

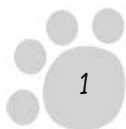


# CHAPTER ONE

“Over here!” Charles Peterson called to his best friend, Sammy. “I need your help with this one.” He grabbed one end of a huge dead branch—more like a tree, practically!—and tugged as hard as he could. It didn’t move.

Sammy trotted over. “That’s a big one,” he said, looking down at the branch. “Let’s drag it over to the fire pit. It’ll make awesome firewood for the party later on.”

It was a chilly day in May. A few patches of blue polka-dotted the mostly gray sky. Charles and Sammy, and the rest of their Cub Scout den, were busy helping to clean up Loon Lake Park for



the summer season. When they were done, their families would meet them there and they would celebrate with the first cookout of the year.

Charles and Sammy were on the “pick-up” team. Their job was to pick up any branches or twigs that had fallen during the winter. Other teams were gathering trash and raking leaves.

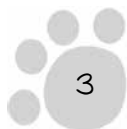
They were working hard, but Charles didn’t mind. It was fun to be at the park before the official opening day. In a few weeks, there would be kids racing around the playground, and noisy volleyball games, and swimmers and kayakers splashing in the water. Now, everything was quiet and peaceful. The grass was just starting to turn green, the leaves on the trees were tender and new, and the colorful canoes and kayaks were still stacked on shore, waiting for their first voyages across the lake.

Springtime at Loon Lake Park was special, but



Charles also liked being there in the middle of winter, when his family had a tradition of having a picnic each year. It was even quieter when the park was closed for the season and they had to hike in. Everything looked so different when snow covered the grassy areas and thick ice trapped the sparkling waters of the lake.

Charles would never forget the winter day when his family had seen a puppy fall through the ice. That had been so scary, but with the help of a special cold-water rescue team, they had saved the curly-haired pup. Noodle had become one of the Petersons' favorite foster puppies as they tried to find out where he belonged. Lizzie, Charles's older sister, got especially attached to Noodle and had a hard time saying good-bye to him when the time came. But that was what fostering was all about: the Petersons only kept each puppy long enough to find him or her the



perfect forever home. Even the Bean, Charles's younger brother, understood that.

"Remember Noodle?" Charles asked Sammy now as they dragged the big branch toward the fire pit, a ring of stones near the sandy beach. It was slow going, but with both of them pulling hard, they could keep moving.

"Of course," said Sammy. "I remember every single one of your foster puppies."

Sammy and his parents lived right next door to the Petersons, so he had met all the dogs who had stayed with Charles's family. Sammy and his family had even adopted one of them: Goldie the golden retriever, the very first puppy the Petersons had ever fostered.

"Ready? One, two, three," chanted Charles as he and Sammy heaved their big branch into the fire pit. They stood back and brushed off their hands, breathing hard.



“Nice work, boys,” said Charles’s dad. “We’re going to have a huge bonfire tonight. I hope we have enough marshmallows!”

Charles grinned up at him. He was glad that his parents were Akelas—leaders—of his Cub Scout den. It made everything the den did even more fun. Mom was home working on a story for the local newspaper, but she had promised to come down to the park with Lizzie and the Bean when she was done. Charles’s dad was on call for his job as a firefighter, but unless his pager went off, he wouldn’t have to leave. Some of the other scouts’ parents were there, just in case.

“Are we having hot dogs, too?” Sammy asked. Sammy was always hungry, always thinking about food.

“You bet,” said Charles’s dad. “And I think your mom said she was bringing over some of her famous potato salad.”

Charles's stomach grumbled. "I'm already hungry," he said.

"We're almost done," said Dad. "See how the grass looks even greener than it did when we got here? All that raking really pays off. And you boys have done an excellent job picking up most of the sticks. Everything is looking terrific." He bent to rummage in his backpack. "Here, have a snack and then we can finish up." He handed Charles and Sammy a cheese stick each and some crackers.

After they'd eaten, the boys headed off, scanning the grass for the last of the sticks and branches. "Hey," said Charles. "Check it out." He leaned over to pick up an old tennis ball. After a winter under the snow, it was more gray than green, and one side was a little bald. "It's kind of ratty, but Buddy will love it. I'll take it home for him."

Buddy was the Petersons' little brown puppy,



the best puppy in the universe. He had come to them as a foster puppy, but the whole family had fallen in love with him, and they had decided that Buddy's perfect home was right there, with them. Now he slept on Charles's bed almost every night (when Lizzie didn't steal him), and waited eagerly for Charles every day after school. He was the cutest, sweetest, most fun puppy Charles had ever known, and he got along great with all the Petersons' foster puppies.

Charles shoved the ball into his jacket pocket and went back to hunting for more sticks. There weren't many. The park was looking really tidy after all their work, and Charles could just picture himself one day soon, running barefoot in the grass in his bathing suit. The sun would be warm on his back, but if he got too hot, all he'd have to do was run down to the dock and leap off into the cool, clear, refreshing—





“Charles!”

He heard his dad shouting, and turned to see his father waving at him from across the grass. Charles ran back to the fire pit. “What is it? Did you get paged? Do you have to go?”

Dad shook his head. He was holding his phone in one hand. “Mom just called. She saw an alert online. Somebody reported that there’s an abandoned puppy who needs help.”

“What?” Charles asked. “Where?”

“Right here,” said Dad. “Right here at Loon Lake Park.”

