



My name is Charlie Sommers, and I'm just like any other kid my age. But that's just what I think. Most other people don't agree with me.

See, Charlie Sommers is just my name right now, but I've had lots more before. My birth name was Rudolph Walker, and I've been cursed by it every day since.

I really don't think my parents understood the importance of the naming-a-child situation and after all, I will never know their names. After I was released from the hospital, they dropped me off at the nearest orphanage Harry Potter style- with nothing more than the blanket I was wrapped up in and the minuscule envelope taped to it. And like Harry Potter, almost no one has wanted to be near me since.

I was at the orphanage for over a decade, though it felt like over a century. Then, right before my twelfth birthday, I met the Sommers'. And everything changed.

When I was at the orphanage, all of the other kids called me Stew, but when I first met Mr. and Mrs. Sommers, they called me 'Buddy'. Mr. Gardener, the owner of our orphanage explained that my proper name was Rudolph, like the Reindeer, and they smiled. But they didn't smirk. Before I had any chance to hate my name even more than I usually do, Mr. Sommers walked up to me and knelt down so we were eye-level.

"I don't like introductions either," he said. When I looked puzzled, he added, "My first name is Michelle." I grinned, but I didn't smirk. I pushed myself up onto my toes and stood up to my full height, which wasn't much more than my sitting height.

"It's very pleasing to meet you," I said softly, shaking his hand and surprising myself.

"We could say the same," Mrs. Sommers pitched in. "How would you like to come home with us?"

Mr. Gardener puckered his already large lips as though he had just swallowed a large jar of lemon juice.

But I nodded my head as fast as it could go. I liked them, and they seemed to like me. Plus, no one had even considered taking me *anywhere* before, especially not into their own homes.

Mr. and Mrs. Sommers shook hands with Mr. Gardener, who told me to go pack my things. I packed at light speed. I wanted to get out of the moldy, peely-painted walls of this place, and I hoped with all of me that my shadow would never again darken the doorstep of the only thing left that tied me to my parents.

I didn't have much to pack, and I was glad for it, because in the time it took me to hobble up the stairs, pack my things, and race back down, the Sommers' had already signed all the papers that allowed them to take me home.

I didn't have to say goodbye because there was no one for me to say goodbye to. I had never made any friends at the orphanage. In fact, I had never made any friends at all, and more than *anything*, I wanted to. But *this* life- this new life I was starting- would be more promising than the last.

So instead of weeping a goodbye, I walked out of the crumbling building onto the streets of the world.

If I said I had never been outside the orphanage, it would probably get Mr. Gardener in trouble, but it would be true. I had never seen more of the afternoon sun than the occasional ray that would navigate through the grimy orphanage windows.

And the truth is: I had no idea what I had been missing. The sun shone off my pale skin like a spotlight on a diamond. People stared at me: an eleven year old the size of a first grader, with one leg about 4 inches shorter than the other and hands like shriveled up pincers.

And suddenly, I understood why my parents dropped me off at the orphanage as soon as they could. It was beyond not wanting me- it was how I was born, it was the things I would never be able to change.

I knew in that moment that if I could find a friend out in this jungle, I would be a winner. Forever and always.

For the next few hours, my new mom and dad took me shopping for clothes and shoes. They even registered me under a new name: Charlie Sommers. But when I walked out of the records office, I knew that even with new things, I would never fit in.

I became so preoccupied with my thoughts, I limped into a large furball. I had never seen anything quite like it before. The only thing that even somewhat resembled it were the rats at the orphanage, who got more food than the orphans.

And I knew what to do with rats.

I grabbed my shoe off my foot and as I wound up to launch it, Mr. Sommers stepped in front of me. I put the shoe down.

“Now, whatcha doing with that, Charlie?” He questioned, puzzled.

“This is just a dog,” he added. “Actually it’s *our* dog, Coco. See, we’ve almost reached home.”

“What’s a... a... dog?”

“A dog is an animal that provides companionship. They don’t judge you, and they don’t usually harm you. Ah, here we are.” He added as we walked onto the beautiful porch. It was bigger than the whole orphanage!

“Well, Charlie. I have to go put sheets on your bed.” Dad patted me on the shoulder.

“And I should get dinner started.” Mom added, “Is it okay if we leave you out here?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m so glad to be here.”

Mom and Dad smiled and walked into the house as Coco sat beside me on the porch swing. And as she rubbed her furry head on my knee, I knew I had done it.

I had made a friend for life.