

*For all my malamute friends, past and present*

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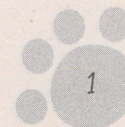
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## CHAPTER ONE

“Wow, I forgot how beautiful it is up here,” said Kamila. “Look at the way these huge old trees arch over the road. And the fall colors are amazing.”

In the backseat, Lizzie Peterson and her best friend, Maria Santiago, grinned at each other. “Amazing,” echoed Lizzie.

They were on their way to the Santiagos' cabin in the country. Lizzie had been there many times before, but always with Maria's parents. This time, they were with Maria's cousin Kamila. She was a grown-up, but just barely—she was twenty-two and had just finished college. Going to the



cabin with Kamila felt like a big adventure, and Lizzie was excited.

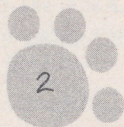
“When was the last time you were up here?” Maria asked her cousin.

“It has to be, like, eight years ago!” Kamila answered. “I remember I had this new camera I’d gotten for my birthday. I must have taken a thousand pictures. I probably still have some of them. You were the cutest thing, in your little pink overalls. You were such a curious kid, into everything.”

Maria laughed. “I remember my pink overalls but I don’t remember that trip.”

“You sure have grown up a lot since then,” said Kamila. “I really appreciate you and Lizzie coming up here with me to help me get settled in.”

Kamila was planning to stay at the cabin for a few weeks. She’d asked Maria’s parents if she could spend some time there while she decided



what she wanted to do next in her life. Maria had told Lizzie that Kamila wasn’t sure whether she wanted to be a doctor or a writer. After this weekend, Kamila would drive Lizzie and Maria home, then go back up and be on her own at the cabin in order to figure it all out.

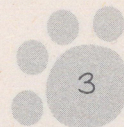
“I still can’t believe my parents let me come,” said Lizzie. “Maybe my mom just wanted me out of her hair for a while.”

“What?” Kamila asked. She met Lizzie’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Why?”

Lizzie shrugged. “She says I’ve been acting like Eeyore lately, whining and complaining about everything.”

“And—have you?” Kamila asked.

“Well, maybe a little,” Lizzie said. She didn’t know exactly why she’d been feeling so cranky lately, but for some reason it was easier to admit it to Kamila than to her mom.

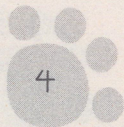


Kamila laughed. “Hopefully this trip will help you break that habit,” she said. “I might even have some ideas that could help.”

Kamila turned off the tree-lined highway and onto a narrow, bumpy dirt road. “Almost there!” she said. “We’ll have a lot to do when we arrive: unload the car, get firewood, start a fire, get dinner going, set the table . . .”

At home, Lizzie would have groaned if she’d heard a list of chores like that. But the cabin was different. She could hardly wait to get there and get to work. There was something really special about the Santiagos’ cozy little cabin in the woods.

The only thing missing on this trip was a dog. Usually Simba would be along. Maria’s mom was blind, and she usually had her guide dog, Simba, at her side. He was a total sweetheart, and Lizzie loved it when Mrs. Santiago told her it was okay to pet and cuddle him a bit, when he was off duty.

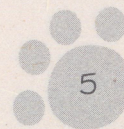


But since Maria’s mom wasn’t going to be there this weekend, that meant Simba wasn’t, either.

Lizzie would have liked to bring her puppy, Buddy, to the cabin, but that idea had been vetoed by everyone else in the family. The Petersons were all in love with Buddy. Lizzie could just imagine the scene at home: Her two younger brothers, Charles and the Bean, would be squabbling over whose room Buddy would sleep in that night. Mom would be slipping him extra treats “just because,” even though Lizzie always told her that he should have to earn them by doing tricks. And Dad would be ruffling Buddy’s ears and asking him over and over if he was a good boy. Buddy sure did get plenty of attention at the Petersons’ house!

“Buddy face,” said Maria, poking Lizzie in the ribs.

“What’s that?” asked Kamila, glancing into the rearview mirror.



Lizzie and Maria giggled. “It’s just the face Lizzie makes when she’s thinking about her puppy—or really about any dog,” explained Maria. “Which is basically all the time,” she added, with another giggle. Maria knew that Lizzie was totally dog crazy. She’d spent plenty of time in Lizzie’s room, which was decorated in everything dog. She knew that Lizzie had dog-themed socks, pajamas, and even underpants, and that Lizzie collected dog books, dog figurines, and of course every color and breed of dog stuffie.

“Lizzie’s family fosters puppies,” Maria told her cousin. “They’ve taken care of so many adorable puppies who needed help. They find the best homes for every one of them! Their puppy, Buddy, was a foster puppy at first, but now he’s their forever dog.”

“That’s so cool,” said Kamila, smiling at Lizzie

in the mirror. “But isn’t it hard to give up the puppies when it’s time? I don’t think I could handle it.”

“It’s never easy,” admitted Lizzie. “But it helps to know that they’re going to great homes. It also helps that we have Buddy.”

“Well, those are some lucky pups to have had you in their lives,” said Kamila as she turned the car onto an even narrower, bumpier road. “Okay, keep an eye out for the parking spot,” she told the girls. “I think it’s coming up any minute.”

Lizzie loved how you couldn’t drive all the way up to the Santiagos’ cabin. You had to park at the bottom of a trail and carry everything in. There were two red wagons, stored in a small shed near the parking area, that they used for hauling things. It was a lot of work, but it made visiting the cabin even more special. You really felt like you were in

the wilderness. She peered out the window, watching for the big old oak tree that stood by the parking area.

“Wait, slow down!” she said suddenly. “What’s that?” She pointed to a flash of white and gray, slipping between the trees on the side of the road. “Whoa! I know there are coyotes around here—but that looks more like a wolf!”

“Where? Where?” asked Maria as Kamila slowed the car down to a crawl. “I don’t see it.”

Now Lizzie didn’t see it, either. Had she been imagining things? She stared into the woods. Yes! There it was again. She spotted a bushy white tail and a pair of pointy ears. “There!” she shouted, pointing. “And you know what? It’s not a coyote or a wolf. It’s a puppy!”

## CHAPTER TWO

Kamila slowed the car down even more as Lizzie stared out the window. Staring back at her from between the trees was a gorgeous young dog. He stood perfectly still just for a moment, so she had a chance to get a good look at him. He had long, thick fur in shades of white, gray, and black; a beautiful fluffy tail that curled up over his back; and a pair of alert, mischievous eyes beneath two furry stand-up ears. Lizzie drew in a breath. That was one handsome dog. He wasn’t a tiny puppy, but he wasn’t a full-grown dog, either. What was he doing all by himself way out here in the woods?