

CHAPTER ONE

“Can we open the windows?” Charles asked.

“Good idea,” said Mom. Soon, a rush of fresh air filled the car.

Charles Peterson and his family had been in the car all day. Actually, longer. They had left in the middle of the night. Charles had been asleep, in his pj’s, when Dad carried him out to the car. He must have woken up a little bit, because he remembered that it had been cold and dark.

The Petersons had stopped a couple of times on the drive. It had been a little sunnier and a little warmer each time. That was because they were headed south. They were on their way to the



beach for spring break, and Charles couldn't wait to get there.

Now it was almost dinnertime, and they had made it all the way to North Carolina. Here, with the sun beating down, it almost felt like they'd skipped spring and gone straight to summer. With the windows open, Charles could smell freshly cut grass and sunbaked dirt. He took a big whiff, smiling. The smell reminded him of summer softball games.

"Windy!" the Bean squealed from his car seat. The Bean's shaggy bangs whipped around his head. The Bean was Charles's little brother, and he needed a haircut.

"It *is* windy, isn't it?" Mom repeated.

Charles looked at his sister, Lizzie. She smiled and rolled her eyes. Mom always repeated what the Bean said. Charles and Lizzie thought it was funny.



“It’s windy,” Lizzie agreed. “But it’s warm. I can’t wait to get to Brisco Beach.”

The Petersons had been to Brisco Beach once before. It was so much fun! The town was on a narrow stretch of land that reached out into the ocean. One side had waves—big enough for boogie boarding and surfing. On the other side, the bay side, the water was smooth and calm—good for fishing and swimming. Plus, there was a downtown where you could get all kinds of treats and souvenirs. There was even a ferry to the mainland, where there were tons of other fun things to do. Charles had never done that, and he was hoping to go this year.

“The best part of our last trip was Liberty,” Lizzie said. “She was the sweetest puppy.”

Dad laughed. “You say that about every puppy,” he said.

“But it’s true,” Lizzie said. “They are all the best.”



Charles nodded in agreement. “Lizzie’s right,” he said. His family fostered puppies. They took care of puppies who needed homes, and they worked to find each puppy its forever family. They loved all the puppies they had helped. Of course, one puppy really had been the very, very best, and that puppy had become the Petersons’ own puppy—Buddy.

“I still wish Buddy could have come with us,” Charles said now, thinking about how much he’d like to stroke the white heart-shaped spot on Buddy’s brown chest. Buddy loved that.

Mom turned around in her seat so she could see Charles. “We talked about this. Buddy will have lots of fun with Aunt Amanda.”

Aunt Amanda ran a doggy day care. When the Petersons went away, they let Buddy stay with her. Buddy loved playing with the other dogs. Charles knew it was a treat for Buddy, but he also



knew he would really miss his favorite puppy. He would miss petting him, and playing with him, and lying on the couch with him. He would miss—well, everything.

“Besides, we’re staying at a bed-and-breakfast this year,” Mom said. “It’s not like we’re renting our own place where Buddy would feel at home.”

“But we’ll get good breakfasts, right?” Lizzie added. “Like pancakes and muffins?”

“Yes,” Mom said. “And we can get takeout for dinner. It’s a real vacation when Dad and I don’t have to cook. It gives us more time to be with you.”

Dad nodded. “We’re going to teach the Bean how to swim.”

“Like a dolphin,” the Bean said. He scrunched his lips together, making a fish face.

“That’s right, like a dolphin,” Mom repeated.

Charles rolled his eyes and grinned at Lizzie. Mom had done it again.

Lizzie smiled, but only for a second. Then she looked back down at the very thick book in her lap. It was the first in a series of very big books, and she had brought them all, saying it was her vacation goal to finish the whole series.

Charles sighed and gazed out the window. He had left his books at home—by mistake. All kinds of books: graphic novels, a book on airplanes, a bunch of mysteries. He had been too asleep when his dad took him to the car, or he would have remembered to grab the extra duffel they were in. He hoped he wouldn't be bored in Brisco Beach.

They had been on the highway for a long time. They'd driven on giant, traffic-filled highways, up and down mountains, and along wide tree-lined roads. But now the view out the window was different. The sky was bright blue, with the hint of a rosy-gold sunset ahead. The air smelled

different, too. It was warm and salty and—Charles sniffed—kind of fishy, in a good way.

“Are we close?” Charles asked.

“Very close,” Mom said, looking at the directions on her phone.

Charles glanced over at Lizzie. She was still staring at her book. She had her finger resting on the top corner, ready to turn the page. She didn’t care about anything but her book.

When they finally pulled into the driveway of the bed-and-breakfast, Charles couldn’t wait to get out of the car. He hopped out, stretched, and took a look around. FAIR HARBOR INN said a sign out front. The house looked really old. It was three stories tall, with a porch that wrapped all the way around the front and sides. On the corners of the second and third floors, there were round towers with windows. The windows all had

lacy curtains. Charles saw one twitch, and he shivered. There was something spooky about this house. Could it be—haunted?

As Charles stretched some more, waiting for everyone else to get out of the car, a family appeared on the porch. He saw a mom and dad with three little kids—and the cutest cream-colored puppy, a pudgy little thing with soft, wavy hair and floppy ears, and huge chocolate-colored eyes, and—

“Hey!” The oldest kid was holding the puppy’s leash—or at least he had been, until the puppy spotted Charles. In a flash, the puppy ran right between the dad’s legs and darted down the steps.

Charles knew what to do. He bent down and opened his arms wide. “Come here, pup! Come on!” he called. In seconds, the puppy was in his arms, covering his face in happy puppy kisses.

