



# CHAPTER ONE

Charles gazed out the car window down a long valley filled with trees in shades of rosy red, bright yellow, and burnt orange. The grass was still a fresh green, like spring. The colors were beautiful, but Charles couldn't wait for the road to start climbing up into the hills. He couldn't wait to breathe the crisp, mountain air. His puppy, Buddy, was super excited, too. The Petersons were off to the mountains for the weekend!

Was Lizzie excited? Charles wasn't so sure about his older sister. The trip was all because of her, but she was very quiet. She sat on the other side of the backseat, counting on her fingers. Every once in a while, she pulled a carefully

folded sheet of paper from the pocket of her purple fleece jacket. Charles knew it was a checklist. Lizzie had been carrying it around for a week, ever since her last Greenies meeting.

Greenies was the name of Lizzie's nature club. Lizzie was in it with her best friend, Maria, and a bunch of older kids from their school. Even though Charles was not a member of the Greenies, he had been invited on the club's big annual camping trip to Misty Valley. Mom and Dad were invited, too!

So was the Bean, Charles's younger brother, but he was staying with Aunt Amanda for the weekend. Charles was sure the Bean was very happy, since Aunt Amanda had a house full of animals. Charles wrapped his arm around Buddy and looked back out the window. He was pretty happy, too. But Lizzie was still looking very serious.

"Why are you so worried?" Charles asked.



“What?” Lizzie said. “Who me? Why do you think I’m worried?”

Charles shrugged. “Because you keep staring at that paper and mumbling to yourself.”

“This paper happens to be my checklist,” Lizzie explained.

“Yeah, but you already checked everything off, like fifteen times,” Charles pointed out.

“I’m just making sure,” said Lizzie. “And besides, all the knots I need to know are on the other side. Plus the words to a new camp song.”

“I thought camping was supposed to be fun,” Charles said.

“It is,” Lizzie said. “But remember, the Greenies don’t get to stay in cabins like you do. We won’t have running water or electricity or beds. We’ll get our water from a nearby stream and cook our own food, and put our tents up all by ourselves. The Greenies are doing real camping.”

Lizzie sometimes acted like a know-it-all, but Charles knew she had never done camping like this before. He could tell she was nervous.

Charles was glad he was staying in a cabin with Mom and Dad and Buddy. Leave the real camping to Lizzie. Let her tie knots and put up tents and swat bugs. Charles and Buddy were going to have fun!

Buddy had been Charles's best friend ever since he'd come to live with the Petersons. Buddy had started out as a foster puppy—the Petersons had taken care of dozens of puppies who needed homes—but unlike all their other fosters, he had stayed forever and become part of the family. Charles gave the little brown mixed-breed puppy another hug. He was so glad Buddy could come with them on this adventure.

"I think you're really going to enjoy this challenge, Lizzie," Mom said now, from the front seat.

"I think so, too," Dad agreed. "And if you don't

fill up on the canned beans you heat over the fire, we'll steal some real food for you from the mess hall in the lodge."

Dad grinned into the rearview mirror, and Charles laughed. But Lizzie scowled. "Beans *are* real food," she said. "But that's not what we're eating, anyway."

"You can't exist on s'mores all weekend," Dad said. Charles could tell he was still trying to get a smile out of Lizzie.

She crossed her arms. "What's that mean? Do you guys think I can't do this?" Lizzie asked.

"We're not saying that at all," Mom said. She turned around to look into the backseat. She smiled at Lizzie. "It's great that you're taking this on. We're proud of you."

Charles nodded at his older sister. "And it's cool that we can come along."

"Even if you do have to sleep in a cabin," Lizzie said, sounding more like herself. "Maria and I are

sharing a two-person tent. We've practiced putting it up. We're a great team."

"I've slept in tents before," said Charles, "with David and Sammy." He could handle real camping as well as Lizzie could, even if she didn't think so.

"Sure," said Lizzie. "In David's backyard, maybe. Not exactly the same thing."

Charles started to reply, but Dad interrupted.

"Look, we're here!" Dad pointed to a sign that said MISTY VALLEY, then turned the car down a long gravel driveway.

"Misty Valley, our home away from home for the weekend," Mom said.

As they got closer, Charles saw small log houses scattered around an open meadow that nestled in among the hills. Charles guessed that those were the sleeping cabins. In the middle of them all were some larger buildings. Dad turned the car toward the one with a sign that read WELCOME CENTER. The building next to it, the largest of all,

was made out of stone. It looked like an old castle, with extra tall windows that looked out on a mountain stream. That building had a sign that read MESS HALL. Charles knew that a mess hall was like a cafeteria for campers. He felt his stomach grumble as he wondered what there would be for dinner. Beans 'n' weenies, maybe? Or chili? Maybe there would even be ice cream for dessert.

“There’s Maria!” Lizzie said. Her friend sat on a bench in front of the mess hall. Maria looked as calm as always, her long, dark hair straight and shiny. She was surrounded by a mound of sleeping bags, food coolers, and other camping gear. Lizzie leapt out of the car and ran over to Maria.

“Charles, how about if you come with me?” Dad suggested. “You can help me sign in.”

Charles climbed out of the car. His legs were stiff as he took the first few steps after that long ride.



A bell jingled when Dad opened the welcome center door. There wasn't anyone at the sign-in counter. "Hello!" Dad called.

There wasn't a person in sight—but the place was not empty. Charles could hear snuffling and scratching. He was almost positive that he recognized those sounds.

Dad started looking through the flyers and papers on the counter, but Charles was feeling curious. He peeked around the tall counter. Sure enough, he saw a metal dog crate—and inside the crate was a sleek gray puppy with long silky ears and slate-blue eyes. The dog tilted his head to look at Charles, staring right back at him. "Dad, look!" said Charles. "It's a puppy!"