

# boys are dogs

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**BLOOMSBURY**

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## chapter seven

### dog-speak

**S**omething weird happened at school on Monday. As soon as Tobias's foot made contact with my chair, I turned around and said, "Tobias, stop."

I didn't think about what I was doing first. The words just came out bossy before I could stop myself.

And Tobias actually looked at me. He seemed surprised and a little alarmed, like he didn't know me. Like he heard something different in my voice, and maybe realized I was someone he didn't want to mess with.

His stunned silence didn't last long, though. Within seconds his features twisted back into a look of annoyance.

"What?" he asked.

"Cut it out," I snapped.

Tobias waited, but just for a few minutes. Clearly he wasn't about to give up that easily.

The next time he kicked me I turned around and spoke even more forcefully. "I said, stop kicking my

chair!” I didn’t mean to be so loud, but from the way the entire class stared, it was clear that everyone heard me.

“What’s with the ruckus?” asked Mr. Beller.

I quickly faced forward. My first instinct was to stay silent and pretend like nothing was the matter. That was the easiest thing to do. But it wasn’t fair that I should get in trouble, when all I did was sit there and try to pay attention.

It wasn’t me causing the ruckus. And who used a word like *ruckus*, anyway? It was even dumber than calling something a *shenanigan*.

Something bubbled up from deep inside me. I don’t know where it came from, or what it was, exactly. Last week I would’ve apologized softly. Last week, I’d have done anything to deflect the class’s attention. But something had changed.

I took a deep breath and said, “I’m sorry, sir. I mean, Mr. Beller. I didn’t mean to cause a ruckus. I was just asking Tobias to please stop kicking my chair, because it’s distracting.”

Behind me, Tobias groaned.

“Mr. Miller,” said our teacher. “Are you kicking Annabelle’s chair?”

Tobias stayed silent. All eyes were on us. I didn’t want to be a snitch, but he’d left me with no choice. Another few weeks of the kicking and I might develop a case of serious whiplash. Okay, perhaps that’s a stretch, but still. The guy was annoying, and I couldn’t let him get away with it anymore.

I heard the sounds of muffled giggles but for once I didn't care.

"Tobias?" our teacher asked.

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Beller," I said. "I was probably mistaken. Maybe it was just the wind, or something."

A few students laughed, Claire included.

An annoyed Mr. Beller looked from Tobias to me. "Well, then. Everyone pull out your homework and pass it to the front. I trust there won't be any more interruptions."

As Mr. Beller blabbed on about the correct format for our book reports, due in just a couple of weeks, I watched the second hand sweep its way around the face of the clock. One minute went by, then two. Tobias didn't kick.

I sat up straight and took notes. Amazingly, I made it to the end of class without feeling like someone's kickboxing target. When the bell rang, I gathered my things.

Tobias left fast with his books tucked under one arm. "See you in science," I called after him, just because I could. Tobias ignored me, but I didn't care.

I sailed through social studies and the rest of the morning. At lunch, Claire told everyone how I'd gotten Tobias into trouble. "He was shocked. It was like no one had ever challenged him before. She was awesome."

"How did you do it?" asked Emma, staring at me carefully.

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “It just sort of happened.”

“Impressive,” said Rachel.

“Totally,” Yumi agreed.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” I told them. But the thing is, it was.

As soon as the bell rang, I hurried to science, excited because we’d finally get to use the lab equipment this week.

When I sat down, Ms. Roberts passed out microscopes—one for each lab group. We also got a small envelope that contained six numbered slides. We were supposed to take turns looking at each slide so we could write down our observations. For homework, we needed to try and figure out what we were looking at.

Not to sound like a nerd or anything, but I was excited, because the assignment was like a puzzle and I’m into that sort of thing.

When our microscope landed on our table, I had to smile. This wasn’t like the cheap plastic one I got for my eighth birthday that melted into an orange puddle two weeks later. (Never bring a plastic microscope to the beach, and definitely don’t leave it in your mom’s car on one of the hottest days of summer.) This microscope was heavy and serious looking, a real piece of scientific equipment. I thought so, anyway.

But before I could get my hands on the thing,

Tobias grabbed it and slid it to his side of the table. “I’ll go first,” he said.

My smile quickly faded. I was about to protest, when someone whispered, “Spaz,” from the table behind us.

As the guys snickered, I hunched into myself and pretended like I didn’t hear.

Tobias slipped the first slide in, bent over the viewfinder, and peered inside. I watched him adjust the side dials, bringing the tray closer to the lens. I was curious, but didn’t want to get too close. Anyway, I figured I’d have a turn soon enough.

A few seconds later, Oliver stood up and walked to the other side of Tobias. He leaned in, with his elbows resting on the edge of the table. “Let’s see,” he said.

“Hold on.” Tobias kept one hand on the arm of the microscope and used the other to shield it from Oliver.

At least he acted rude to us both.

“Come on,” said Oliver. He seemed so anxious, I almost felt bad for the guy.

Tobias finally passed him the microscope. Oliver peered through and said, “Whoa.”

“What?” I asked.

They ignored me.

Tobias took down his notes.

Oliver kept looking. “That’s pretty cool,” he said.

“I know,” Tobias replied.

“Let me see.”

Oliver tried to pass me the microscope but Tobias pulled it away and grabbed the next slide.

“Wait, I didn’t get a turn,” I said, which shouldn’t have been necessary. I mean it was obvious I hadn’t seen it.

“Too late, Spazabelle.” Tobias pointed to the clock. “We’re running out of time.”

He stared me down, challenging me to object, but I couldn’t.

I watched them go from slide to slide to slide, and I didn’t say a word.

Tobias wrote down his observations with my pen. He didn’t even ask this time. He just saw it sitting there and took it. When I tried to see what he was writing, he blocked his page with his elbow.

They let me look at the last two slides, but only because Ms. Roberts strolled by our table and asked how we were all doing. Slide number five looked like little gray scratches on glass. Slide number six looked like bigger scratches. I’m sure it all would’ve made more sense if I’d seen the sequence from the beginning, but now I had no idea what I was looking at. I told myself it didn’t matter. I could always ask Yumi later on, since she had Ms. Roberts first period. But that wasn’t the point. I was mad at the boys for hogging the microscope for the entire class. And I was mad at myself, too, because I let them.

I wish I knew what came over me in English

class. Why had it been so easy to stand up to Tobias then?

I couldn't figure it out.

Not until I got home and took Pepper for a walk.

Before I opened the front door I said, "Pepper, sit." And I hardly recognized my own voice.

It's because my tone sounded different—stronger and more commanding. I was only following the instructions. My dog-training book said I had to talk to Pepper like that so he'd actually listen. And it worked.

But here's the thing: I'd talked to Tobias that way, too.

The dog-training lesson worked on a boy.

Wow. Just thinking about the possibilities made my brain spin. When I first met Pepper, he was wild and unruly. Just like Tobias and the other middle school boys.

With my dog, all I had to do was learn some rules, pitch my voice a certain way, and give him commands. Pepper's behavior got better every day.

It got me thinking. . . . Was it actually possible to train boys like I trained my dog?

Yes, it already had worked on Tobias this morning. But could it work on other boys, too?

And what about the other lessons? Would they apply?

I ran upstairs, sat down at my desk, and opened up the book. Taking a pencil, I crossed out the word "dog" and replaced it with "boy."

Boy

🐾 UNDERSTANDING DOG-SPEAK 🐾

<sup>bays</sup> Talk to <sup>dogs</sup> dogs in their own language. Your tone is just as important as your words. *Stay? Sit? Come?* Don't ask them. Tell them. You're the boss, so act that way. Make your commands firm, short, and to the point. This is how you'll get <sup>dogs</sup> dogs to listen to you. <sub>bays</sub>

It totally made sense! I flipped through the book, looking for other lessons to adapt, and found plenty: positive reinforcement, bribery, walking on a leash. Okay, maybe not walking on a leash, but the others would work. This was amazing. Monumental. Completely awesome. If I could actually pull it off, that is.

Just reading about it made me feel better.

Later that night, Mom poked her head into my room. "You're studying hard," she said.

I grinned. "Well, like you said, sixth grade is a lot of work."

She smiled back. "I was going to remind you to take Pepper outside before you went to bed, but since you're working, I'll do it myself."

"Okay, thanks," I said.

When she brought the dog back into my room, I was almost halfway done translating the book.

"It's getting late, Annabelle."

I yawned. "I'll go to bed soon."

“Okay, good. Sleep tight.” She kissed my forehead and then headed out.

I finished one more chapter, changed into my pajamas, and got into bed. I was plenty tired but too excited to sleep. For the first time since I started going to Birchwood, I couldn’t wait until school.