

CHAPTER ONE

“Did you see the girl who was explaining her experiment on how mushrooms can save the planet?” Sammy asked. “That was so cool.”

Charles nodded. “She made a whole movie about it and everything.” He sighed. “I don’t think our science fair projects are going to come anywhere close to that,” he said.

Sammy shrugged. “Well, we’re only in second grade,” he said with a grin. “That girl was a senior in high school.”

“Exactly,” said Charles’s dad, from the driver’s seat. He met Charles’s eyes in the mirror. “When you’re a high school senior, you can invent some



new way for people to communicate or fly into space. But for now, I'm sure Mr. Mason will be happy with—I don't know—maybe a project on raising tadpoles.”

Charles and Sammy cracked up. “No, he won't!” said Sammy. “He made a rule this year: no tadpoles.”

“He said he'll be happy if he never sees another tadpole again,” Charles added. “He said he's had six years of tadpoles and that's enough.” Mr. Mason was always saying funny things. He was the best teacher ever, and Charles really wanted to make him proud by doing a great project for the Littleton Elementary School science fair. That's why he and his best friend, Sammy, had convinced Charles's dad to take them to the high school science fair that night after dinner. They'd been hoping to find some inspiration at the fair,

but instead, Charles just felt overwhelmed. All the projects were so impressive.

“Did you see that robot?” he asked Sammy. “The one that could shoot a basketball into a hoop? I think the guy who built it is only a freshman.”

“Everybody’s doing robots lately,” Sammy said, shrugging. “I heard Jason is building a robot for our science fair.”

“Yeah, from a kit his dad bought for him,” said Charles. “All that shows is that he can follow directions. That guy tonight invented his whole robot from scratch! I heard he’s going to enter it in a national robotics competition.”

“Robot, bobot, dobot,” sang the Bean from his car seat. “Beep, beep, beep!”

“That’s right!” said Charles, holding up a hand to give his little brother a high five. “Robots say beep-beep.”

“Boop-boop,” said the Bean, laughing his gurgly laugh. “Goop-goop. Zeep-zeep.”

Charles and Sammy cracked up again. Charles was glad Dad had decided to bring the Bean along, even if it meant that they’d had to walk very slowly through the science fair. It was always fun to go places with the Bean, because everyone loved him. He got a lot of attention. It was sort of like having a cute puppy along.

“Lizzie would have liked that exhibit on how to measure dog intelligence,” said Charles. His older sister was a total dog expert. “She would have been impressed by the border collie who knew over two hundred words.”

“I think I’m glad that Buddy isn’t quite that smart,” said Dad. “Your aunt Amanda always says that dogs who are too smart can be trouble.”

Charles laughed. He was thankful that Buddy had been smart enough, and cute enough, and



charming enough, to make the whole Peterson family fall in love with him when he first came to them as a foster puppy. Unlike all the other puppies they had fostered, who had only stayed a short time, Buddy had stayed forever, becoming part of the family.

Sometimes Charles still couldn't believe how lucky he was that he and Lizzie had convinced their parents to be a foster family. He loved getting to know each of the dogs they took care of, and making sure that each one went to the perfect home. It was always sad to say good-bye when it was time to let them go, but having Buddy made it easier. With Buddy in the house, there was always a puppy to play with, to tell secrets to, and to cuddle with under the covers at night.

"I'm thinking mold," Sammy announced just then.

Charles turned to stare at his friend. “Mold?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Sammy. “I mean, for my science fair project. What could be easier or more fun? I heard about a third grader who did it last year. You take a bunch of different foods and liquids and leave them sealed up in plastic bags on the counter for a week or so, just to find out what grows on them. Some things grow green or yellow mold, some grow long white hairy stuff, and some just get all jellified and gross.” He grinned.

“I’m sure your mom will love that,” said Charles’s dad. He stopped at a red light and turned to smile at the boys.

“She will,” said Sammy. “She’s really into science. I bet she’ll get her microscope out. She’ll probably try to identify every mold. It’s my dad who won’t like it. He’s totally creeped out by moldy

stuff. He's always throwing leftovers out, even before they get old."

"Uppy!" said the Bean, who had been staring out the window.

"That's right, we'll see Buddy soon," Charles said. He knew that "uppy" was sometimes the Bean's way of saying "puppy." "We're almost home."

The Bean shook his head. "Uppy!" he said again. He pointed. "Uppy-uppy-uppy!"

Charles leaned over to look, wondering what his little brother was talking about. It was getting dark out, and at first, he didn't see anything. Then he spotted a tiny white fluff ball, sitting very still in the tall grass on the side of the road. "Dad!" he said. "Pull over! The Bean is right. It's a puppy!"