

DOUBTING RIVER

by

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CHAPTER 1

Thwap, thwap, thwap, thwap. Lucas's footsteps pounded a staccato rhythm along the trail: *you're late, you're late.* "I'm going as fast as I can," he muttered, but he pushed his legs faster, hurdling fallen branches and zigzagging through close-packed trees. When the scrub cedar opened up to overgrown pasture, he twisted around and whistled. After much rustling of underbrush and one loud crash, a black head popped out from under a low branch.

The boy whistled again. "Come on, River. Let's go!"

Ears perked and tongue lolling, the dog hesitated just a moment before launching himself into the field. Lucas turned and broke into an all-out sprint. River loped beside him for a few strides, weaving through thatches of Johnson grass beaten nearly flat by late-season storms and winter cold, then shifted into a gallop and disappeared into thicker weeds. When the boy reached the far side of the field, the retriever had his head buried in a rabbit warren near a fork in the trail.

Lucas bent over and sucked in deep breaths of cold air. "Show-off," he grumbled. "If I could run that fast, we'd be there by now." River sniffed the air, then plopped his butt on the ground and scratched his ear.

Lucas looked at his watch. No way they were going to make it, unless.... His gaze drifted

to the side path. Winter-browened kudzu vines crept over the edges, obscuring it beyond the first couple of feet. Past that it disappeared into bottomland swamp. He chewed his lip. *Really shouldn't*. But it would be faster. And the trail came out of the woods behind the barn, out of sight of anyone who happened to be watching from the house. *No one will know*.

He clucked his tongue. River gave his ear a final scratch then trotted over. Lucas pulled off his belt, slipped it under the dog's collar, and put the end through the buckle. The retriever huffed softly and pushed his head under the boy's hand. Lucas obliged him with a rub between the eyes. There, on the face and forehead, the dog reminded him of Teal, the field Lab his grandfather had owned before he died. But that's where the resemblance ended. River's muzzle was a little longer, and its smooth fur morphed into slight waves on his forehead then into crisp curls, small and delicate on his ears, larger but still tight on his neck and body, giving him what would have been an almost lamb-like look had the fur been longer or his body less powerful. His chest wasn't as wide as a Teal's, but it was deep, the ribs well-sprung. He was taller, leaner—a runner like him, Lucas decided. Teal was more like his best friend, Joseph. Kind of short and wide.

Lucas checked the makeshift leash and gave the dog a final pat. "Just in case," he said. "If you become an alligator snack, my butt is toast—Hey!" River bolted down the side path, dragging the boy in his wake.

The trail wound an irregular path along the highest ground in a fruitless attempt to avoid the ever-present brackish water. When it rained, the water surged in, redistributing the silt and debris, changing the landscape from one season to the next. In the driest of times, the moisture receded to just below the carpet of grasses and vines that grew vigorously anywhere the sunlight reached the forest floor. Unfortunately, now was not a dry time. With each step, Lucas sank in

the saturated earth. He slid on a sharp curve and gasped as the cold water swelled over the top of his sneaker, but managed to stay on his feet. Mostly. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to have River pull him, he thought as he dodged a fast approaching tree. They were making good time.

The retriever stopped when he reached the barbed wire fence that kept cattle out of the swamp. Lucas crouched there and peered through the rusty strands. Their barn blocked most of the view of the house and driveway beyond, good cover for a boy coming out of woods he wasn't supposed to be in with a dog he wasn't supposed to take out.

He jiggled the makeshift leash and glared at River. "Mind your manners, and keep quiet," he said, then added as an afterthought, "and no, you can't chase a cow." The retriever's eyes brightened at the mention of the beloved "c" word, but Lucas kept a tight hold as they crossed the pasture and slipped into the barn through the horse paddock at the back.

The chestnut gelding napping in his stall woke and snorted. Lucas put a finger to his lips. "Shhhh." He slipped the belt off River's collar and motioned him into the barn. Home free.

"Where have you been?"

Lucas's head whipped to the right. His mother stood in the doorway, arms crossed, watching him. *Busted*. He closed the stall door. "Just out back."

She arched her eyebrow and looked him up and down. "Want to try again?"

He followed her gaze. Muck coated his jeans from the knees down. In unison they looked at River, now brown from his belly to the tips of his paws. As if to emphasize the point, the dog shook, showering them both with mud.

"River!"

"Lucas Gibson!"

The boy dragged the dog toward the house, scattering a trio of chickens pecking for

tidbits in the middle of the gravel drive. River bounced every other step, trying to free himself from the death grip on his collar. "I'll get him cleaned up, Mom. I swear," Lucas said over his shoulder.

She followed him, brushing at the spots of dirt flecking her jacket. "That doesn't answer my question. And honestly," she said, "the woods? Without a leash? If we've told you once...."

Protests rose in his throat. He hadn't intended to go through the woods, and he'd had a leash when they left, but he left it at.... Never mind. She definitely didn't need to know where he left it.

"This dog isn't a pet, Lucas." She punctuated each word with a shake of her index finger. "He's a national grand...."

"Grand National Champion."

"...Grand National Champion. Whatever. Lord knows, we can't afford to import another one if something happens to him."

The hose lay in a tangled heap where he'd left it after filling the water troughs that morning. He grabbed the nozzle and turned on the spigot on the side of the house. The hose choked and sputtered, but no water came out. "Oh, come on," he muttered, shaking it.

"What would your father tell Mr. Forbes?" his mother continued. "You know better. Where were you?"

"Maybe it's frozen," he said, peering into the end of the nozzle.

She pressed her lips together. "That's not an answer." She took the nozzle and gave it a shake. "This is Mississippi, not Michigan—it's not that cold. If you would put the hose away properly, it wouldn't get kinked up." She snapped it, hard.

Water exploded from the end, jerking the hose from her grasp. Mother and son screamed

and jumped apart to escape the frigid deluge. His mother stumbled backwards, but the hose, writhing like a dancing cobra, followed her. River, delighted with this game, jumped in the middle, chasing the stream as it whipped to and fro. Lucas stared, open-mouthed, too shocked to act.

"Turn it off!" his mother yelled.

Lucas grabbed the knob and turned it left, then right, then left again. Which way was off?

"Lefty loosey, righty tighty!" She danced forward, backward, spun left, and bobbed.

Water was everywhere, and everywhere was River, moving in an odd syncopation, bounding and snapping at the drops. Lucas turned the spigot to the right until the hose sputtered and fell lifeless, bringing the dance to an abrupt end. River sniffed at it and pawed it hopefully. For a long moment, no one spoke.

Lucas gawked at his mother. Water dripped from her nose and her chin. Her hair, a red, usually somewhat more tamed, version of his own curls, hung limp in her eyes, and now, in addition to the specks of mud, her jacket sported a set of four perfect paw prints walking their way from her left hipbone to her right shoulder. To his horror, laughter quivered in his gut. He bit the inside of his cheek, but he couldn't help it: a giggle climbed his chest and burst out of him. *I am so getting grounded for this.* Once he started, he couldn't stop.

His mother stood frozen, mouth gaping open. Then a tell-tale red built in her cheeks, and her shoulders began to shake. Lucas smothered his guffaws under clasped hands and cringed. *Not grounded. Dead. I am so dead.* Instead, there was a snort, then a chuckle. Then deep belly laughs. Lucas's jaw dropped open, and for a moment he forgot his own amusement and just stared. That seemed to delight her even more. She sank down at the picnic table and laughed until tears mixed with the water on her face. After a moment, she shrugged out of her wet jacket

and dabbed at her face and streaming eyes with the collar of the lightweight cardigan underneath.

Lucas slid onto the bench beside her. “You’re wet.”

“I am?” She shook her head, showering him with water droplets. His squeals of delight turned to ear-splitting shrieks when she slipped her hands under his shirt and tickled bare ribs.

“I’m cold too!”

“I’ll get you a towel.” He started to get up, but she caught hold of his wrist.

“Not yet. First, I want you to tell me where you were when I got home.”

“Mom...” He tried to pull away, but she pulled him down beside her and wrapped her arm around him to keep him still.

“I spent twenty minutes looking for you. You weren’t out back.”

He stuck out his bottom lip and looked down.

She held up an index finger. “One.”

Lucas’s eyes widened. *One day grounded.* “Mom!”

“Two.”

“It’s Christmas!”

“Three.”

“But we’re training River!”

A horn honked, and tires crunched on the gravel drive. Both mother and son swiveled around to see the source. “Dad!” Lucas jumped up and ran to meet his father’s truck, River close on his heels.

“It’s not fair!” he said as his father emerged from the cab.

“What’s not?” His father knelt down and rubbed the retriever’s ears. “Why is River so muddy?”

“Your son took that dog and disappeared this afternoon,” his mother said, joining them.

“Three days!” Lucas complained. “She grounded me for three days.”

His father looked back and forth between them for a long moment. “Lucas,” he said finally, “go inside and put on some dry clothes. We need to leave soon if we expect to work River this afternoon.”

Lucas glanced at his mother and saw her jaw tighten the way it did when she held back words she didn’t want to say in front of him. He started to turn away, then paused. “River....”

“I’ll take care of him,” his father said.

“Yes, sir.” The boy fled to the house, a buzz of heated conversation rising and falling in his wake.

“Why are you making me the bad guy—”

Lucas shut the front door, cutting off the rest of his mother’s words. He didn’t want to hear. This was his fault. *Forget it. I’m telling her the truth.* He turned, then hesitated, hand on the doorknob. *And then they’d never get to train River.* He kicked the door.

The impact scattered chunks of mud from his shoes across the hardwood floor. Great. He dropped to his hands and knees and brushed the dirt into a pile. Then, careful not to dislodge anymore dirt, he stripped off his shoes and his socks, and after a moment of consideration, his jeans. Mud safely contained in the heap, he scampered upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. Socks on first, but his feet were already chilled, and he hopped from one foot to the other as he dressed. His mother didn’t see the point in heating the house during the day when they were out, even now when he was on break from school. He complained once, but she threatened to give him extra chores to keep him warm, so he decided to wear an extra sweater.

Before he went back downstairs, he peeked through the window to see what his parents

were doing. They stood face-to-face, his father's jacket around his mom's shoulders, her hands wrapped in his flannel shirt. His father's head was bent close to hers as he spoke. The words were just for her; not even the hum of conversation reached the glass. Her lips were pressed tight, but the corner of her mouth twitched, and then she smiled, looking down when she did so.

Lucas backed away from the window and headed outside. He went through the kitchen, rather than the front door and circled wide on his way to the barn, keeping his head low, hoping not to attract their attention.

In an unused corner of the old structure, his father had built a chain-link kennel run for River, and next to that stood a cabinet where they kept training equipment. Lucas opened it and looked over the contents. Whistle, replacement leash, long line—they'd definitely need those. He pulled out a couple of knobby white retrieving dummies and considered them. River retrieved these plastic bumpers instead of birds. It sure would be cool if they could retrieve some real ducks instead. He looked wistfully at his dad's shotgun.

"You were late."

Lucas looked over his shoulder to see his father and River coming through the barn door. He glanced past them, but his mother was out of sight. "She wasn't supposed to be home until three."

"And you were supposed to be home at two."

Lucas sighed. Logic sucked. "Am I grounded?"

"No. I told her that boys keep secrets at Christmas." He grinned. "You'd better have something good for her under that tree though."

Lucas tapped a bumper against his thigh and wondered how he could tie the vase he made in art class into his trip through the swamp. River grabbed the bumper and tried to tug it out of

his hands. The boy obliged him for a moment, then tossed it for him to fetch. The dog bounded after it and returned it, tail wagging. “Can we train with real birds today?” Lucas asked. “I bet you can get some pigeons from Oscar.”

His dad sat on the edge of a hay bale. “We’ve talked about this. We’re not ready for live flyers yet.”

“But River is already a champion. When he was in New Zealand, he retrieved real birds all the time.”

“I didn’t say *he* wasn’t ready. I said *we’re* not. We need to test him, bit by bit, to find out what he knows and what he doesn’t. There’s a huge difference between competitions in New Zealand and American field trials. We’ve got to figure it out systematically, starting with the basics. And that means we go slow.”

The boy sighed. “All right. But I think he’s bored.”

His father leaned forward. “You know what? I think he is too. What do you say we try some water retrieves today?”

Lucas wrinkled his nose. “Isn’t it kind of cold?”

“Not to River.” His father suddenly swept him up and hung him, upside down and backwards, over his shoulder. For a split second, Lucas considered complaining that at nine years old, he was too old for this, but his argument was overruled by irrepressible giggles. “Get the stuff,” his father said, turning so he could reach it.

It wasn’t easy to manage all the bits and pieces while hanging upside down, but that was part of the challenge. Of course, the snickers he couldn’t control and the dog that kept jumping up and licking his face didn’t help, but he managed to hold onto everything all the way to the truck. He watched his mother approach, shaking her head. She looked funny walking on her

head, and it made him laugh harder.

“Jake,” his mother admonished. “It’s a wonder he doesn’t have brain damage. Look how red his face is.”

His father swung him around and set him on his feet. “Just trying to get the blood flowing up there. Want him firing on all cylinders.”

“Mmmhmm.” She didn’t sound quite convinced, but at least she seemed amused and no longer angry.

A silver “dog box” designed to hold multiple hunting dogs and their equipment was mounted on the bed of Jake’s pickup. Lucas shoved the equipment into a compartment on the driver’s side, then ran around and opened the one on his side. His dad lifted River in, and then carefully fastened the hatch. Lucas crawled into the truck’s cab. “Seat belt,” his father reminded him.

“Don’t forget,” he heard his mother say as his parents walked around to the driver’s side, “your training partner has cows to feed, and we promised to attend the live Nativity at the church tonight.”

Jake gave her a quick kiss and got in the truck. “How could I forget? Chasing Gertrude McKelvey’s ass up and down Main Street is a December twenty-third tradition.” He rolled down the window and turned the ignition key. The truck put-put-putted to life.

His mother leaned in the window. “I hope you’re talking about her donkey.” Lucas giggled. She winked at him, then turned her attention back to his father. “You’re going to have to watch Lucas tonight too. I promised to sell ornaments in the church booth.”

“Grandma will be there. I can stay with her,” Lucas said.

“No, you can’t.” Her tone was flat. She met his eyes to be sure he understood her, then

tapped Jake's arm. "Speaking of the McKelveys, I heard Tom might be looking to hire somebody to help build some new fence in his back pasture before the winter calves come."

"All Tom McKelvey has to do is ask, and the whole county will turn out for free."

"Free won't pay for a new alternator or my textbooks. New quarter starts right after New Year's. I had to charge..."

"Don't worry about that," his father said. "We'll get the money. Have I ever let you down?" He gave her a quick kiss. "Home for dinner!"

She smiled and stepped back so he could turn the truck around. "Be careful."

He started down the drive. "Nahhhhh."

Her laughter followed them onto the road.

Lucas turned on the radio. Twangy music blared for a moment, then dissolved into static. He fiddled with the tuner, but the old truck apparently wasn't in the mood for music today. "Crap."

"Language."

"Sorry." He turned the radio off. "I wish Mom didn't hate Grandma so much."

"She doesn't hate her. They're just too alike and too stubborn, and your mom can't let go of some stuff that happened a long time ago."

"A long time ago like when you got married?"

"Like even before that," Jake said.

Unable to imagine such ancient history, Lucas switched topics. "So if River wins this contest, will Mom stop worrying about money?"

"Field trial. If—When—River wins a field trial, I will be *the* man for training around here, and our troubles will be G-O-N-E. Trust me, Lucas, that dog is our golden ticket."

“I don’t know why Mom’s going to school anyway. I know I wouldn’t go to school if I was a grownup.” Lucas watched the scenery pass for a long moment and then blurted the words he’d been holding in. “I think we should tell Mom the truth.”

His father pulled up to the stop sign at the turn onto Highway 61 and stopped. “We’ve discussed this. I thought you understood.”

“I do understand.” Lucas kicked the dashboard. “It isn’t fair!”

“Maybe not, but don’t take it out on my truck.” His father made the left onto the highway. “I don’t like this either, Lucas, but I don’t see any other way to do it.”

The boy crossed his arms and huffed. “It’s just... She just... She just ought to be *reasonable*.”

His father threw back his head and laughed. “I agree. I don’t recommend you tell her that though.”

A sudden blur of tan distracted Lucas from his reply. “Look out!”

The truck careened and skidded as his father tried to avoid the buck that leapt in front of them. Lucas glimpsed the deer’s eyes, rolling in terror, an instant before the collision flipped the animal onto the hood. Glass shattered and the boy yelled and threw his arms up to protect himself. Another lurch, and the truck came to a halt.

Lucas sat with his eyes squeezed shut until the unnerving stillness finally drove him to peek. He yelped and flinched away from the buck, its face just inches from his own. The deer was beyond reacting. It had come partially through the windshield, its body wrenched and twisted by the impact. The neck was at an odd angle, the antlers wedged between the dash and Lucas’s abdomen. The boy exhaled. *That was close!* He pushed at the massive head, but it wouldn’t budge. He tried again. No luck. Maybe he could slide out. He fumbled with the

seatbelt, but somehow the tip of one antler had jammed in the clasp. “Dad, I’m stuck.” His father didn’t answer. Lucas looked over. “Dad?”

Jake was leaning forward over the steering wheel, eyes closed, as if he were trapped in that moment before impact, praying they wouldn’t collide.

“Dad?” Lucas’s voice shook. He reached over and tugged on his father’s sleeve. Jake slumped toward him, his head lolling backwards to reveal a small cut and swelling on his forehead. Lucas grabbed his jacket and shook him. “Dad, wake up!” Jake made a sound low in his throat, but didn’t open his eyes.

Tears spilled down the boy’s cheeks. “We’ve got to get out of here. You have to help me.” He shook him again, then looked up and past him. They were on the highway, facing oncoming traffic, or what would be oncoming traffic if he could have seen it. The road angled left limiting his view—and the view of anyone coming towards them. *No, no, no.* He grabbed the seatbelt and jerked at it. “Dad, help me!”

Jake stirred, reaching out blindly. “Lucas,” he whispered.

Lucas clasped his hand. “Dad... Dad, you’ve got to move. Dad, please!” It wasn’t quiet anymore. There was a rumble, growing louder. He punched at the buck’s head until the antler broke loose and then fumbled to free himself of the seatbelt. *Hurry, hurry, hurry.*

The rumble became the blare of a horn, then the squeal of brakes. The seatbelt slithered free, and Lucas threw his shoulder against the door. But it was already too late.