

Book



Shelter Pet Squad

Jelly Bean

by

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Scholastic Inc.

To Mona

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Even If It's Not Perfect

Dad calls my bedroom “Suzannah’s Pet Shop,” because stuffed animals have taken over! They play hide-and-seek between the books on my shelf. They bounce with me when I jump on my bed. They snuggle against my neck and beg for treats.

It’s fun pretending with my stuffed animals, but I wish I could have a *real* pet. Something soft and furry that could sit in the window, waiting



for the school bus to bring me home. My pet would bound across the living room to greet me. He'd jump into my lap before I even sat down.

If I couldn't have a big pet, I'd pick something little and busy. He could live in a cage in my room. I'd build him a fun playground with paper-towel-tube tunnels to scurry through and ramps to climb up and slide down. My pet would ride in my bathrobe pocket when I made breakfast: cereal for me, carrots for him.

But the only pets I can have are stuffed animals. We live in an apartment, and the landlord says:

No dogs.

No cats.

No pets of any kind.

Only *people* can live in our apartment.

I don't think that's fair. A fish wouldn't make a mess. A lizard isn't noisy. A hamster doesn't smell bad — well, not too bad.

“Maybe someday we'll have our own house,” Mom says. “And then we can make the rules. But right now, this apartment is a good home for us. Even if it's not perfect.”

Sometimes I put my stuffed-animal dog, Bentley, in the window to watch me come home from school. I carry Whiskers, my stuffed-animal mouse, in my bathrobe pocket while I make breakfast. Mom bought me a collar with a bell so that Oscar, my stuffed cat, doesn't surprise Tweets, my toy bird.



“Pretending is fun, but it’s not the same as *really* doing something,” I told Mom.

One day I was lining up my stuffed animals to watch TV with me. “Suzannah,” Mom said, “I have an idea. I just read about a new program for kids to help at the animal shelter. I thought you might like to go.”

“What’s an animal shelter?” I asked.

“The shelter is a place for stray animals and homeless pets. The people who work there take care of the animals and try to find homes for them,” Mom explained. “The new program is called Shelter Pet Squad. Kids from second through sixth grade can sign up to come in on Saturday mornings. They will help make toys and do special things for the animals. I think you might like it, Suzannah. Want to give it a try?”

“It wouldn’t be like having my own pet,” I said slowly.

“No, it wouldn’t be the same,” Mom said. “But it still might be fun.”

“What kinds of animals do they have at a shelter?” I asked.

“Mostly dogs and cats,” Mom said. “But some other animals, too.”

The shelter animals didn’t have a home — not yet. And I couldn’t have a real pet — not yet. But maybe we could borrow each other? Even if it was just for now and not “for keeps”?

Even if it wasn’t perfect.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll try it.”

Chapter 2

Little Things Matter

On Saturday, Mom drove me to the animal shelter. I felt tingly with excitement. I couldn't wait to see the animals and make things for them.

But I was a little bit worried, too. Second grade was the bottom age for Shelter Pet Squad. Would there be any other second graders, like me?

And I'd never had a pet before. What if I

didn't know what to do? What if the animals didn't like me?

I really wanted them to like me.

Before we left home, I hid my stuffed-animal mouse in my pocket. Whiskers is a brave mouse, and he makes me feel brave, too.

"We're here!" Mom parked in front of a big red building. A sign out front said **MAPLEWOOD ANIMAL SHELTER**. I reached into my pocket and touched Whiskers's nose. His nose is his bravest part, because it leads him into adventures.

Inside the shelter, there was a waiting room with shiny floors. There were racks of colorful leashes and collars, silver pet dishes, and cushy dog beds for sale. Behind the cash register were filing cabinets, bookcases, and a bulletin board

covered with photos of animals. A striped orange cat walked across the counter. A gray cat was curled up asleep in one of the chairs.

“Hello!” said the lady behind the counter. She lifted the orange cat out of the way. “Can I help you?”

“This is Suzannah.” Mom put her hand on my shoulder. “She’s here for Shelter Pet Squad.”

“How nice to meet you, Suzannah! I’m Ms. Flores. Thank you for helping our animals. Ms. Kim is in charge of Shelter Pet Squad. She’s in the workroom with the rest of the kids. Just go right through that door and you’ll find them.”

Mom opened the door to the workroom. I saw four kids and one adult sitting around a

table with markers and paper bags and a big bowl of dog biscuits. I didn't know anyone. All the kids looked older than me.

“Hello. I'm Ms. Kim,” the woman said, smiling. “You must be Suzannah. Come in. You're just in time!”

I slipped my hand into my pocket to touch Whiskers' nose. I knew *he* wasn't feeling scared.



“This looks fun,” Mom said. “Do you want me to stay, Suzannah? Or are you okay by yourself?”

No other parents were there. “I’m okay,” I said quietly.

“Dad will pick you up in an hour,” Mom said. “Have fun!”

I opened my mouth to say good-bye, but the word got stuck on the way out. So I just nodded.

“I have a name tag for you to wear around your neck,” Ms. Kim said. “May I put it on you?”

I nodded again. It went over my head like a necklace, with a plastic name card at the bottom. Under my name, it said **SHELTER PET SQUAD**

MEMBER. I glanced at the other kids around the table: Levi, Jada, Matt, and a girl whose long black hair covered up her name tag. In my head, I called her Pink Girl because everything she wore was pink — even her shoes. Jada and Pink Girl looked like third or fourth graders, but Levi and Matt were probably fifth or sixth graders.

“When the dogs are in their cages, they need things to do,” Ms. Kim said. “So today we’re putting dog biscuits in paper bags. Then we will scrunch each bag into the shape of a ball. The dog will smell the treats inside and will work to get them out. So it’s like a puzzle. Some dogs will figure it out really fast. For other dogs, it will take some time. We’re

going to make one for every dog at the shelter. It's a little thing we can do for them, but little things matter.”

Ms. Kim showed us a whiteboard where she had written a list of the dogs' names.

Bandit, 2
Gordie, 3
Patches, 3
Brutus, 3
Sweetie, 2
Abby, 3
Dusty, 3
Toby, 3
Max, 2
Bella, 3
Sunny, 3
Coco, 2
Texas, 3

“The number is how many treats for that dog,” Ms. Kim said. “We don’t want the dogs to gain too much weight while they’re with us. So two treats for the little dogs and three treats for the big dogs.”

That didn’t seem too hard. I chose an empty chair between Levi and Pink Girl. I took a red marker and a bag from the pile in the middle of the table.

“Suzannah, you can make bags for Bandit and Sunny. Write the dog’s name near the bottom of the bag. Then put the correct number of treats inside and scrunch. Levi can show you.”

Levi had dark, curly hair and a friendly smile. “I made a ball for Brutus.” He showed

me his scrunched-up paper-bag ball. “Ms. Kim, when we’re done, can we give these to our dogs and watch them open them?”

“Yes, of course!” Ms. Kim said. “This is the work part. That will be the fun part.”

Even the work part seemed pretty fun to me. I wrote in my best letters *B-A-N-D-I-T* on the bottom of the bag. The marker squeaked as I wrote.

“Bandit sounds like Band-Aid!” Pink Girl said.

I looked at the word on my bag. Did I spell it wrong? No. It said *Bandit*, just like Ms. Kim had written it on the board. I wasn’t sure if Pink Girl was joking or making fun of my dog.

“It’s Bandit,” I said firmly. I slid my bag closer to Levi and away from her.

“Bandit must be a little dog, because he only gets two biscuits,” Levi said. “Both of my dogs are big, because they each get three.” He grinned. “My dog at home is named Penny. She would get *four* biscuits! She’s a sheepdog and she’s huge.”

“I have a pet rabbit at home,” Jada said. “His name is Honeybun.”

Matt laughed. “Honeybun?”

Jada shrugged. “My little sister named him. He likes me best, though. I bring him carrots and lettuce.”

“I have two cats and a hamster,” Matt said.

“I want a dog, but my dad doesn’t think our cats would like it. Someday I want to have a golden retriever. My aunt has one named Ben.”

“My dog is the best dog in the whole wide world,” Pink Girl said. “My grandpa calls him a dust mop. He’s really a Yorkshire terrier. His name is Ringo, and we have to take him to the groomer or else his hair just grows and grows.”

Everyone looked at me, as if it was my turn. I didn’t want to be the only one without a pet. “I have a mouse named Whiskers,” I said.

No one said the pets had to be real.

“Cool,” Jada said. “I wish I had a mouse.”

“I don’t have any pets at home,” Ms. Kim said. “My husband has allergies. So the

animals at the shelter are my pets while they're here.”

Ms. Kim didn't have a real pet of her own, either? It made me feel better to know I wasn't the only one. I smiled and picked a green dog biscuit and a yellow dog biscuit out of the bowl



for Bandit. I hoped he'd like having two flavors, not just one.

“Now for the scrunching!” Levi said to me. “Just pretend you're making a snowball.”

I pushed and squished and squashed. It was a messy-looking ball, but I hoped Bandit would think it was fun.

For Sunny, I picked a yellow marker and wrote *S-U-N-N-Y* on the bag. I drew a big sun at the end.

“Sunny is sunny in two ways,” Ms. Kim told me. “She's yellow like the sun, and she's bouncy and happy. So she makes everyone around her feel sunny *inside*.”

I gave Sunny three treats: green, yellow,

and red. I squished the bag tight. I wanted her to have lots of fun getting it open.

When we had a pile of paper-bag balls, Ms. Kim said, “Okay, Shelter Pet Squad. Are you ready to meet the dogs?”

Chapter 3

The Kennel

On the way to the dog kennel, Ms. Kim gave us a tour of the animal shelter. First we peeked into the small-animal room. There were only empty cages. “Our last rabbit went to her new home yesterday,” Ms. Kim said proudly. “But sometimes we have hamsters, gerbils, rats, ferrets, guinea pigs, birds, and rabbits. Once, we even had a pair of chinchillas!”

I squeezed the paper-bag balls I had made for my dogs, Bandit and Sunny. When it was time to give them the treats, I hoped Ms. Kim wouldn't pick me to go first. I wasn't sure what to do.

In the hallway, we passed a kitchen and a laundry room and then a room of cats. Some of the cats were lying on the windowsills. Some were curled up on blankets on the floor. Others climbed on towers with platforms to sit on. So many cats! I wished I could go inside the room with them, but Ms. Kim was already opening a big door at the end of the hallway. I hurried to catch up.

The dog kennel had two long rows of big cages. A few of them were empty, but most had

a dog inside. There were big dogs, little dogs, black dogs, brown dogs, spotted dogs, and yellow dogs. On each cage was a sign with the dog's name and information on it.

Some of the dogs barked at us. Others came to the edge of the cage, wagging their tails. Ms. Kim stopped at the first cage. "Hey, Dusty! We have something for you!" She turned to Matt. "When I open the door to the pen, toss your treat in to him."

"Can I go inside and pet him?" Matt asked.

Ms. Kim shook her head. "There will be some pets at the shelter that you can play with. But we always have to think about what's best for each animal. Some of our dogs are scared when they first come here. It's hard for them to

be in a strange place with new people and dogs. Other dogs come here needing to learn some manners, like not to jump up on people. So we have to keep you safe and the dogs comfortable. But you can talk to them and watch them play with their treats and know that you've made their day special."

Dusty was a big, shaggy, gray dog. He jumped off his bed and went after his treat ball as soon as Matt threw it on the floor of his cage.

"Hey, Dusty!" Matt said. "Can you smell the treats inside? I picked them just for you."

"Allie, did you make a bag for Sweetie?" Ms. Kim asked.

"Yes," Pink Girl said.

Now I knew Pink Girl's name. It was Allie. But "Pink Girl" was already stuck in my head. Maybe I'd call her both names.

"Here Sweetie-weetie!" Allie Pink Girl said in a really high voice.

Sweetie was a skinny little dog, with long legs and tiny feet. She nosed her ball around her cage before she ripped it open and ate the treats. She seemed like a nice dog.

"Suzannah, do you have treats for Bandit?" Ms. Kim called to me from farther down the row of cages.

Bandit was a little black-and-white dog. He stayed in his bed as Ms. Kim opened the cage door. I looked between the scrunches of my bag balls to find Bandit's name, then threw his

ball onto the floor of his cage. Bandit stayed on his bed and stared at it.

“Bandit is shy,” Ms. Kim said. “He had an owner who loved him very much. But she was an older lady and she died. He misses her. He might not play with it right now, Suzannah. But he’ll come get it when he’s ready.”



The group moved on to the next dog, but I stayed. I watched Bandit through the pen door.

It wasn't fair that he'd lost his person and his home at the same time. "I made this for you," I said softly to him. "There are yummy treats in the bag."

The little dog climbed slowly out of his bed. He walked over to sniff the bag. Picking it up in his teeth, he carried it back to his bed.

I smiled, but my heart hurt, too. Bandit needed someone to help him feel happy again. I wished that someone could be me. "I'm sorry you're sad," I said quietly. "I hope you get a new family soon."

I pulled Whiskers out of my pocket, just far enough that his nose was poking out. "Be brave, okay?" I said in my squeaky mouse voice. "Adventure is ahead!"

Bandit put his foot on the edge of the bag and ripped it with his teeth. He found the first treat and looked up at me while he crunched it.

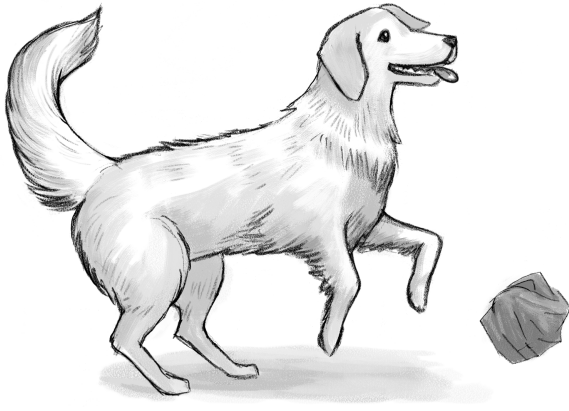
“Good boy!” I said.

“Suzannah, Sunny wants her turn now!” Ms. Kim called from somewhere in the kennel.

“Bye, Bandit.” I pushed Whiskers back down into my pocket so no one would see him. I left Bandit crunching his second dog biscuit.

Sunny was a big golden retriever. She came right over to me with her fluffy tail wagging. I tossed the bag into the cage and she jumped around, ripping it apart. Sunny wouldn't need a pep talk from Whiskers. Sunny was plenty brave already.

“She's the kind of dog I want,” Matt said.



Sunny would take up my whole bed at home. I still wished I could take her home, though. I wouldn't mind sleeping on the floor if we didn't both fit.

"Sunny really likes your treats," Jada said, smiling at me.

I smiled back. Jada looked like she might want to be friends with me. "I gave Sunny one of each flavor."

"That was a good idea," Jada said. "If I could

adopt a dog, Sunny is the dog I'd pick. Which one would you pick?"

"I want to adopt them all!" I said.

Jada laughed. "Then you'd have an animal shelter at your house!"

"The dogs are happy and busy now," said Ms. Kim. "So let's go back to the workroom. I brought some fleece for us to braid into simple rope toys for the cats to pounce on and swat." She grinned at Matt. "And then you can play with the cats."

"Hooray!" Matt said.

As we walked back to the door of the kennel, Ms. Kim spoke to each dog. "You're such a pretty girl, Bella. Hi, Patches. You'll be going for a walk soon. Hey, Max! Who's a good dog?"

I could tell she loved the dogs. But a cage wasn't the same as a house. I wanted the dogs to have homes all their own.

On our way out of the kennel, I walked slowly on purpose. I kept turning around one more time to see Bandit and Sunny. One more time. One more time.

It had been fun making things for the dogs and seeing how much they liked them. But it hurt to walk away. Would they get adopted this week? Would I ever see them again?

I looked back one more time.