

KATE DICAMILLO
Because of
Winn-Dixie



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Chapter One

•—My 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 humor.

“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 stunk. 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 yappie 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 foldout table. He had papers spread all around him and he was rubbing his nose, which always means he is 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?”

“Mmmmm-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 I've ever 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."

Chapter Three

•— I started in on Winn-Dixie right away, trying to clean him up. First, I gave him a bath. I used the garden hose and some baby shampoo. He stood still for it, but I could tell he didn't like it. He looked insulted, and the whole time, he didn't show me his teeth or wag his tail once. After he was all washed and dried, I brushed him good. I used my own hairbrush and worked real hard at all the knots and patches of fur stuck together. He didn't mind being brushed. He wiggled his back, like it felt pretty good.

The whole time I was working on him, I was

talking to him. And he listened. I told him how we were alike. “See,” I said, “you don’t have any family and neither do I. I’ve got the preacher, of course. But I don’t have a mama. I mean I have one, but I don’t know where she is. She left when I was three years old. I can’t hardly remember her. And I bet you don’t remember your mama much either. So we’re almost like orphans.”

Winn-Dixie looked straight at me when I said that to him, like he was feeling relieved to finally have somebody understand his situation. I nodded my head at him and went on talking.

“I don’t even have any friends, because I had to leave them all behind when we moved here from Watley. Watley’s up in north Florida. Have you ever been to north Florida?”

Winn-Dixie looked down at the ground, like he was trying to remember if he had.

“You know what?” I said. “Ever since we moved here, I’ve been thinking about my mama extra-extra hard, more than I ever did when I was in Watley.”

Winn-Dixie twitched his ears and raised his eyebrows.

“I think the preacher thinks about my mama all the time, too. He’s still in love with her; I know that because I heard the ladies at the church in Watley talking about him. They said he’s still hoping she’ll come back. But he doesn’t tell me that. He won’t talk to me about her at all. I want to know more about her. But I’m afraid to ask the preacher; I’m afraid he’ll get mad at me.”

Winn-Dixie looked at me hard, like he was trying to say something.

“What?” I said.

He stared at me.

“You think I should make the preacher tell me about her?”

Winn-Dixie looked at me so hard he sneezed.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

When I was done working on him, Winn-Dixie looked a whole lot better. He still had his bald spots, but the fur that he did have cleaned up nice. It was all shiny and soft. You could still see his ribs, but I intended to feed him good and that would take care of that. I couldn’t do anything about his crooked yellow teeth because he got into a sneezing fit every time I started brushing them with my toothbrush, and I finally had to give up. But for the most part, he looked a whole lot better, and so I took him into the trailer and showed him to the preacher.

“Daddy,” I said.

“Hmmm,” he said. He was working on a sermon and kind of muttering to himself.

“Daddy, I wanted to show you the new Winn-Dixie.”

The preacher put down his pencil and rubbed his nose, and finally, he looked up.

“Well,” he said, smiling real big at Winn-Dixie, “well, now. Don’t you look handsome.”

Winn-Dixie smiled back at the preacher. He went over and put his head in the preacher’s lap.

“He smells nice, too,” said the preacher. He rubbed Winn-Dixie’s head and looked into his eyes.

“Daddy,” I said, real quick before I lost all my nerve, “I’ve been talking to Winn-Dixie.”

“Is that right?” the preacher said; he scratched Winn-Dixie’s head.

“I’ve been talking to him and he agreed with me that, since I’m ten years old, you should tell me ten

things about my mama. Just ten things, that's all."

The preacher stopped rubbing Winn-Dixie's head and held real still. I could see him thinking about pulling his head back into his shell.

"One thing for each year I've been alive," I told him. "Please."

Winn-Dixie looked up at the preacher and kind of gave him a nudge with his nose.

The preacher sighed. He said to Winn-Dixie, "I should have guessed you were going to be trouble." Then he looked at me. "Come on, Opal," he said. "Sit down. And I will tell you ten things about your mama."