

CHAPTER ONE

“Wow, look at that one.” Charles stared as his mom steered the van past another huge house, high on a hill. “It’s like a castle! I don’t remember any of these giant houses from last year.”

“They all sprang up like mushrooms.” Mom shook her head. “This area sure has changed.”

It was a few days before Thanksgiving, and the Petersons were on their way to visit Uncle Stephen, Aunt Abigail, and Charles’s cousins Becky and Stephanie, who lived way out in the country.

Last time they’d come, this road had been a quiet lane with fields of corn, grazing cows, and apple orchards on either side. This time everything



looked different. New roads had been carved through what used to be fields and forests, and gigantic houses dotted the open land.

“Meadow Acres.” Dad snorted as he read a sign near one cluster of brand-new houses. “Not anymore, it isn’t. Stephen told me there had been a lot of development here. Rich people from the city, mostly. They think the area is just charming, perfect for a weekend getaway home.”

“You mean people don’t even live in those gigantic houses full-time?” asked Lizzie, Charles’s older sister. “That’s not fair, when some people don’t have any homes at all.”

Dad nodded. “You’re right, it’s not fair,” he said.

“Not fair, not fair,” chanted the Bean, Charles’s younger brother, from his car seat. He bounced and waved his fists in the air.

Buddy chimed in with a few happy barks. Charles put his arm around his brown-and-white



puppy, who sat cuddled between Charles and Lizzie, strapped into a travel harness. Buddy leaned against Charles and snuffled into his ear. Charles kissed Buddy's nose and sighed happily as he scratched the heart-shaped white patch on Buddy's chest. The world wasn't fair, but at least he had Buddy, the best puppy in the world.

Charles and Lizzie had wanted their own puppy forever, but no matter how much they had begged, their parents had said no. Finally, though, Mom and Dad had agreed that the family could foster puppies, taking care of each one just until they found it the perfect forever home. Soon Charles and Lizzie had proven how responsible they could be. When Buddy came along, the whole family fell in love with him, and Mom and Dad decided that the family was ready for a dog of their own.

Now Charles hugged Buddy closer. "We're almost there," he whispered into the pup's ear. He felt a

little twinge in his belly as Mom turned up the road that led to his cousins' big old farmhouse.

Lizzie loved to travel. She was always excited to go anywhere. But Charles liked his own house, his own things, and his own bed. He never felt quite comfortable when he was away from all that. Still, having Buddy with him was like bringing a little bit of home. All Charles had to do was touch Buddy, and he felt better.

"I wonder what Becky is up to these days," Lizzie said. "She's always getting into adventures."

Charles felt the twinge again. He liked Becky a lot. His cousin was funny and smart and good at solving mysteries. Charles liked playing detective with her. Their most successful case had been when they figured out the truth about Flash, a border collie puppy who had mysteriously appeared at Becky's house. But sometimes Becky was a little *too* adventurous.

