Chapter 1

“Aaron! Aaron! It's getting late for school. Get ready!”

Sharon Brown stood in the kitchen, calling toward the stairs.

Mornings at the Brown household were unpredictable.

Some mornings went as smoothly as butter on warm toast.

On other mornings, even the word *chaos* would have run away in terror.

This morning had started peacefully enough. Sharon was determined to keep it that way.

Buckaroo lay in a corner of the living room, a little distance from his castle. Hearing Sharon's voice, he lifted his head, gave a sleepy whine, and closed his eyes again.

“Aaron!”

Still no answer.

Sharon walked to the foot of the stairs.

“Aaron Brown! What's happening up there?”

At that moment, the upstairs bathroom door opened.

A cloud of steam drifted into the hallway.

Out of the steam emerged a mysterious figure.

He had the confident walk of a movie hero, a tune on his lips, and his hair standing up in a magnificent Mohawk.

It was Aaron.

“Mom!” he said cheerfully. “What's happening? Why are you in such a hurry?”

Sharon pointed at the clock.

Aaron looked.

Then he shrugged.

He walked over and planted a kiss on her cheek.

“We've got time, Mom. Lots of time.”

He was perfectly relaxed.

After all, he still had thirty minutes to eat breakfast, pack his lunch, find his homework, locate his bicycle helmet, check his tires, and spend a few minutes playing with Buckaroo.

Plenty of time.

“RUN!” Sharon thundered. “I DON'T WANT TO SEE ANOTHER LATE SLIP!”

The movie hero instantly became an army recruit reporting to his drill sergeant.

“Yes, ma'am!”

The next few minutes were a blur.

Aaron grabbed a piece of breakfast bread and took several hurried bites.

He looked at the remaining piece.

He looked at the table.

He considered hiding it underneath.

Then he remembered his lunch bag.

Where was it?

He searched around the kitchen.

Under a chair.

Beside the counter.

There!

He picked it up and opened it.

Inside was the previous day’s snack box.

Untouched.

Aaron froze.

If his mother discovered that he hadn't eaten yesterday's snack, he might have to listen to another sermon.

And the morning already had enough sermons waiting to happen.

He quietly stuffed the old snack box back into the bag and added his fresh lunch.

“Aaron!” Sharon called. “I keep telling you not to spend so much time in the shower. You never listen!”

Sermon number one.

Aaron decided not to wait for number two.

Then he remembered something.

His helmet!

He dashed upstairs.

Sharon heard drawers opening, objects falling, and footsteps thundering across the floor.

A moment later, Aaron appeared again, triumphantly holding his bicycle helmet.

Sharon looked at him.

Then at his feet.

“Aaron!”

“What?”

“Your socks!”

Aaron looked down.

One sock was one color.

The other was completely different.

“Two different socks?” Sharon asked. “Really? Are you a rock star?”

“Couldn't find a matching pair.”

“I folded all your socks yesterday!”

“They weren't there.”

“Aaron—”

“They look cool, Mom. Sarah likes them.”

Sharon took another look at him.

A blue soccer jersey.

Brown pants.

Mismatched socks.

She closed her eyes.

“What combination of clothes is this? How many times have I told you not to wear your soccer jerseys to school?”

Aaron looked at his outfit.

He thought it looked excellent.

Sharon had always liked keeping his shirts and trousers in matching sets. Aaron, however, considered those sets merely suggestions.

She was about to deliver another lecture when she checked the clock.

Ten minutes.

Only ten minutes before assembly.

She decided that today, at least, the fashion battle could wait.

“Go! You'll be late!”

“Oops!”

Aaron suddenly ran upstairs again.

Sharon heard the bathroom faucet.

Then another sound.

Scrub. Scrub. Scrub.

She stared toward the ceiling.

“Dear God! He hasn't brushed his teeth yet!”

Aaron had managed to shower, dress, and eat breakfast before remembering his toothbrush.

How was that even possible?

Nathan would have laughed.

In fact, Nathan sometimes found Aaron's morning disasters so entertaining that he recorded them on his phone.

Sharon did not find them quite as entertaining.

At last, Aaron came charging down the stairs with his helmet already on.

“Aaron, wait—”

“It's late, Mom! I've got to go!”

He jumped into his shoes, grabbed his school bag, and rushed outside.

The door banged against its stopper.

A moment later, he was on his bicycle.

And gone.

Sharon stood in the kitchen.

Silence.

Wonderful silence.

Buckaroo opened one eye.

Sharon sighed.

Then she turned toward the counter.

There it was.

Aaron's brand-new water bottle.

Still sitting exactly where he had left it.

“Oh, Aaron.”

She picked it up.

The school had a perfectly good drinking fountain, but Sharon always preferred sending him with water from home.

It was one of those precautions she insisted upon.

And that day, of all days, he had forgotten it.

Sharon placed the bottle back on the counter.

She had no idea that this small mistake was about to lead Aaron Brown into another very big adventure.