

Chapter One

*M*y name is India Opal Buloni, and last summer my daddy, the preacher, sent me to the store for a box of macaroni-and-cheese, some white rice and two tomatoes, and I came back with a dog. This is what happened: I walked into the produce section of the Winn-Dixie grocery store to pick out my two tomatoes and I almost bumped right into the store manager. He was standing there all red-faced, screaming and waving his arms around.

“Who let a dog in here?” he kept on shouting.
“Who let a dirty dog in here?”

At first, I didn’t see a dog. There were just a lot of vegetables rolling around on the floor, tomatoes

and onions and green peppers. And there was what seemed like a whole army of Winn-Dixie employees running around waving their arms just the same way the store manager was waving his.

And then the dog came running around the corner. He was a big dog. And ugly. And he looked like he was having a real good time. His tongue was hanging out and he was wagging his tail. He skidded to a stop and smiled right at me. I had never before in my life seen a dog smile, but that is what he did. He pulled back his lips and showed me all his teeth. Then he wagged his tail so hard that he knocked some oranges off a display and they went rolling everywhere, mixing in with the tomatoes and onions and green peppers.

The manager screamed, "Somebody grab that dog!"

The dog went running over to the manager, wagging his tail and smiling. He stood up on his hind legs. You could tell that all he wanted to do was get face to face with the manager and thank him for the good time he was having in the produce

department, but somehow he ended up knocking the manager over. And the manager must have been having a bad day because, lying there on the floor, right in front of everybody, he started to cry. The dog leaned over him, real concerned, and licked his face.

“Please,” said the manager, “somebody call the pound.”

“Wait a minute!” I hollered. “That’s my dog. Don’t call the pound.”

All the Winn-Dixie employees turned around and looked at me, and I knew I had done something big. And maybe stupid, too. But I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t let that dog go to the pound.

“Here, boy,” I said.

The dog stopped licking the manager’s face and put his ears up in the air and looked at me, like he was trying to remember where he knew me from.

“Here, boy,” I said again. And then I figured that the dog was probably just like everybody else in the world, that he would want to get called by a name,

only I didn't know what his name was, so I just said the first thing that came into my head. I said, "Here, Winn-Dixie."

And that dog came trotting over to me just like he had been doing it his whole life.

The manager sat up and gave me a hard stare, like maybe I was making fun of him.

"It's his name," I said. "Honest."

The manager said, "Don't you know not to bring a dog into a grocery store?"

"Yes sir," I told him. "He got in by mistake. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Come on, Winn-Dixie," I said to the dog.

I started walking and he followed along behind me as I went out of the produce department and down the cereal aisle and past all the cashiers and out the door.

Once we were safe outside, I checked him over real careful and he didn't look that good. He was big, but skinny; you could see his ribs. And there were bald patches all over him, places where he

didn't have any fur at all. Mostly, he looked like a big piece of old brown carpet that had been left out in the rain.

"You're a mess," I told him. "I bet you don't belong to anybody."

He smiled at me. He did that thing again, where he pulled back his lips and showed me his teeth. He smiled so big that it made him sneeze. It was like he was saying, "I know I'm a mess. Isn't it funny?"

It's hard not to immediately fall in love with a dog who has a good sense of humour.

"Come on," I told him. "Let's see what the preacher has to say about you."

And the two of us, me and Winn-Dixie, started walking home.

Chapter Two

That summer I found Winn-Dixie was also the summer me and the preacher moved to Naomi, Florida, so he could be the new preacher at the Open Arms Baptist Church of Naomi. My daddy is a good preacher and a nice man, but sometimes it's hard for me to think about him as my daddy because he spends so much time preaching or thinking about preaching or getting ready to preach. And so, in my mind, I think of him as "the preacher". Before I was born he was a missionary in India and that is how I got my first name. But he calls me by my second name, Opal, because that was his mother's name. And he loved her a lot.

Anyway, while me and Winn-Dixie walked home, I told him how I got my name and I told him how I had just moved to Naomi. I also told him about the preacher and how he was a good man, even if he was too distracted with sermons and prayers and suffering people to go grocery shopping.

“But you know what?” I told Winn-Dixie, “you are a suffering dog, so maybe he will take to you right away. Maybe he’ll let me keep you.”

Winn-Dixie looked up at me and wagged his tail. He was kind of limping like something was wrong with one of his legs. And I have to admit, he stank. Bad. He was an ugly dog, but already I loved him with all my heart.

When we got to the Friendly Corners Trailer Park, I told Winn-Dixie that he had to behave right and be quiet, because this was an all-adult trailer park and the only reason I got to live in it was because the preacher was a preacher and I was a good, quiet kid. I was what the Friendly

Corners Trailer Park manager, Mr Alfred, called “an exception”. And I told Winn-Dixie he had to act like an exception, too; specifically, I told him not to pick any fights with Mr Alfred’s cats or Mrs Detweller’s little yappy Yorkie dog, Samuel. Winn-Dixie looked up at me while I was telling him everything, and I swear he understood.

“Sit,” I told him when we got to my trailer. He sat right down. He had good manners. “Stay here,” I told him. “I’ll be right back.”

The preacher was sitting in the living room, working at the little fold-out table. He had papers spread all around him and he was rubbing his nose, which always meant he was thinking. Hard.

“Daddy?” I said.

“Hmmm,” he said back.

“Daddy, do you know how you always tell me that we should help those less fortunate than ourselves?”

“Mmmm-hmmm,” he said. He rubbed his nose and looked around at his papers.

“Well,” I said, “I found a Less Fortunate at the grocery store.”

“Is that right?” he said.

“Yes sir,” I told him. I stared at the preacher really hard. Sometimes he reminded me of a turtle hiding inside its shell, in there thinking about things and not ever sticking his head out into the world. “Daddy, I was wondering. Could this Less Fortunate, could he stay with us for a while?”

Finally the preacher looked up at me. “Opal,” he said, “what are you talking about?”

“I found a dog,” I told him. “And I want to keep him.”

“No dogs,” the preacher said. “We’ve talked about this before. You don’t need a dog.”

“I know it,” I said. “I know I don’t need a dog. But this dog needs me. Look,” I said. I went to the trailer door and I hollered, “Winn-Dixie!”

Winn-Dixie’s ears shot up in the air and he grinned and sneezed, and then he came limping up the steps and into the trailer and put his head

right in the preacher's lap, right on top of a pile of papers.

The preacher looked at Winn-Dixie. He looked at his ribs and his matted-up fur and the places where he was bald. The preacher's nose wrinkled up. Like I said, the dog smelled pretty bad.

Winn-Dixie looked up at the preacher. He pulled back his lips and showed the preacher all of his crooked yellow teeth and wagged his tail and knocked some of the preacher's papers off the table. Then he sneezed and some more papers fluttered to the floor.

"What did you call this dog?" the preacher asked.

"Winn-Dixie," I whispered. I was afraid to say anything too loud. I could see that Winn-Dixie was having a good effect on the preacher. He was making him poke his head out of his shell.

"Well," said the preacher, "he's a stray if ever I've seen one." He put down his pencil and scratched Winn-Dixie behind the ears. "And a Less Fortunate, too. That's for sure. Are you looking

for a home?” the preacher asked, real soft, to Winn-Dixie.

Winn-Dixie wagged his tail.

“Well,” the preacher said, “I guess you’ve found one.”