



## Chapter 2

# Brave Little Soldier

The pavements sparkled with frost as the Appletree Animal Agency walked through the village. As she looked at her feet, Mattie thought it was like watching clouds. In the frost, she could see the shapes of dogs and flowers, dragons and stars – all sparkling and beautiful. There was something so magical about winter! She hoped it would snow. Luna would love chasing snowballs and whizzing down a hill in Mattie's bright orange sledge.

“Come on, you,” said Mattie to Domino. He yipped up at her. Luna was walking beautifully on her shiny blue lead. Luna was nine months

old now and Mattie had worked very hard on making her a well-behaved puppy. If only she'd stop chewing Dad's slippers, she'd be perfect. She was especially good at sniffing out Domino when he was lost, just like today.

The children waved to all the villagers. Mattie was pretty sure she knew every single person who lived here.

Heather, the vicar, was stringing fairy lights up between lampposts around the village.

“Nice badges, guys!” she called, giving the children the thumbs up.

A little further along, knitters were carefully arranging woolly candy canes and stars and reindeer in tree branches. Everything was looking very cosy. It was the Christmas Fête in a few days' time, when the village Christmas lights would be turned on and everyone would have hot chocolate on the green. Mattie couldn't wait!

Ria was opening the shutters of her candy-striped hut in the middle of the green. In the summer she sold every flavour of ice cream you could imagine. Sometimes her experiments were a bit too strange for Mattie (cheese and tomato, anyone?) but her double chocolate fudge maple pecan was an absolute winner. And in the winter, she made the best hot chocolates ever, with just about every flavour too! She could even make you a whipped cream snowman to go on top. Mattie's favourite flavour was gingerbread and white chocolate. Zoe liked dark chocolate made with coconut milk, and Casper liked milk chocolate with mint choc chip sprinkles.



“I wonder what new flavours Ria will have invented for the fête —” started Mattie, but the



rest of her words were lost as Domino gave a sudden lurch forwards!

He was even stronger than before. Mattie nearly slipped over on the frosty ground, but Casper caught her elbow and held her up.

“Domino!” Mattie cried in shock. “What is going on with you?”

The collie dog whined and strained on the end of the red lead. He was looking at something in the distance.



Mattie squinted.

"What is it, Domino?" Zoe asked.

"There!" said Mattie, pointing in the direction Domino was dragging her. "Look!"

Standing in the middle of the village green was a boy with wild curly hair. He was darting between the knitters and Heather, helping them to hang their lights and woolly creations. Domino was pulling towards him frantically. How odd! Maybe they should say hello.

Mattie raised her hand to wave at the boy, but as soon as she did so, Heather called out that she needed more lights, please! Immediately, the boy darted into Mr Clarke's storage shed.

"Weird how keen Domino was to meet the boy," said Casper. "Who is he?"

"I have absolutely no idea," said Mattie. "I've never seen him before in my life."



The Appletree Animal Agency walked up the crunchy gravel path to Mrs McDonald's cottage. Zoe rang the doorbell and Mrs McDonald appeared instantly. Her hair was curled up in powder blue rollers and she wore a fluffy pink dressing gown. She looked just like Domino, if a dog could wear hair rollers and a dressing gown!

"Oh, thank goodness! There's my darling boy!" she cried. Already, her hair was coming