

Max the
Missing
Puppy

For Rosie

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Chapter One



Molly opened the gate, and stood holding it, waiting impatiently for her parents to catch up. “This is it!” she called. “Number forty-two!” She was sure she could hear squeaking and yapping from inside the house, and she couldn’t wait to get inside.

At last her parents caught up. “Go and ring the bell, then!” said Molly’s dad.

Molly heard the bell chime inside the house, and it was followed by an explosion of deep woofs. Then she heard paws thudding, and claws clicking, and something thumped into the door. Molly jumped back in surprise.

“Jackson, get away! How can I open the door with you in front of it?” The voice didn’t sound cross, more as though the dog’s owner was trying not to laugh. “And the rest of you aren’t helping!”

The deep barking had now been joined by a lot of squeaky little noises, all sounding very excited. The door opened, and a friendly-looking woman attempted to hold back a tide of black and white puppies as they surged around her feet. An enormous grey, shaggy dog was sitting beside her.



“Oh, good, you shut the gate. The puppies are a bit excited, I’m afraid, and they’re desperate to get out and explore. I’m Sally Hughes, we spoke on the phone. Come on in!”

“I’m James Martin,” Molly’s dad said, picking up a puppy who’d managed to scramble over Mrs Hughes’s foot. “You spoke to my wife Clare on the phone, and this is our daughter Molly. The dog-mad one!”

They followed the excited puppies into the house. Molly looked at them in amazement. Mrs Hughes had told her mum that there were six puppies, but surely there were more than six here? They seemed to be everywhere!

Mrs Hughes led them into the kitchen and put the kettle on. Another

massive dog was stretched out dozing on a comfy-looking cushion in the corner. Molly was sure she heard her groan as the puppies flooded back in and threw themselves all over her.

Mrs Hughes smiled. “Poor Silkie! I think she’s actually looking forward to the puppies going. She’s a great mum, but they’re wearing her out!” She put cups of coffee down in front of Molly’s mum and dad, and poured Molly a glass of juice.

Molly sipped from her glass, perched on the edge of her chair, wishing she could go and play with the puppies who were still bouncing all over their mum.

Mrs Hughes noticed her hopeful eyes and beamed at her. “Go on, get down and play with them! Just watch

out for Jackson, the puppies' dad, he's completely friendly, but he's huge, and if he wants to join in he can knock you over without meaning to!"

Molly knelt down on the floor, and the puppies looked at her with interest. The bravest of them started to creep slowly over to her, tail wagging gently. Molly stretched out a hand hopefully, and he butted it with his soft little head, then darted back. Molly thought he looked almost as though he was giggling!

"Mrs Hughes?" she asked, looking round. "Why don't the puppies look like Jackson and Silkie? They've got short fur, and they're black and white, but their parents are grey."

"That's the way it is with Old English sheepdogs," Mrs Hughes explained.

"They're born with that short, springy black and white fur, and when it grows longer, it gets much lighter."

Dad was looking thoughtfully at Silkie, her long fur glossy and smooth as it trailed over her cushion. "It's going to be a lot of work, grooming."

Mrs Hughes nodded seriously. "Yes, it really is. You have to make sure their coats are clean, and that they haven't got any sore patches under all that fur. And they need a *lot* of exercise. Old English sheepdogs are a big commitment. I mean, no dogs are easy to look after, but one of these can be hard work."

Molly looked up at her parents. It sounded a bit scary, but she still wanted to take one of the puppies home!

Her mum was looking doubtful. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea, we’ve never had a dog before. Perhaps something smaller would be better...”

The bravest puppy, who had a mostly white face, with cute black ears, and a pirate-style eyepatch, was creeping up to Molly again. This time he jumped up so his paws were on her lap, and gave her a quick little lick.



Molly gasped delightedly. She’d been listening to her mum and hadn’t noticed him. She tickled him under the chin. “I don’t mind it being hard work,” she said earnestly.

Another puppy, who had just the same gorgeous pirate look, bounded over and jumped into Molly’s lap. Then he sat with his tongue hanging out, looking very pleased with himself.

Mrs Hughes smiled. “It’s not all work. They’re incredibly affectionate dogs, and very playful and good with children. Your daughter will have a friend for life.” She crouched down next to Molly. “Those two are the boy puppies, they’re a real pair of rascals, into everything. The girls are a little bit more shy.”

But now that their brothers had proved that this girl wasn't scary, the other puppies came crowding round to be stroked and petted too. Soon Molly was covered in a heaving black and white puppy blanket. She caught sight of Silkie watching her, one big dark eye peering out from behind her gorgeous long fringe. The big dog sighed happily, and Molly was sure she was glad that someone else was being climbed on for once.

Molly's parents had been talking quietly. Molly tried to listen, but the puppies kept licking her ears, which made it a bit tricky. Oh, she did hope they hadn't changed their minds! When they'd spotted the advert in the local paper saying *Puppies for Sale*, and

seen that the house was only half an hour's drive away, it had seemed so perfect. It had taken ages to persuade Mum and Dad that she was old enough to have a dog. They'd been saying, "When you're older," for years! Molly didn't think she could bear it if she had to wait any longer. These puppies were so lovely, and Jackson and Silkie were gorgeous. Molly could just imagine running along the beach after school every day with a huge silvery-furred dog like Jackson galloping beside her.

At last Dad came over and squatted down next to the puppies too. Molly and all the puppies stared seriously at him. Then one of the bouncy boy puppies leaned over and biffed him on

the arm with his head, looking up at him with twinkly dark eyes.

Dad gently picked up the puppy, and smiled over at Molly. “So, you think you can manage to keep one of these little rascals exercised?” he asked.

Molly gasped in delight. “You mean yes? We can have one?” She wrapped her arms round the other boy puppy, who was trying to burrow under her jumper.

“Yes. But you’ll have to look after the puppy, Molly. And it won’t be a puppy for that long, either – soon it will be a great big dog the size of Silkie and Jackson over there.” Dad tickled his puppy, who wriggled happily. Then he looked down at the puppies romping all round them. “Now we just have to choose one...”

One!

Molly knew she ought to be over the moon about having a puppy at all, but she hadn’t imagined quite how difficult it would be to pick just one. The puppies were all so sweet she wanted to take every one of them home! How could she choose one – when it meant leaving all the others behind?

The two cheeky boy puppies were scrapping over a chew-toy now, pulling it to and fro with mock-fierce growls. The fight looked even funnier because they were so alike, the same size and with almost identical markings. The only noticeable difference was that their eyepatches were on the opposite eyes – sitting side by side they were like mirror images.