Chapter 1

It was a wonderful summer morning in Earthampton.

Aaron had already been busy.

He had gone for his morning run with his mother, Sharon, and Buckaroo. Buckaroo had spent most of the run doing everything except running properly. He chased birds. He chased bees. He investigated bushes. And whenever a sprinkler came on, he charged toward it before jumping away as if the water had attacked him first.

By the time they returned home, Nathan Brown was already on his second cup of coffee.

He was sitting at the table with the newspaper spread in front of him.

“How was the run, guys?” he asked. “Simply great?”

Sharon smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

Buckaroo gave Nathan a much wetter greeting. He jumped up and licked his face.

“Buckaroo!”

Nathan tried to push him away.

Buckaroo considered this encouragement.

Aaron pulled a chair next to his father and climbed onto it.

“Crossword, Dad?”

“Yep.”

Aaron liked the jumble better, but a crossword was good too.

“Do you want me to help?” Aaron asked.

Nathan looked at him.

“I thought I was supposed to help you.”

“Same thing.”

Nathan laughed.

“All right, genius. Here's one. Accidental find.”

Aaron thought about it.

“How many letters?”

“Eleven.”

“Do you have any already?”

Nathan showed him the puzzle.

“Starts with S. Fifth letter is N. Last three are I-T-Y.”

Aaron grabbed the pencil and wrote:

S---N---ITY

He stared at it.

“Sanity?”

Nathan shook his head.

“That's six letters.”

“Sanctity?”

“Nope.”

Aaron stared harder.

Nothing happened.

“Beats me. Do you know?”

Nathan smiled.

“Yes.”

Before he could give the answer, Sharon called from the other room.

“Guys! It's getting late for school. Nathan, puzzles later!”

Nathan looked at Aaron.

“Here she goes.”

Aaron grinned.

His mother had a remarkable ability to interrupt him and his father exactly when they were doing something important.

“Dad,” Aaron whispered. “Should we ask Mom?”

Nathan understood immediately.

He smiled.

Aaron shouted, “MOM!”

Nathan quickly put a finger to his lips.

“Don't yell across the house. Go ask her.”

Too late.

Sharon appeared.

“What is so urgent?”

Aaron tried his best to look innocent.

“Could you help us with a crossword clue?”

Sharon looked at Nathan.

Then at Aaron.

Then back at Nathan.

“Are you boys trying to make fun of me?”

“Nope,” Nathan said.

He winked at Aaron.

Sharon saw it.

“Remember,” she said in a threatening voice, “if you two don't behave, breakfast, lunch and dinner may disappear from this house forever.”

Aaron decided that sounded serious.

He showed her the clue.

“Accidental find.”

Sharon barely needed time to think.

“Serendipity.”

Nathan stared at her.

“Wow!”

Sharon immediately noticed his expression.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn't think I would know it.”

“I didn't say that.”

“You didn't have to.”

Aaron looked from one parent to the other.

This was becoming much more interesting than the crossword.

“Is Mom right?”

“Your mom is always right,” Sharon answered for Nathan.

She pointed at herself.

“Who has the doctorate in this house?”

Nathan wisely returned his attention to the newspaper.

Aaron still had a question.

“What does serendipity mean?”

“It means finding something interesting or useful by accident.”

Aaron frowned.

“How do you say it?”

“Se-ren-DIP-i-ty.”

Aaron repeated it.

“Serendipity.”

Then he straightened himself like a spelling-bee contestant.

“Please use it in a sentence.”

Sharon thought for a moment.

“I was looking for my cell phone, and by serendipity, I found my missing earrings.”

Aaron stared at her.

That didn't help much.

Sharon tried again.

“By serendipity, I found Aaron's hidden Halloween candy.”

Aaron froze.

Nathan lowered his newspaper.

Sharon smiled.

That example Aaron understood perfectly.

He still wasn't completely sure about the word.

But he remembered it.

Serendipity.

Finding something you weren't looking for.

Aaron had no idea that before long, he was going to understand that word very well.

And what he found by accident would lead him to another strange problem in Earthampton.