



SUMMER
READING
SERIAL



by Chris Martin,
local Kingsport author

CHAPTER
FIVE

The Search Is On



The phone rang just as Luke finished telling his parents the entire story.

"I got it." He jumped up from the couch and answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Luke! It's Bobby!"

"Bobby! Where are you?"

Ethan sprang from the living room recliner and joined Luke. He leaned in trying to hear the other side of the conversation.

"Luke...Charleston Hall...they're after us!"

There was a clanging sound as if the phone had been dropped to the floor. Luke thought he heard a girl's voice yell something and then just empty static. "Bobby? Bobby, are you there?" He covered his other ear and listened intently.

"What happened?" Ethan edged closer. Luke motioned for him to be quiet.

On the other end of the silence, Luke imagined a very large, scary looking man retrieving the handset off the floor and putting it to his ear. He held his breath.

"Who is this?" a voice asked. It was as deep and menacing as the face of the man Luke had imagined.

"What have you done to my friend?"

The eerie chuckle of a reply sent ripples of chills down Luke's back. For the first time in his young life, Luke experienced a feeling of pure fear. He flinched in surprise when Mrs. Farmer stepped over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Luke?" Her eyes pooled with concern and questions.

The man continued. "Luke, huh? Where's my cell phone, Luke?"

Why don't you bring that to me and we'll leave your friend alone. You wouldn't want him to get hurt would you?"

"No, I don't." Luke tried his best to appear fearless, but his voice trembled. He could only hope the words didn't sound as frail and timid in the man's ears as they did in his own.

"I didn't think so. Now, we can do this the easy way or the extremely hard way. I'm sure you are a smart kid, so we won't talk about the hard way. We'll just assume you want the easy way. That sound good to you?"

Luke was fairly certain that neither way would be easy, but he had no choice but to go along with it. "Yes."

"Be at the park where you found the cell phone tomorrow morning at nine. You bring us the phone and we'll bring your friend. It will be a nice, quick trade. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I got it."

"Good. Be there or you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

"Wait!" The call ended.

Mr. and Mrs. Farmer along with Ethan circled Luke, their faces reflecting concern. Sensing uneasiness, Boone had even pulled himself away from a bowl of refrigerator leftovers to sit beside his new master.

"So, what's going on?" Ethan was the first to break the silence.

"They want to trade the cell for Bobby. Tomorrow morning at the park."

"We need to call the police," Luke's father spoke up and reached for the phone. "I don't like this at all."

"We can't!" Luke grabbed his arm. "They're involved with this. I told you the officer that was here earlier was the same one chasing us from the park."

"And don't forget Bobby's glasses were in the trunk of his car," Ethan added. "Luke's right, we can't call them yet. We don't know who else is involved."

Mrs. Farmer shook her head and let out a sigh. "You boys watch way too much television. This isn't some game of cops and robbers. This is real. We need to get help for Bobby."

Luke grimaced when he heard his mom use almost the exact same words he had spoken to Ethan earlier. Maybe she was right and they should call the police. Maybe the undercover officer was acting alone and no one knew what he was up to. Maybe they had already done something horrible to Bobby and they would be wasting their time meeting at the park.

Luke shook his head. There were too many questions that needed answers. "Do you know what Charleston Hall is? That's what Bobby said before he dropped the phone."

Mr. Farmer nodded. "That's an apartment complex over on Main Street."

"We need to go check it out," Ethan said. "Let's at least do that before calling the police. Maybe Bobby will be there."

Luke's parents exchanged a look and he knew they didn't approve. Normally, he would be the first one to say call the police. This time it was different. After the events at the park and the threat from the undercover officer, Luke didn't want to take any chances. "Mom? Dad?"

Mrs. Farmer stepped into action. She grabbed her purse from the table in the hallway. "Bill, you take the boys over to those apartments and see what you can find. I'll go talk to Bobby's parents to let them know what's going on. I'm not sure I can keep them from calling the police though."

Luke's dad nodded. "Okay. If they insist on calling, try to stall them as long as possible. Let's go, guys."

Luke smiled at Ethan and then had a thought. "Did you call your parents?"

"Dang it, I forgot. I'll do that now."

"We'll wait in the truck." Luke patted his leg and called for Boone. "Come on, boy!"

Boone followed Luke and his dad out the door and jumped into the bed of the pickup. He didn't even wait for the tailgate to be lowered. The dog cleared the side of the truck in one quick leap.

Bill Farmer wore an expression of surprise. "Wow. That was pretty impressive. You've got yourself an amazing dog there, son."

Luke beamed with pride. He knew the retriever was something special. It felt good to have his dad voice that out loud. He climbed into the cab and waited for Ethan. "So, you're saying we can keep him then?"

Mr. Farmer nodded. "We'll see. I think we can convince your mother."

Ethan ran out of the house and hopped into the truck beside Luke. "Let's roll."

"Where's the cell phone?" asked Luke.

Ethan pulled it out of his coat pocket. "Right here."

"You think we should leave it here in case we run into trouble?"

"Nah, I'll make sure nothing happens to it. It's cool, dude. They aren't getting this phone."

Luke's dad started the truck and pulled out of the driveway. He navigated the vehicle through the light traffic and out to the interstate. In the back of the truck, Boone curled up near the cab and closed his eyes. Luke glanced over at Ethan. "Has anyone called it since we left the park?"

"Nope."

"I wonder what the deal is with that thing. Why do they want it back so bad?"

Ethan shrugged. "I don't know. We need Bobby to get his geek on so he can tear it apart and figure out what they're after. I wouldn't know where to start."

"Yeah, me either," replied Luke. "Don't they usually have a card or something that stores phone numbers?"

"Sure, whatever."

"A SIM card." Luke's dad spoke up. "It's the card you get from the carrier that has your phone information on it. Most phones have one but there are some service providers that don't use them. It might also have a memory card with something on it."

"So, if this one has a card, then there could be something on it these guys don't want anyone to find. Is there a way to get that off and onto a computer or something maybe?"

Ethan turned his head with a smirk on his face. "I think you've confused me with someone who looks like a nerd. Are you seriously asking me this?"

Luke smiled. "Come on, man. Have you not learned anything from hanging around with Bobby? I was hoping his smarts had rubbed off on at least one of us."

"Sorry, dude. We're not that lucky. If his parents aren't freaking

out by the time we get back, maybe they would let us into his room. I'm sure he's got something there we could use to read that card."

"That's a pretty good idea," Luke replied. "Maybe we can at least make a copy of it so we'll have some proof."

Mr. Farmer glanced at his son. "Proof of what?"

"Proof that all of this happened. Even if we trade the cell for Bobby, we still need to let someone know what's going on."

"Who?" Ethan asked. "If we can't trust the cops, who can we take this too?"

Luke shrugged. "I don't know, but we need to figure it out. I don't think we can just ignore everything that's happened."

They pulled off the interstate and drove two blocks before turning into the parking lot for Charleston Hall Apartments. Mr. Farmer parked the truck and they climbed out. Luke shook his head. The building was five stories tall. It would take them forever to look around, especially since they really didn't know what they were looking for.

Boone stood and whimpered. Luke walked to the back of the truck and rubbed the retriever's head. "Easy, boy. It's okay. We're going to go look around. You stay here, okay?" Boone licked his hand. "Good boy."

"Well," Ethan asked. "What's the plan?"

"Did Bobby say anything at all besides the name of this place?"

Mr. Farmer asked.

"Nope, not a thing. I did hear a girl's voice say something before the phone dropped."

Ethan started for the building entrance. "Let's go see what we can find."

They left Boone in the truck and entered the apartments. An office sat to the right of the first floor hallway, but there were no lights visible. Luke noticed an elevator and also a door further down the hall that showed a picture of stairs. "Well, what now?"

"Start walking the halls calling out his name?" Ethan smiled.

"I was going to suggest going door to door, but what are we going to say? Hey, did you see anyone come through here with a kidnapped boy about twelve years old? They would probably call the cops."

"There are five floors in this building," said Mr. Farmer. "Let's split up and wander around. Maybe we'll get lucky and see something."

Ethan nodded. "Cool, I'll start on three. You guys take one and two."

Luke nodded. "Dad, you want this floor? I'll get two."

"Okay. Let's meet on the third floor in about fifteen minutes. Then we can tackle the top two floors together."

The boys hurried up the stairs. Luke stopped on the second floor as Ethan continued on. Normal sounds of apartment living filled the hallway. Several TV's competed with each other to be the loudest. Toward the end of the hall, a stereo blasted out loud, thumping rap music.

He thought he heard fighting, but wasn't sure. All the sounds blended together into a steady hum of noise. Feeling uneasy, Luke walked the hall to the other end where he noticed an Exit sign.

He had passed apartment 203 and was almost out of sight when the door opened. A man walked out and Luke froze. Barely able to breathe, he stared at the undercover policeman who had been at the park and his house. Panic thumped in his chest as the man tried to shut the door. Luke noticed it wouldn't close all the way.

He wanted to run, but he knew even the slightest movement might catch the man's eye.

The officer stepped back into the apartment and Luke heard him shouting. "The stupid thing's busted. It won't close all the way."

The instant the man was out of sight, Luke bolted through the exit door and into the stairwell. Should he go down and get his dad or up to the third floor and let Ethan know what was going on?

Approaching footsteps nearly gave him a heart attack and he looked up to see a shadow coming down the stairs.

COMING NEXT WEEK:
CHAPTER SIX

Reunited

For more information, please call
Elaine Riner at 423-245-4954
or e-mail at eriner@timesnews.net