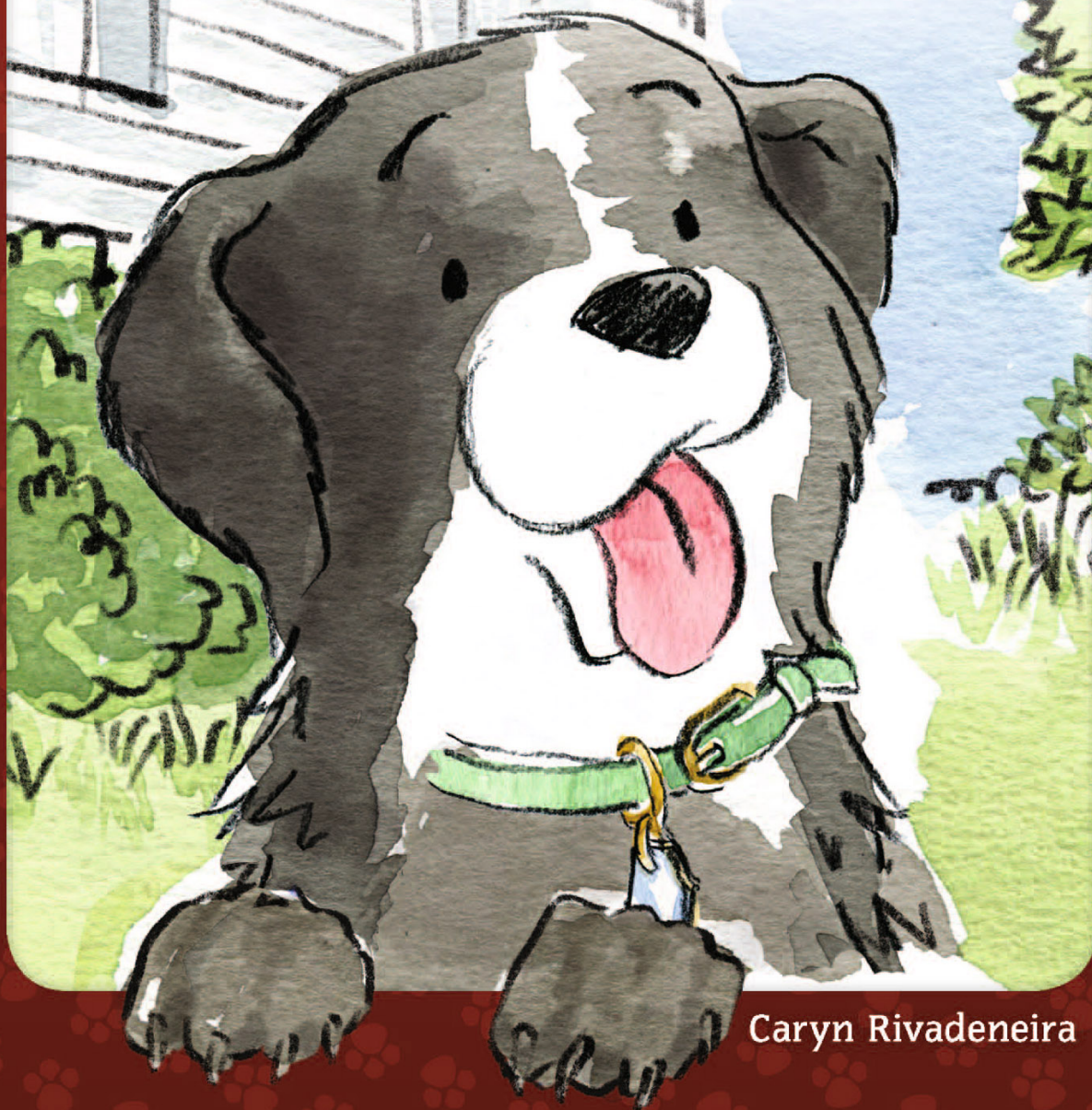


HELPER HOUNDS™

Sparky

Helps Mary Make New Friends



Caryn Rivadeneira



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CHAPTER 1

I raced to Tasha's desk. I knew that "*bing!*" anywhere. It was the sound her computer made when we got a fresh case. I wagged my tail. It shook my whole body. I pressed my snout into Tasha's side.

"Easy, buddy," Tasha said.

I sat like a good dog. But I couldn't stop my tail. It swooshed across the wood floor. Dust bunnies hopped away as my tail swept. Sweeping floors is one of the *many* things I am great at.

My mouth opened into a huge smile. My tongue rolled out the side. I couldn't help that either. *Holy cow*. This was exciting!

“OK,” Tasha said. “Looks like we’ve got a new assignment for you.”

I knew it! *Tell me! Tell me! Who needs me?*

“There’s a little girl named Mary,” Tasha said. *Mary. Mary. I like her already!* Tufts of hair flew off my tail. (I may have been drooling. But that’s not important.)

“Her mom got a new job,” Tasha said. Her eyes squinted at the screen. “The family just moved from Texas to Chicago. Mary’s starting at a new school and is pretty nervous. She’s worried about making new friends.”

New job. Texas. Chicago. New school. New friends. Nervous. Got it!

“This sounds perfect for you, Sparkplug,” Tasha said.

I barked and put my front paws on her lap.

“Yeah, Spark, you know all about moving and new homes and new friends, don’t you?”

I barked again. I do. I know all about moving. Plus, another thing I'm great at? Meeting new friends. I can help Mary with that, no problem.

“Should I say yes to this one, Spark?”

My bottom wagged along with my tail. I barked twice.

“I'll take that as a yes,” Tasha said.

Tasha is good at reading my mind. She knows me well.

So our next adventure was about to begin. Tasha plunked on the keyboard and grabbed my red Helper Hound vest and name badge. My mission to help Mary with her new school jitters and make new friends was launching in 3-2-1...!

CHAPTER 2

Before we go, perhaps I should tell you a bit about myself. This is how I became a world-famous, card-carrying Helper Hound.

I was born in a barn. My dad, Jasper, was a world-champion herding dog, a Border Collie from two farms over. He was great at rounding up sheep. Jasper was also good at roaming around the central Wisconsin farmlands.

That's where he met my mom, Betsy: a beautiful, prize-winning Bernese Mountain Dog, whose main job was to have puppies. Purebred Bernese Mountain Dog puppies, that is. Puppies, puppies, and more puppies.

You'd think the lady who fed my mom would've been happy when my brothers, sisters, and I came along. But she wasn't. Since our dad was a roaming Border Collie from two farms over and *not* a prize-winning Bernese Mountain Dog, Mom's lady sneered at us. She called us "mutts" and "mongrels." She never even pet us! Not that I remember.

As soon as we were "ready," which meant as soon as we were munching on puppy food and drinking water and sleeping away from Mom, the lady sent us all away. Normally she made people pay lots and lots of money for Mom's fancy puppies, but since we were "worthless mutts," she gave us to whomever would take us. For *free*.

My first family only kept me for a couple of weeks. Today, I'm a champ at pooping and peeing in the yard. That little corner behind the garage is my favorite spot. It's a fun surprise for

the possums who walk back there. But when I was a little guy, I wasn't so good at it. After a couple of "accidents"—at least that's what humans call it, but I always remember peeing on purpose!—in the house, my first family decided I had to go. That's OK. Their carpet was starting to smell funny anyway.

So, off I went. This time, the family was a lot nicer. They admired my good looks. Which reminds me: have I already told you about my looks? My shiny black, brown, and white coat? The way my hair *flows* when I run? The way my white snout shows off the beautiful dirt I'm always rooting around in? Let's just say I'm really handsome. Everyone says so. Even strangers at the park who don't even know me.

And this family even understood my brains. Mutt or no mutt, I come from quality Border Collie stock, and Border Collies are the smartest dogs. Don't believe me? Google it.

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