



**SUMMER  
READING  
SERIAL**



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# CHAPTER ONE **The Discovery**



**T**welve year old Luke Farmer sat on the wooden bench, excitement, mixed with a hint of uneasiness, creasing his features. This would be the day. He felt it stronger than ever before.

He checked his watch. It was approaching two hours since he stepped off the bus. He would wait fifteen more minutes before heading home. No need to encourage another verbal lashing for not being on time for supper. One more offense and he could kiss his Xbox goodbye for at least a month.

Luke held his breath as a rustling sound pierced the stillness of the underbrush behind him. The bench he sat on was a resting spot for one of the many trails that trickled throughout the park. Surrounded by woods, the path wound its way through the trees, branching off at certain points to connect with other sections of the walkway.

Like all the days before, Luke felt the gaze of curious eyes watching him. It wasn't an eerie sensation though, like the stare of a caged lion slowly pacing back and forth behind thick glass. This feeling churned with excitement.

Breathing almost normally now, Luke turned and faced the woods. His eyes lit up and he smiled.

The Golden Retriever stood poised to spring back into the cover of brush and fallen limbs if he sensed any danger. His thick coat was damp, dirty and full of burrs and broken pieces of leaves and twigs. His tail hung low as if to signal embarrassment over his current condition.

"Hey, boy," Luke spoke softly, barely above a whisper.

The Golden met his gaze with brown eyes that were warm and inviting. They pooled with caution, but a glimmer of trust was evident. He cocked his head and waited for Luke to make the first move.

"Whatcha doing, boy? Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

The dog sniffed the air as if searching for confirmation that Luke meant him no harm. He took two steps closer, and then stopped.

Luke carefully reached into his backpack and pulled out a small box of multi-flavored biscuits. Jake Thomas, the class bully, had made fun of him relentlessly, saying that was Luke's lunch and calling him Kibbles N Bits. None of that mattered now as the dog took a few more steps toward the bench, clearly intrigued with the possibility of some food.

Luke tossed a couple treats to the ground by his feet and waited. The retriever moved closer, and then stopped once again, glancing back into the woods. Luke could sense the dog was torn between the safety of the forest and uncertainty of the unknown.

"It's okay, boy. There's nothing to be afraid of. I won't hurt you."

The dog snorted, clearly offended at the mere suggestion that he would be afraid of anything. Luke smiled. He looked past the grungy, matted coat and saw an amazing, beautiful animal underneath.

"Come on, boy."

The cautious canine moved closer to the treats. After a quick sniff of inspection, he devoured them both, barely chewing at all. He looked at the box sitting on the bench, but instead of trying to get more, he sat down and met Luke's stare.

Luke poured out the remaining biscuits and watched his new friend swallow them as quickly as the first two. He needed to get him home where there was some real food.

"What should I call you, boy? Huh? You want something macho and fierce, or just a normal name?"

A slight wag of the tail and a faint whimper made Luke think the retriever was excited over the possibility of belonging to someone. They were known to be very intelligent dogs. This one would be no exception.

"How about Sam?"

The brown eyes studied him, but the tail had ceased its movement.

"Buddy?"

No response.

Luke wasn't sure what he was expecting. He knew the dog wouldn't stand up and say, "Why, thank you, Luke. I love that name. Let's go with that one." However, he sensed when he spoke a name the animal liked, he would let him know.

"Boone?"

One short bark of approval and Luke laughed out loud. He knew the dog was smart. He wanted to jump from the bench and wrap his arms around Boone, but he would have to take it slow at first. Trust was the most important piece of the friendship puzzle.

Speaking softly and with careful movements, Luke left his seat and got down on his knees. "Okay, Boone. Just going to get down here with you, nice and slow. That's it. Good boy. See? I don't bite."

Boone nuzzled the offered hand and licked it in approval. Luke wasn't sure if that was to seal the friendship, or to enjoy the lingering taste of doggie biscuits. Either way, it didn't matter. Boone was his now. He couldn't wait to show his friends.

Luke spent the next ten minutes trying to clean the dog's fur, but he soon realized it was a useless effort. A full bath was in order. There were too many tangles and brush fragments to clean by hand.

"Come on, boy. We better get home in time for supper."

Boone wagged his tail furiously as if he knew what that meant. He barked in approval. They left the bench and headed back to the main area of the park. A hint of sun lingered behind darkening clouds as glorious rays of orange, mixed with pink, brushed the sky with the skill of an artist.

Luke hurried down the path to the park's entrance with Boone right beside him. He finished all his homework while at school, so that was one less thing to worry about. They reached the parking lot and stopped.

"Luke!"

Luke turned to see his two best friends waving at him. As they came running up, Boone stepped in front and let out a deep growl.

"Whoa, boy. It's okay. These are friends." He patted Boone on the head in an attempt to soothe the animal. "They aren't as goofy as they look, trust me. They're cool." Boone quit growling, but still bared some teeth. He trembled slightly under Luke's touch.

Luke had been friends with Bobby Jenkins and Ethan Moore since he could remember. All three of them had moved into the neighborhood in the same year. Their parents quickly became acquainted and the boys all played league sports together.

Bobby was quiet, but incredibly smart. There wasn't a problem in math he couldn't solve. He was already three grades ahead in that subject. Luke and Ethan both went to him constantly for help. His dream was to become an engineer. When he was two, his parents started buying him Legos and by the time he was seven, Bobby was making things out of K'NEX sets that weren't even in the instructions.

His room contained notebooks full of designs that Luke knew one day would make Bobby a regular on the cover of Popular Science magazine. The kid was gifted.

Ethan was the complete opposite. He liked to be loud and wasn't happy unless he was the center of attention. He wasn't book smart like Bobby, but if were abandoned in a big city with nothing but the clothes on his back, Luke knew he would make it out just fine and be home in time for lunch.

Luke brought a good balance to their friendship. He remained level headed most times and was clearly the leader of their group. They were all the same age, but it was apparent early on that both Ethan and Bobby respected Luke and viewed him as the one to make decisions when needed.

"Does that thing bite?" Ethan had reached out to pet the dog, but drew his hand back at the sight of teeth.

"No, he doesn't bite. His name is Boone, not 'that thing'."

"Punk." Bobby was clearly amused at Ethan's hesitation.

"Shut up, Bobby. Boone? When did you get that...dog?"

"Found him in the woods. I've been waiting for him to come out for almost two weeks. He finally did today. Isn't he beautiful?"

Bobby knelt down and offered a hand. Boone sniffed momentarily, and then licked his acceptance. "No offense, Luke, but I'm not sure beautiful is the right description, especially for a male dog."

Luke smiled. "You have to look past the dirt and grime to what's hidden underneath. Golden Retrievers are awesome. I hope mom and dad let me keep him."

Ethan still stood back, not making any effort to touch Boone. "So, how did you get him out of the woods, dog whisperer?"

"Very funny," replied Luke. "I had some dog treats he couldn't resist."

Bobby stood. "He seems pretty friendly to me. Retrievers are some of the smartest breeds in the world. I bet he makes a great pet." Luke glanced at his watch. "I've got to get going. What are you

guys doing here?"

Keeping one eye on Boone, Ethan moved around Bobby so he could see Luke better. "I went to shoot some hoops. I was about to head home when genius here stopped me. He found a cell phone over by the pavilion."

"A cell phone? Does it work?"

Bobby nodded and pulled it out of his pocket. "Looks like it. It doesn't have the owner information anywhere on it, so I can't tell what the phone number is. I have a program at home on the computer I can use to figure that out."

Math and engineering weren't the only two things Bobby had mastered. Computers were his specialty as well.

Luke spoke up. "We should probably return it, don't you think?"

"Return it to where? Finders keepers, losers weepers." Ethan jumped up on a parking space divider and acted like he was skateboarding.

Luke shrugged. "I don't know. I'm sure there's probably someone looking for it. Isn't there a park office or something for lost and found?"

"Why is your dog staring at me like I'm some freak at a circus?"

Boone sat quietly beside Luke, but hadn't turned his gaze from Ethan since he and Bobby had walked up.

"For once, I think I agree with Ethan on this one, Luke. How many people ever find a missing cell phone? It's usually easier to just cancel service and get a replacement."

"Well, if it rings, answer it and maybe it will be the owner."

"It already rang once. Bobby answered it, but no one was on there."

Luke took a quick glance around the park. He suddenly felt uneasy. "That's weird. They just hung up?"

Bobby shook his head. "No, someone was there, just not talking."

"Did you say anything?"

Boone stood and walked past Bobby, looking toward the area of the park the two boys had come from. The lingering sun had vanished behind the trees as the day faded into twilight. People were returning to their cars to leave.

Luke repeated his question. "Did you say anything on the phone?"

"I asked who was there, but no one answered."

Ethan stopped playing and moved to stand beside Luke. "What are you so worried about? Someone probably dialed the wrong number and didn't expect some kid to answer."

"Do you always have to call me a kid? I'm twelve for crying out loud." Bobby tried to look mad, but the thick glasses perched on his nose made his eyes bulge almost comically.

The bickering was a side effect of the strong bond the boys had formed with each other. A stranger would think they were constantly fighting, but in reality, it was just joking banter. At the end of the day, they were closer than just friends. They considered themselves brothers.

Boone emitted a low growl and all three boys turned as one in the direction he was looking. Draped in the long shadows of the trees, a man walked toward them, sweeping the ground with his eyes as if searching for something. One hand was pressed against his head.

The cell phone in Bobby's hand rang and he almost dropped it in surprise. He looked at Luke with a silent question. Luke nodded. Bobby answered. "Hello?"

Luke noticed the man had stopped and was now looking around. His gaze came to rest on the three boys and the dog. Something inside warned him of danger, but he pushed it back. The man was probably looking for something he dropped.

"Bobby?" Ethan took a couple steps backward. "Who was it?"

"Just silence."

"It's him." Luke wasn't sure why he was whispering. "He's looking for the phone."

"Why would he have two cell phones?"

Bobby asked a very good question. Luke didn't have an answer. Boone continued to growl, low and menacing. It was obvious the dog sensed something was wrong and he was alerting them of danger. He backed away from the quickly approaching stranger, his growl turning into short barks. He was letting the guy know to back off.

"Luke?"

As the man drew closer, Luke knew they needed to leave. The tightness in his chest, combined with the actions of Boone, convinced him.

"Hey!" The man called out and started jogging toward them.

Luke didn't hesitate. "Run!"

**COMING NEXT WEEK ... The CHASE**

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