

CHAPTER ONE

Fwoosh! With a great heave, Lizzie Peterson swept a big pile of leaves onto the tarp spread out on the lawn. Then she leaned on her rake and let out a sigh. She had filled this tarp five times already, dragging each load of leaves to the back corner of the yard where Dad used them to make compost. How many more loads would she have to rake and drag before she was finished?

Raking was definitely not one of Lizzie's favorite activities. It wasn't how it looked in the adorable photos of kids jumping into huge crunchy piles or tossing colorful leaves into the air. It was hard work. Her shoulders hurt. She had blisters on her



hands even though she was wearing the gloves Mom had made her put on. Her brothers were being super annoying and not at all helpful. And on top of it all, her hair was full of leaves—not the colorful red and orange ones like in the adorable pictures, just plain old brown, crackly, musty leaves. The kind there were tons of in this yard, just waiting to be raked.

Why did trees have to drop their leaves, anyway? Why couldn't she live in the middle of an evergreen forest, or out in the middle of a prairie, or on an island with palm trees? If Mom and Dad knew what she was thinking, they'd remind her how lucky she was to live in a nice big house with a nice big yard full of nice big trees. Lizzie knew that. She knew she was lucky. She just wished someone else would do the raking.

The Bean, her youngest brother, was too young. He had a little-kid toy rake, but he wasn't



much actual help. In reality, he just messed up Lizzie's neat piles and made the job take even longer. And he spent most of the time shouting and laughing and running and wrestling with Charles, her middle brother. Charles wasn't much help, either, even though Lizzie knew that he was old enough. Mostly he just fooled around with the Bean.

At least Lizzie did have one pal out there in the yard: her puppy, Buddy. She looked around now, wondering where he'd gotten to. "Buddy!" she called. A pair of perky ears popped out of a leaf pile. Buddy shook himself off and ran to Lizzie, his tongue lolling as he grinned a doggy grin. His brown coat shone in the sun. He sniffed at her hands, looking up at her expectantly.

"You want a treat, don't you?" Lizzie rummaged in her pocket, found half a small biscuit, and tossed it to him. Buddy caught it in midair,

crunched it up, gulped it down, and then sniffed at her hand again as if asking for seconds.

Lizzie laughed and scratched him between the ears. Buddy always cheered her up. All dogs did, but especially this dog, her own dog, the very best dog in the history of the universe.

That cheering-up ability was one of the reasons Lizzie was dog-crazy. Who could ever be sad or cranky or worried for long with a puppy nearby? That was why she had convinced her parents that the Petersons should be a foster family. Now they were known all over Littleton for taking care of puppies who needed help. Lost puppies, abandoned puppies, injured puppies, puppies who were too wild, puppies whose people had to move away: they all showed up at the Petersons'.

Lizzie and her brothers and her parents took care of these puppies and did their best to find the perfect home for each one. Buddy had started



out as one of their foster puppies—along with his mom and two sisters. It had not taken long for Lizzie and her family to figure out that Buddy’s perfect home was right here with them. He was part of the family now, and he’d seen many other puppies come and go.

The “go” part? There was no question that it was always hard to say good-bye to the puppies they’d cared for. It was the hardest part of the whole thing! But having Buddy made it a little easier to see the other puppies leave. And, of course, it helped to know that they were going to fantastic homes where they would be truly loved and wanted, just like Buddy was.

“Isn’t that right, Buddy?” Lizzie asked now, ruffling his ears. She scritchd the heart-shaped white spot on his chest, remembering how she’d fallen in love with him the second she first saw it.

Buddy squirmed away and ran back to his leaf

pile, ready to take another dive. Lizzie had thrown his favorite squeaky football in there, and he still hadn't found it. "Find it, Buddy!" she called. "Find that toy!" Buddy loved playing hide-and-seek with his toys. Lizzie played with him indoors, too, tucking his favorite stuffed duck under the couch or behind a chair. He'd race around the room, sniffing and pawing at everything while his tail wagged double time. He always looked so proud when he finally found the toy. He'd bring it to Lizzie, his head and tail held high. Thinking about it, Lizzie felt her heart swell. She loved her puppy so much.

"Buddy! Buddy!" Charles and the Bean galloped across the backyard to help Buddy find his toy. Just as they got to the leaf pile, Buddy burrowed his nose down into the leaves, pulled out the football, and took off with it, looking over his shoulder to make sure the boys were chasing him.

Charles and the Bean shouted and waved their arms and tumbled into Lizzie's neat leaf piles as they tried to tackle the puppy.

Lizzie harrumphed and crossed her arms, shaking her head as she watched them. She loved her brothers, she really did. But why did they have to act like such—such *boys* sometimes? Would a sister be running around the yard screaming her head off as she chased the dog? Would a sister think that fart jokes were the funniest thing ever? Would a sister always grab the biggest slice of cake or the best piece of bacon? Well, maybe. Why not? Girls could be just as wild and gross and greedy as boys could. Lizzie had friends who had sisters, and they complained about them all the time. Still, she'd always wished she had at least one, if not three, like the March sisters in *Little Women*.

“Hi, kids!” Lizzie looked up to see Mom



standing on the deck. “Come sit with me. We need to talk.” *Uh-oh*. Lizzie thought Mom looked serious. Lizzie checked behind her to see how the yard looked where she’d raked it. Mom was kind of picky about doing it the right way. But it looked fine—actually, it looked great. That part of the lawn was tidy and neat, ready for winter.

Lizzie looked back at Mom.

Mom was still frowning. “We need to talk,” she repeated. “All of us.” She raised her hands to her mouth, megaphone-style. “Boys!” she called.

They didn’t hear her—or at least they didn’t pay attention.

Mom put two fingers into her mouth and let out a shrieking whistle.

The boys stopped in their tracks, looked up, and ran right over, with Buddy bounding along.

Lizzie had to laugh. She loved that her mother



could whistle like that, and it always worked: with boys, with dogs, with anything. Lizzie had tried to learn many times, but so far all she ever got was a disappointing *thwww* sound.

“We need to talk,” Mom said again, when they were all gathered on the deck steps.

“About what?” Lizzie asked.

“About a foster—” Mom said.

Lizzie and Charles exchanged a glance, grinning at each other. The Bean clapped his hands and jumped up and down. This was one of the most exciting parts of fostering: finding out all about their newest puppy. “What breed is it?” “How old?” “Girl or boy?” they shouted, all at the same time. Mom held up her hands.

“Hold on,” Mom said. “I didn’t say we were getting a puppy. I said we need to discuss it. Here’s the thing: it’s not just a foster puppy. It’s more

like, well, a fostering situation. One that we really have to consider carefully.”

“Huh?” Lizzie had no idea what her mom might be talking about. “What do you mean, ‘situation’?”

Her mom sighed. “It’s two puppies. Sisters.”