

CHAPTER ONE

Lizzie Peterson trudged along the sidewalk, feeling her backpack thump against her shoulders. It was a cloudy, gray afternoon in September. The leaves on the trees that lined her street hadn't changed color yet, but you couldn't say they were bright green, either. Their dullness seemed to match her mood.

“What's the matter, Lizzie?” her mom asked, when Lizzie arrived home from school.

Lizzie shrugged as she bent down to give her puppy, Buddy, a scratch between the ears. He gazed up at her, his brown eyes shining with happiness, love, and excitement. She couldn't help



smiling back at him. Dogs always made her feel better. They had a great attitude, upbeat and ready for anything. At least, Buddy did. He was the best puppy ever, and Lizzie knew how lucky she was that he was part of her family. She reached down to stroke the heart-shaped white patch on Buddy's chest.

"I'm just bored, I guess," she said to her mom. "It's been a while since anything exciting happened."

Mom gave Lizzie a hug, then held her by the shoulders and looked her straight in the eye, smiling. "You mean, since we had a new puppy to foster?" she asked.

Lizzie kicked her sneaker against the floor. Mom always seemed to be able to see straight into her heart. "Maybe," she said. As usual, Mom was right.

The Petersons were a foster family who helped



puppies who needed homes. Some puppies had stayed with them for only days while others were there for weeks. Only one, Buddy, had stayed forever. Lizzie's family (her parents; her younger brother, Charles; and their toddler brother, the Bean) had fostered golden retrievers and a Great Dane plus practically every other common breed, as well as mutts large and small. Sometimes Lizzie couldn't believe her good luck.

Lizzie had a "Dog Breeds of the World" poster hanging on her bedroom wall, and she loved to draw a red heart next to every breed she'd met or fostered. She'd still never even seen one of those hairless dogs, the Chinese crested, but she was sure she would one of these days.

Mom nodded. "Having a new puppy is always exciting," she said. "Don't worry, one always comes along just when you least expect it."

Lizzie gave Buddy one more pat. Then she hung



her blue school backpack on a hook by the door and grabbed the green one from the next hook. This was her dog-walking backpack, equipped with a variety of yummy treats, extra leashes and harnesses, and poop bags. “I’d better get going,” she said. It was time for work. Lizzie and her best friend, Maria, (and their two friends, Briana and Daphne) had a very successful dog-walking business, with many happy clients (dogs and people). They were successful because they all loved dogs, and also because they all knew at least a little bit about dog training (Lizzie knew a lot). But the main reason for their success? They were responsible. Lizzie had never once missed a walk, and neither had her friends. They had a perfect record, and all their clients definitely appreciated that.

Lizzie kissed Buddy once more, then stood up tall and stretched. She put on the green backpack.



“Okay,” she told Mom. “See you later!” She waved as she headed down the front steps.

As she walked, Lizzie thought about other breeds she hadn’t met yet. Like a borzoi, a sleek runner with an elegant, swooping chest. Or a big white komondor, a brave protector of sheep with a long, thick coat. She’d never even met a Vizsla, or a Norwegian elkhound. But she would. No matter what it took. It was Lizzie’s main goal in life to “heart” every dog on her poster.

Lizzie was headed to see her first client, a young German shepherd named Tank. Tank was big and all muscle, but he was the sweetest, most gentle dog. He wouldn’t hurt a fly, even if it landed right on his soft brown nose. Lizzie had brought a pocketful of Tank’s favorite treats along (freeze-dried liver), since she planned to work on his leash-walking skills today. She reached in to check that the little brown chunks were there.

They were. Good. It was never much use trying to teach dogs if you didn't have excellent treats to offer them.

After Tank, and four other dogs, Lizzie was looking forward to walking her favorite new client: Domino, a peppy little Jack Russell. He was white with black spots, including one near his tail that was the exact shape and size of a domino. He was the happiest dog she'd ever met, and still full of energy even though he was seven years old. Domino was bursting with charm, and being around him never failed to cheer Lizzie up.

The Jacksons, Domino's family, were super sweet. Lizzie knew that when their young twins, Jenny and Merrie, got a little older, they would love taking Domino for walks. For now, while the twins were still babies, Mrs. and Mr. Jackson needed help. They adored Domino, but since the

kids had come they didn't always have time during the week to give him the exercise and attention he needed.

"Lizzie!" said Mrs. Jackson when she opened the door later that afternoon. "So great to see you. Domino's been off-the-wall excited today, and super hyper." She held a baby in each arm as the little black-and-white pup did figure eights around her feet.

Lizzie dropped to her knees to give Domino a hug. He wriggled in and out of her arms, then spun around in a circle, barking happily. He dashed down the hall, toenails scrabbling, and came prancing back with a giant neon-green alien stuffie. He bit down on it to make it squeak, then tossed it into the air.

Yay, you're here! Let's play!

