

CHAPTER ONE

Lizzie rolled down her car window and stuck her nose out for a good sniff. “I can smell the piney woods,” she said. The air was fresh and clean.

“Just a little longer,” Maria’s mom said from the front seat. “Good thing, too. I bet Simba is about ready for a walk.”

Lizzie turned in her seat to check on Simba, the big yellow Lab riding in the way-back. “Is that true, Simba?” she asked, giving him a scratch between the ears. Simba gave her a doggy grin and panted happily. As a guide dog (he belonged to Maria’s mom, who was blind), he was not supposed to get petted while he was working. That

meant he especially loved attention when he was “off duty.” A long car ride definitely counted as off duty.

Lizzie Peterson had been to the Santiagos’ weekend home in the woods a few times, and she loved it — even if it did take forever to get there. She loved the forest, the trails, and the sparkling lake. She loved the way they had to park way down below the cabin and haul all their stuff in red wagons, and she had even come to love how rustic it all was: no electricity or running water, the outhouse, the woodstove for heating. Most of all, she loved the cozy cabin and the sweet, tiny room she shared with Maria, her best friend. The only thing she didn’t like was that she had to leave her darling puppy, Buddy, behind.

“You’ll have Simba to spend time with,” Mom had said when Lizzie begged to take Buddy along.



“And the rest of us would miss Buddy if he went away.”

It was true. All the Petersons loved Buddy, the foster puppy who had come to stay. Lizzie’s family took care of puppies who needed homes, usually just until they found each one the perfect forever family. She and her two younger brothers, Charles and the Bean, always had a hard time saying good-bye to the puppies they had helped care for. In Buddy’s case, saying good-bye had been impossible. When it was time to find him a home, the whole family agreed that he belonged right there with them.

Lizzie closed her eyes, picturing Buddy’s smooth brown coat and the heart-shaped white patch on his chest. He loved it when she scratched him there. She hoped Charles would remember to do that while she was gone. She sighed. Buddy would be fine. It was only a few days, after all.

