know how to tell you this,” Bill said.

“Tell me.”

“Randy’s gone.”

“*Gone?*”

“He slipped out the front door this morning.”

“But how? Why?”

“We were going to build a fence. Honestly we were. We thought we had a little more time. He was getting along real swell with Bonbon. He was happy here.”

“How did he get out?” I asked.

“One of us left the front door ajar. He just kept running. We followed him in our car but then we lost sight of him. Ned, my radio program reaches thousands of people. And Lollipop—here, she’ll tell you.”

“Ned, I’ve made three thousand fliers,” Lollipop piped up. “The neighbors are putting them up. We’re having a prayer circle, we’ll pray every day. We’ll find him. Honest we will.” She was sobbing.

“Ned, worry not.” Savage again. “We know how much you love him. We’ll find

him. Gotta go—I'm on the air, commercial's over.”

I put down the receiver. I had a feeling the whole world needed a make-over. In the meantime, I searched my room for dad's old radio. I clicked on the AM settings and turned the dial until I found him.

“Hi there, guys and gals! This is your Savage Bill with all kinds of savage rhythms to sooth your savage soul. Woo! Woo! Woo! Before we turn Luscious Lips Henry's hot new disc of 'Baby It's Possible,' let's remind you that Randall's out there. Randall the Chow—fifty pounds of love, love, love! *BUT!* Don't handle Randall. Leave that to daddy Savage and mommy Lollipop. Toss a PB&J sandwich and run, run, run to call us. That's our Vegan Baby Prince Randall's favorite food—PB&J on nine grain bread. It's grrrr-eat you're praying for Randall! Your prayers will get us to that magic day when Randall's home! Woo! Woo! Woo! And remember there's

a big, big, big reward for whoever finds Prince Randall.

“And now that disc you’ve been waiting for, Luscious Lips Henry with ‘Baby, It’s Possible!’”

I clicked off the radio and ran downstairs to the offices. “Mom! Gene! Randall’s run away. We’ve gotta find him. He wants to come back.”

There were all kinds of Randall sightings. Randall had been spotted at almost every gas station in Jersey. He swiped a sandwich from some citizen in the parking lot of a Stop ‘n’ Shop. Randall had been seen running on the interstate. A Jersey commuter reported seeing him riding the PATH train and then lost him in the crowd at Penn Station. A woman reported that Randall had hidden under her five-year-old son’s bed and then left with his teddy bear. Another saw him guiding a blind Golden retriever across the street. An old man saw him go into a McDonald’s and

come out with French fries and a Coke (that one had said he was six feet tall.) A listener reported that Randall had been abducted by aliens. Some people were selling T-shirts in Jersey with “Come Home Randall” on the front. They were going like hotcakes. There was a vote taken at Rutgers University to see if he should be their mascot for the football team. An animal activist said Randall had freed all the cows from a slaughterhouse in Queens. Randall was everywhere. He had been seen in every size and shape, but there was still no lead that led to finding him. Then on the tenth day, close to evening, the telephone rang. It was Savage Bill.

“I got news. Randy’s been spotted twenty miles from our home off Route 287. He high-tailed it into the Ringwood State Park. I think we’ve got him. Ned?”

“If I can get Gene to drive me, I’ll meet you there,” I said.

Chapter 18

Trap the Dog

Savage Bill, five of his friends, Gene, and I filed into Ringwood State Park with flashlights. Mom and Lollipop stayed in their cars. Savage Bill carried a trapping net.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked.

“From the Woolly Mammoth Butterfly Farm,” Savage said.

“Aw, come on!”

We were carrying bags of cooked veggies and PB&J sandwiches. It was night, but we didn’t want to wait. We went uphill and down, through twists and turns, on into the belly of the park. For about two

miles we separated, then came together again. And then—

“That’s him!” I whispered.

“My Vegan Baby Prince Randall,” Savage sighed.

Randall was there, sure enough, high on a mound, blinded by the lights. He was wild Randall again and about seven pounds thinner. His ears were pulled back, his hair stood straight up and out, and his scrawny body was wired to lunge or run.

“Quiet!” Gene said. “Ned, what do we do?”

“Here’s the leash,” Savage said.

Randall growled. His upper lip curled back, and his teeth glistened. “Throw some food,” I said. “I’ll see if I can put the leash on him.”

Gene threw broccoli and carrots in Randall’s direction. “What the hell?” one of the men snarked. “This is a dog, not a rabbit!”

Randall snatched the carrot and took a couple of steps back. “Try the sandwiches,” I said. “Throw two or three at a time.”

“Where’s the meat, Ned?” one of Savage’s other radio friends asked.

“Randall’s on a green friendly diet. He’s vegan,” I said.

“You gotta be kiddin’ me,” said another of Savage’s buddies. “Dogs are carnivores.”

“They’re omnivores!” I barked. “Randall’s vegan, okay?” They saw I was very upset and backed off. Also, they were embarrassed to be shown up by a twelve-year-old.

“Yeah, well,” one of them fumbled, “if I got fed carrots and Brussels sprouts, I’d’ve hightailed it, too.”

“Shut up!” whispered Gene. This moment was the most I’d ever liked him.

Randall went for a sandwich, and I took a slow step toward him. “Randall...Randall, boy, it’s me, Ned. It’s gonna be all

right.”

Randall stopped eating and growled weakly.

“Come on boy,” I whispered. “Come on, buddy, let’s go home.”

Randall stared right into my soul and seemed to say: “You threw me away.” A rock jammed into my stomach. Randall wired up his sumo wrestler pose.

Gene said, “I think you better use the net, Savage.”

Just then, Randall looked like he might come toward me after all. But Savage had already swung. Swish! The net rippled through the air and landed on the ground. Randall ducked and ran sideways out of sight.

“He’s smarter now,” I said.

“Maybe he’s into meat again,” Savage said.

“Naw, he’s wiser than that. He doesn’t trust strangers; he only trusts things he knows.”

Suddenly I thought of something. Dogs remember. Pete said that Randall had had a happy puppyhood, and that the mother had played him Moroccan music.

“Does anybody have an iPhone?” I asked.

“I don’t think this is the right time, Ned,” said Gene.

“I got one, kid,” said Savage. “Can’t be a DJ without being connected.”

It was a long shot, but the park was big, and this could be the last chance to trap Randall before he lost all faith in me or any of us. “Quick, Mr. Savage, please, let me use that.” He handed the phone to me and I logged onto iTunes. I searched on “Moroccan music” and downloaded the first choice that popped up. Then I held the phone up to the night air and crossed my fingers. I’d have to hope for the best.

A few minutes passed, each more tense than the last. Time was ticking—now or never. My stomach turned in knots. I’d felt the same way I felt when Randall’s Is-

land was under construction and thought I'd lost Randall for good. And then I heard it. I heard that familiar crunch, crunch, crunch of the leaves. I saw a poof of rust-brown fur. And I saw the big, intense brown eyes staring at me even from the puffed-up coat.

“The trap,” I whispered. “The trap.”

Jim, the Jersey forest ranger, had set the trap when Savage asked some hours ago, and he brought it to us. A PB&J was inside. Steadily, Randall inched toward it.

Chapter 19

Chow for Now

“Home sweet home,” Gene said as we drove into Savage and Lollipop’s driveway.

“Ned, baby! Couldn’t have done it without you! You okay, honey?”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“I was talking to Lollipop,” Savage said.

“We’ll be on our way,” Gene said. “We don’t want to keep Randall locked up in the car.”

“Locked up?” Savage said. “He’s home.”

“Savage, we all want what’s right for Randall,” Gene said. “Ned and I’ve been talking. We think it’s best he finds a new

home.”

There was a long pause while Savage seemed to readjust. “Aw, Ned baby, look.” Savage swept his arm around the yard.

“What?”

“The fence, Ned. The fence. Fifteen feet high of the best oak. All for our Vegan Baby Prince Randall. A bird can hardly get over it, much less Randy. And a steel gate guaranteed to be dog-proof.”

“Very nice,” I said. “But—”

“And we’ll get him a trainer, won’t we, Lollipop?”

“We know the perfect guy,” she said.

“I know you mean well, but—”

Savage took a deep breath and got a new idea. “And we promise to get rid of that cuckoo clock, won’t we, Lollipop?”

“Cuckoo clock?” I said.

“Been in the family since I was a little boy. Dad bought it for Mother on their honeymoon. Swiss. Mother gave it to us when Lollipop and I got married. Remem-

ber, honey?”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“We didn’t want to tell you, but that’s what spooked Randy. The sound really got to him. We thought he’d get used to it. That morning when it rang eight times, with the bird jumping out and all, he couldn’t take it any longer. He just kept running. Besides, I don’t think Randy likes birds. Living with one that twittered sometimes twelve times at a shot was just too much. Your garden has birds, right?”

The aviary was filled with birds. Then there was Charlie, he didn’t want Randall. I looked at mom. She didn’t want Randall. Maybe I would have to let go. There was that sinking, hollow feeling again.

“You can visit anytime you like,” Savage said. “We’ll own him, but he’ll still be your friend.”

Mom and Gene didn’t say anything. I thought to myself that nobody owns anybody. You just spend time together.

“Randall can’t go through this again,” I said.

“We’ll call the trainer right now,” Savage said. “And the vet for his leg.”

I looked at Randall. He didn’t look back; he was busy ogling Bonbon.

Things hadn’t turned out like I’d dreamed they would, but the awake part wasn’t so bad.

And I still had Charlie!

Chapter 20

Celebration

Savage Bill and Lollipop Sue wanted to celebrate with a “Welcome Home, Randall” party. They rented a restaurant for the night. Lollipop chose the menu, which included vegan hamburgers and hot dogs, PB&J sandwiches cut in heart and diamond shapes, yummy green salad, potato salad, bean salad, pink cupcakes with candles, and coconut chocolate-ripple ice cream. They invited all the people who had helped Randall. I invited Hersch, of course, along with Morgan, Shannon, Francine the ranger, Victor

the vet, Nancy, Sandy and Candy, mom's hairdresser, Lollipop's five prayer-circle ladies, Savage Bill's five friends who'd gone into the state park, Jim the Jersey forest ranger, the groomer, Tommy the trainer, and the guy who'd first sighted Randall. He was given his reward in a sealed envelope, and a chair next to Shannon.

Savage Bill even broadcast the party on the air, so I suppose all of his listeners were invited, in a way. I also put in a call to Olga and Muffy in Germany. ("*Wunderbar!*" she said from the US embassy.) Mom, Gene, and I had the honorary seats at the head table.

"I always knew Randall was sunshine," I told her.

I guess because of Mr. Savage being a sort of celebrity, there was an article that appeared in the *New York Times* about Randall and his life story. After that, a ton of people came to see the old Hooper Cooper mansion. A lot of them hired mom

and Gene to decorate their homes. Despite the mirror, Randall ended up bringing them more business than they'd ever dreamed.

“Gene and I want to give you this,” mom said at the party. She handed me an envelope. Inside was a round-trip ticket to Mexico. “So you can share the good news about Randall with your dad in person.”

“Thank you, mom. And Gene.”

Mom was crying a little bit. I gave her a clean tissue. I hoped she would marry Gene. He was for real. I could have two dads. I had two granddads, after all; why not three?

I walked over to Sandy and Candy.

“Come sit with us, okay?” I asked.

I felt all warm with butterflies inside my stomach when I sat with Candy. She looked prettier than ever. She was dressed in white, and her blonde hair was done up with pink sparkly pins.



I heard later that Randall was enjoying a quiet evening at home. He was busy with royal affairs. Cuddled next to him were Bonbon and Fluffy.

The radio played softly. He cocked an ear when over the airwaves Savage said, “This is a toast to you, Vegan Baby Prince Randall. And to your new kingdom!”

I finally thought of something. I had made a wish some time ago in Central Park at Bethesda Fountain, to the Angel of the Waters. I hadn’t remembered what it was back then, but now I remembered clear as day. It had come true.

I loved Randall, and I know in his way Randall loved me. Once in a while you can love badly, so badly that it scars your heart forever. And sometimes you have to love that love from afar—like with my dad and with Randall. I was getting used to that hard-nosed kind of love. It made the world feel smaller, and it was sure better than not loving at all.

Chapter 21

Going Forward

I've promised not to bring any more animals home. Instead, I volunteer at Victor the veterinarian's. They have a lot of kittens and cats and a couple of dogs waiting for adoption that need care. Candy's there helping on some days also. Then there's the Wild Bird Fund across town that takes in all kinds of wildlife. We even had an injured hawk brought in.

Hersch and I are still best friends. And he's still drawing. This is a drawing he did when we visited Randall and Bon Bon the other day. As Napoleon said, "A picture is

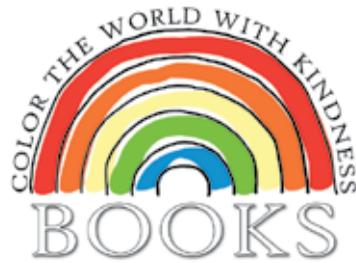
worth a thousand words.”

I hope you walk down the green friendly road.



And if you should have a Randall in your life, never give up!





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