

~ CHAPTER SIX ~

Finders Keepers

AFTER lunch on the Saturday after the dog show Henry was in his room feeding his catfish. He dropped a tiny pinch of food into the water and watched it drift down to the bottom of the aquarium, where the catfish busily dug through the sand to find it.

"He-e-e-nry!" Robert was calling from the front yard.

Henry put the lid back on his aquarium and went out on the front porch. "Hi. What do you want?"

"Come on out and let's practice tumbling like the fellows in the gym at the Y."

"O.K." Henry ran down the front steps. Ribsy looked up from the bone he was gnawing and growled. It was not a cross growl. It was a growl that meant, "Don't bother me. Can't you see I'm busy?"

The boys practiced standing on their hands and turning somersaults on the lawn until Robert said, "Come on, let's try that trick where one fellow gets on his back with his feet in the air and the other fellow gets on top of his feet and the first fellow turns him around and around." He flopped on the grass with his feet in the air. "Come on. Try it," he said.

Henry sat on Robert's feet and lay back with his arms and legs outstretched. Robert tried to twirl him around. Henry teetered.

"Hey, you're kicking me!" Henry toppled over upon Robert.

"Oof!" Robert sat up. "You're too heavy. Let's try something else."

"I know what. Let's go over to Beezus' house and practice chinning ourselves on her chestnut tree."

They found the girls in front of Beezus' house. They were busy tying a long jumping rope from the horse chestnut tree across the sidewalk to the lilac bush. Ramona, who was wearing pink coveralls and curlers in her hair, was scratching on the bark of the chestnut tree with her fingernails.

"Hi," said Henry.

"Hello," answered Beezus, stopping work on the rope.

"Mewow, mewow," said Ramona.

"What does she mean, 'Mewow'?" asked Henry.

"Oh, don't pay any attention to her," answered Beezus. "That's the way she says miaow. She's pretending she's a cat."

"Mewow," said Ramona and patted the curlers in her hair. "I'm a cat with curly hair." Henry and Robert exchanged disgusted looks. Girls certainly started to be dumb when they were awfully young. They watched the girls in silence.

Then they all sat down on the grass and waited.

"I wish you'd go away," said Mary Jane at last.

"We're busy."

"Don't mind us," said Henry. "We have all day."

Beezus tightened the knot on the jumping rope. "Henry Huggins! I think you're mean. Why don't you play in your own yard?"

"We want to watch what you're doing," answered Henry, chewing on a blade of grass.

"Ho! I know. I'll bet you think you're going to be tight-rope walkers!" scoffed Robert. "Why don't you tie the rope up high? It's only about two feet off the ground."

"Dumbbell!" said Beezus. "Every time we walk across it without falling off we'll move it up a foot. I'll bet even people in circuses don't start practicing at the top of the circus tent. And they have nets under them, too: "

"Aw, you can't even walk it when it's two feet off the ground," scoffed Henry. "I'll bet you couldn't walk it if it were one inch off the ground."

"You be quiet, Henry Huggins!" ordered Mary Jane. "Why don't you and Robert mind your own business? Go on, Beezus. Let's not pay any attention to them. They just think they're smart."

Beezus opened her mother's umbrella and held it in her right hand. As she stepped up on the rope, Mary Jane took hold of her left hand to steady her. The lilac bush bent under her weight, the rope sagged, and Beezus was standing on the sidewalk with the rope under her feet.

Robert and Henry hooted with laughter. "You sure look silly standing there on that rope with that umbrella in your hand!"

"You keep quiet!" snapped Beezus. "Let's see you do it if you think you're so smart."

Henry laughed harder. "She can't even walk it when it's a trillionth of an inch off the sidewalk!"

Robert rolled on the grass. "Not even if it's a billionth of a trillionth of an inch off the sidewalk!"

Beezus waved the umbrella. "You get off my property!"

"You can't make us!" yelled Henry.

"If you don't go home, I'll never speak to you as long as I live!" Beezus was really angry.

"Or me either." Mary Jane glared at the boys.

"See if we care!"

Just then Scooter rode down the street on his bicycle. "Look!" he yelled. "No hands!"

The others stopped squabbling to watch. As Scooter approached, he bent slowly backward while he continued to pedal. When his head had almost touched the fender over the back wheel, the bicycle began to wobble. The handle bars turned and the bicycle headed for the curb. Scooter tried to sit up. It was too late. He had lost his balance. The bicycle bounced up the curb and tumbled Scooter sprawling upon the grass. The bicycle, stopped by the chestnut tree, toppled over on top of him.

Robert and Henry hooted as Scooter sheepishly untangled himself from his bicycle. He rubbed his shin but didn't say anything. The children knew the fall must have hurt, but Scooter wasn't going to admit it.

"Well, anyway, I did it once," he said, carefully feeling his right elbow to make sure it wasn't

broken.

"Aw, I'll bet you didn't." Henry was pleased. Usually he was the one to have accidents while Scooter watched.

"I did, too!"

"I bet you didn't."

"Keep quiet, all of you!" shouted Beezus. "And get off my property this minute!"

"Beezus, you keep out of this!" ordered Henry. "Aw, you're just a dumb girl," sneered Scooter.

"Yes, a dumb girl," echoed Robert. "And anyway, it isn't your property."

"My dad pays rent on it, so it's just the same as my property." Beezus raised the umbrella to hit Scooter.

"Hit him!" yelled Mary Jane, far from her usual ladylike self.

"Don't you dare hit me!"

"Hey, you kids!"

It was a strange voice. The children stopped quarreling to see who it was. A strange boy was sitting astride a bicycle by the curb. He was a big boy, big enough to be in the seventh or eighth grade. He didn't belong on Klickitat Street and none of them had ever seen him before.

"I've been yelling at you for five minutes," he said and grinned. "Is one of you Henry Huggins?" Henry was so surprised he didn't answer. Who was this boy and how did he know his name? Robert nudged Henry, who remembered he hadn't answered. "Oh yes," he said, "that's me."

The boy reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the newspaper clipping that showed Henry and Ribsby at the dog show. Henry couldn't understand why this strange boy was carrying that picture with him. Just then Ribsby began to bark furiously and Henry saw him running down the street toward them.

"Dizzy!" the boy shouted and sprang from his bicycle. "Here, Dizzy!" Ribsby jumped up on the boy and licked his hands. The boy laughed and patted him and, when Ribsby would stand still long enough, scratched him behind his left ear.

That's funny, thought Henry. How does he know Ribsby likes to be scratched behind his left ear? And why does he call him Dizzy? "His name isn't Dizzy," he said to the boy. "It's Ribsby and he's my dog!"

Ribsby looked at the boy and wagged his tail again.

A terrible thought came to Henry. Ribsby must have belonged to the boy before he found him in the drugstore over a year ago. The boy had seen his picture in the paper and had come to take him away!

If only Ribsby hadn't won the prize in the dog show and had his picture in the paper! Then the boy would never have found him. Henry didn't know what to do. He couldn't give up Ribsby after a whole year. He couldn't.

He moved closer to Ribsby and put his hand on his collar. "He's my dog," he said. "He's my dog and you can't take him away. He was a skinny old dog when I found him and I bought him a collar and a license and a dish and now I buy him two pounds of horse meat every week and Woofies Dog Food besides. And I wash him and brush him and everything." Henry gulped.

"You can't take him away!"

"Henry does take awfully good care of him," added Beezus loyally.

"Henry found him, so he must have run away from you," said Robert.

"Finders keepers, losers weepers," chanted Mary Jane.

"Well, I had him longer than you have," said the boy. "And I fed him and brushed him, too. I had him when he was a puppy. He used to chase his tail so much I named him Dizzy. And the only reason he ran away was because he was heartbroken. I went to Scout Camp for the summer and Mom and Dad went East and we left Dizzy with my aunt and uncle. They said he was so lonesome and homesick he wouldn't eat or play or anything. Then one day they couldn't find him anywhere. They thought maybe he'd gone home to look for me so they drove over to our house to look for him. He wasn't there and they looked every place. They advertised in the paper and everything."

"So he did run away," said Robert. "You left him and he ran away."

Ribsy licked the boy's hand again.

"Look. He remembers me and wants to come *home with me*."

"But he likes me, too," protested Henry.

Ribsy looked at Henry and wagged his tail.

For the first time Scooter spoke. "We like Ribsy right here in this neighborhood. He's just about the most popular dog around here and every one of us would miss him."

Henry stared at Scooter in amazement. It was the first time he had heard him say anything good about Ribsy.

"Yes, we all like him," agreed Robert. "All the kids at Glenwood School like him. He waits for Henry every day under the fir tree and all the kids know him."

"Yes, what about us?" asked Beezus. "Henry has taken care of him for a whole year and I don't think it's fair for you to take him away."

"He didn't have a collar or a license tag when I found him," said Henry.

"He had them when I went off to Scout Camp. I don't know how he lost them except my aunt said he was awfully thin when he disappeared. Maybe he slipped his collar off over his head or somebody took it." The boy reached in his pocket. "I have my birthday money that you can take." He held out a five-dollar bill to Henry.

"Five dollars! I wouldn't sell Ribsy for a million dollars!"

"Oh, I didn't mean for you to sell him," said the boy hastily. "I meant the money to help pay his expenses for the last year. I know it isn't enough, but it's all I have."

Henry felt sorry for the boy. He could understand why he would want to keep a smart dog like Ribsy. But Henry couldn't part with his dog. Nothing exciting had ever happened to him before and look at all the things that had happened this year!

Henry knelt and put his arm around his dog's neck. "You wouldn't want to leave me, would you, Ribsy? You wouldn't want to leave Klickitat Street, would you?"

Ribsy licked Henry's face.

The stranger knelt and snapped his fingers.

"Dizzy, you want to come home with me, don't you?"

Ribsy looked at him, wagged his tail, and said, "Woof!"

"I guess he likes both of us," sighed Henry. "But I don't care. He ran away from you and I found him.

"That's right. Just like I said, Finders keepers, losers weepers," said Mary Jane.

"But I raised him from a pup. And my mother and father and kid sister miss him, too."

"But he likes to meet me after school and play with the kids." Henry paused to pet the dog. Then he said slowly, "Maybe we should let Ribsy decide."

"Sure," said Scooter. "That's a good idea. Don't worry, Henry. He'll choose you."

"That seems fair enough," agreed the boy. "How shall we let him choose?"

"I know," said Scooter. "Leave Ribsy where he is and each of you go twenty squares down the sidewalk in opposite directions. Then when I say, 'Go!' you both start calling at the same time. Whichever one Ribsy goes to gets to keep the dog."

"O.K.," agreed Henry. He felt all quivery inside.

"Sounds fair to me," agreed the boy.

"Oh, Henry, what if he doesn't choose you?" asked Beezus fearfully.

"Don't worry," said Mary Jane. "He won't want to leave Henry."

Scooter held Ribsy by his collar. Henry counted twenty squares down the sidewalk toward his house. The boy walked twenty the other way. They both turned and faced the dog. Henry's mouth felt so dry he was afraid he might not be able to call.

Scooter turned to the boy. "Say, you don't have any meat or anything in your pockets, do you?" he asked suspiciously.

"No, I don't. Cross my heart."

"How about you, Henry?" Scooter was going to be fair.

"Good luck, Henry!" shouted Beezus,

"Thanks," said Henry weakly.

Scooter turned Ribsy toward the street so he was facing neither Henry nor the strange boy.

"All right, you guys. Ready, get set-go!" He took his hand off Ribsy's collar.

"Here, Ribsy! Here, Ribsy! Come on, Ribs!" At least Henry's voice worked.

"Here, Dizzy, Dizzy, Dizzy!"

Henry gulped. "No, me neither."

"O.K. We want to make this a fair contest."

The dog's former master snapped his fingers.

The dog looked at Henry. He looked at the other boy. Then he sat down to scratch behind his left ear with his left hind foot.

"Ribsy!" wailed Henry. "Come here! Here, Ribsy! Here, Ribsy!"

"Come, Dizzy! Come, Dizzy!" called the boy. Ribsy stood, up and took a few steps toward the boy and wagged his tail. The children groaned. "Ribsy!" shouted Henry with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Ribsy stopped, turned around wagged his tail, and said, "Woof!"

"Attaboy, Ribsy!" shouted Henry. "Go on, Ribsy!" screamed Beezus.

"No coaching from the audience!" ordered Scooter.

Ribsy took a few steps toward Henry. Then he looked back at the other boy.

"Horse meat, Ribsy, horse meat! Here, Ribsy! Here, Ribsy!" At the mention of horse meat Ribsy looked at Henry.

"Here, Dizzy, Dizzy!" Then the boy had an idea. "Here, Ribsy! Here, Ribsy!" he called.

"Hey, you're cheating!" objected Henry. "I'm supposed to call him Ribsy."

"There wasn't any rule about what we should call him."

"That's right; Henry," agreed Scooter.

"Look, he's turning around!" shouted Mary Jane.

But Ribsy only turned around to chew at a spot near his tail. He bit at the flea, sat down, scratched behind his left ear again, and then stood up. The boys kept on yelling.

With a tired sigh Ribsy sank down on the sidewalk, put his head on his paws, and closed his eyes.

The children groaned. "Don't go to sleep now, Ribsy!" begged Henry, who was so scared his hands felt cold and damp.

Ribsy opened his eyes and, without moving his head, turned them first toward the strange boy and then toward Henry. "Come on, Ribsy," they both coaxed.

Slowly Ribsy stood up, and after a backward glance at the stranger, trotted eight squares down the sidewalk toward Henry. He paused, scratched again, and trotted the remaining squares to Henry. Then he sank down with his head on Henry's foot and closed his eyes again.

Ribsy had chosen Henry!

The children cheered, but Henry couldn't say a word. He knelt and hugged his dog.

"I knew he'd choose you, Henry," crowed Mary Jane. "I just knew it all the time."

"My, but I was scared for a minute," said Beezus.

The other boy looked so disappointed that Henry couldn't help feeling sorry for him.

"I'm glad Ribsy wants to stay with me," said Henry, "but I'm sorry you have to lose him. He's an awfully good dog."

"I hate to lose him, too, but I guess I can't complain. It was a fair contest." The boy threw his leg over his bicycle. "Say, do you suppose I could come over to see him sometimes?"

"Sure. Any time you want."

"Thanks. I'll be around soon." The boy rode off down the street.

The children all crowded around Ribsy to pet him. "I sure am lucky," said Henry, "but he had me scared for a while."

"Jeepers, I don't know what this neighborhood would have done without Ribsy," said Beezus. "Come on. Now that Ribsy is Henry's for keeps, let's think of something we all can play."