Chapter 1

It was a bright Sunday morning in Earthampton.

Golden rays from the rising sun slipped through the curtains into eight-year-old Aaron Brown's room. The cool air from the vent made the curtains sway back and forth like a ballet dancer trying to keep the sunlight away.

Then someone entered the room and pulled the curtains wide open.

Mom.

Sunlight flooded the room.

Aaron quickly pulled the blanket over his face and pretended to be fast asleep.

It was Sunday!

No school. No homework. No reason at all to wake up this early.

At least, that was Aaron's opinion.

His mother, Sharon, had a different one.

She believed that a good day started early. It didn't seem to matter whether it was Monday, Wednesday, Saturday, or Sunday. Once Mom decided that Aaron had slept enough, there was usually no changing her mind.

Aaron often wondered why his friends got to sleep late on weekends and he didn't.

It didn't seem fair.

His playful fight to stay in bed didn't work.

Sharon gently ran her fingers through his hair.

"Sleepyhead, go brush your teeth," she said with a smile. "It's a beautiful day outside. Let's all go for a run."

Aaron sat up and stretched his arms wide, trying to shake the sleep out of himself.

His mother gave him a hug and kissed his forehead.

"Come on. Get ready."

She left the room.

Aaron sat on the bed and yawned.

He still didn't get up.

Something was missing.

Actually, *someone* was missing.

Buckaroo.

Every morning, Buckaroo waited impatiently for Aaron to wake up. Sometimes he paced around the room. Sometimes he sniffed Aaron's face while Aaron was still asleep.

And the moment Aaron opened his eyes—

Attack!

Buckaroo would jump on him and lick his face.

Aaron would push him away.

Buckaroo would come right back.

That was how mornings were supposed to begin.

But not that day..

There was no Buckaroo.

There wasn't even the usual sound of him getting into trouble somewhere in the house.

"BUCKAROO!" Aaron called. "Where are you, buddy? I'm up. Come and get me!"

Nothing.

Aaron listened.

He could hear Mom and Dad talking in the kitchen.

Maybe Buckaroo was with Dad.

Sometimes Buckaroo curled himself up on dad Nathan's lap while he read the newspaper.

Aaron jumped out of bed and hurried toward the kitchen.

His parents were making breakfast.

Aaron immediately looked under the kitchen island.

No Buckaroo.

"Aaron, good morning, buddy," Dad said. "How about some nice fluffy pancakes and orange juice?"

Pancakes were normally worth stopping for.

Not today.

"Did you see Buckaroo?"

Mom looked at him.

"Did you brush your teeth?"

"Where's Buckaroo?"

"He's still sleeping," Dad said.

Aaron stared at him.

"Sleeping?"

Buckaroo?

At this hour?

Buckaroo woke up at the slightest noise. Sometimes Aaron thought his dog could hear a potato-chip bag being opened from three houses away.

And once Buckaroo was awake, everybody else might as well be awake too.

He ran.

He sniffed.

He barked.

He chewed things he wasn't supposed to chew.

Buckaroo did many things.

Sleeping late wasn't one of them.

Aaron hurried toward the stairs.

Underneath them was Buckaroo's special place. It was surrounded by a little gate and had his bed and favorite things inside.

The family called it Buckaroo's castle.

Aaron dropped to his knees and looked inside.

Buckaroo was lying on his bed with his back toward him.

"Buckaroo, my bro. It's me."

Buckaroo slowly lifted his head.

He looked at Aaron.

Then he put his head back down and closed his eyes.

Aaron's stomach tightened.

That wasn't Buckaroo.

Well, of course it was Buckaroo.

But it wasn't *his* Buckaroo.

His Buckaroo should have been climbing all over him by now.

"Buckaroo?"

Aaron crawled into the little castle.

He reached for him.

A hand gently caught Aaron by the shoulder and pulled him back.

Mom.

"Let him sleep," she said.

Aaron looked at Buckaroo again.

"But he doesn't sleep this late."

"He may just be tired."

Aaron didn't believe that.

He wanted to pick Buckaroo up and take him straight to the pet clinic.

Mom pointed at her watch.

Their Sunday morning run.

Aaron looked at the watch.

Then at Mom.

Then at Buckaroo.

"Do we have to go?"

"We won't be gone long."

Aaron reluctantly went upstairs to change.

A few minutes later, he came back wearing his running clothes. Before heading outside, he went straight to Buckaroo's castle again.

Buckaroo hadn't moved.

Now Dad seemed worried too.

"I'll stay here with him," Nathan said.

Aaron looked at his father.

"You will?"

"I will."

Dad staying home made Aaron feel a little better.

Only a little.

"I'll text you as soon as he gets up," Dad promised.

Normally Mom didn't want phones distracting them during their runs.

That day she made an exception.

She handed Aaron her phone.

Aaron held it tightly.

"Dad, please. As soon as he gets up."

"I will. No worries, sweetheart. Have a good run with Mom."

Aaron followed his mother toward the door.

Then he stopped and looked back one last time.

Buckaroo still hadn't moved.

Outside, the Sunday morning was bright and beautiful.

Aaron hardly noticed.

His body was going for a run.

His mind was staying home with Buckaroo.