

CHAPTER I

The Storm



A small black squirrel poked its head out of the branches and chattered at Casey and Sheba. The two dogs spotted it and barked loudly. The squirrel scampered down the tree, and the dogs took off after it, disappearing behind the school.

“Oh no!” Mike said to Annie. “Trouble!”

Mike scanned the windows. He expected to see the principal, Mr. Mulligan, staring down his glasses at them. Mr. Mulligan was always popping up to catch kids the instant they broke a school rule.

A slight movement caught Mike’s eye. Someone was watching them, but it wasn’t the principal. It was Mr. Duffy, the new school custodian. He was smoking a pipe and looking out of one of the classroom windows. When he saw Mike looking back at him, he quickly closed the blinds.

A sudden wind scattered leaves across the ground. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled. Heavy drops of rain rattled onto the tin slide like nails on a coffin, sending shivers up Mike’s neck. Casey came racing back.



“It’s okay. Come here, boy!” Mike called.

Dripping with rain, the big dog stopped beside him. Annie and Mike called for Sheba, but their voices were lost in a roll of thunder. They called again. Finally, the black and white sheltie came running toward them with her head down.

“Sheba!” Annie yelled. “Good girl!”

“We’re going home now, Casey,” Mike said.



As Mike and Annie turned to go, a bolt of lightning lit the sky above the playground, followed by another wave of rolling thunder.

“That was close,” Mike said.

Casey barked frantically. Sheba looked like she was barking too, but

Mike noticed something odd.

“Annie,” Mike said. “There’s something wrong with Sheba.”

“What?”

“She’s not making any noise when she barks.”

“She’s not?” Annie asked. She held Sheba close to her as the storm raged. “Maybe you didn’t hear her barking over the thunder.”

“Maybe. Anyway, we’d better get home,” Mike said.

They started running, heads lowered against the pounding rain. As they approached their apartment building, Mike saw his big brother, Ritchie, holding the lobby door open.

“Come on, you guys!” Ritchie yelled. “Hurry up!”

Casey bounded inside and shook like crazy, splattering water and dirt everywhere. Sheba saw



Ritchie and barked. But what everyone heard was a peculiar huffing sound.

“What’s up with Sheba?” Ritchie asked as they piled into the stairwell.

“I don’t know,” Annie said. “But I want to get her home.”

Mike and Annie both lived on the second floor. When they got to her apartment, Annie took out her key, opened the door and shooed Sheba inside. “See you tomorrow,” she said.

Mike wanted to say something—to ask about Sheba—but it was too late. Annie had closed the door.

Weird, thought Mike. 🐾