

# Kidd's Grand Adventure

A novel for youngsters eleven through fifteen  
(And their parents!)

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## **Dedication**

To  
Young people of every generation  
who are brave enough  
and wise enough  
to  
consider  
the  
truly important problems of life  
and  
how to live it  
so everybody benefits.

- D.D. 2003

## **Chapter One**

### **Here We Go!**

There is something special about a May sunrise in the mid-west. Gramps said it was due to the ever-present early morning wisps of clouds that hang low, just above the horizon, each waiting patiently for its turn to burst into some glorious shade of crimson or violet or brilliant orange.

At first, they glow, ever so faintly, like lingering coals from the previous night's campfire. Then, as if being gently fanned to life by the morning breeze, their lower edges begin to brighten. Slowly, pale fingers of color spread their way up and around each cloud as if claiming it as its own. Soon the sky behind is ablaze with a brilliance that relegates the clouds to mere colored silhouettes. It is at that point Kidd wishes he could pause the process and make it linger in its beauty forever.

Granted, most twelve-year-old boys aren't into appreciating sunrises - heck, most twelve-year-old boys are still comfortably cozied under their covers at that early morning hour. Not Kidd! He had far too many important things he wanted to do each day and sleeping his life away was not one of them.

It still felt lonely there on the porch swing for Gramps and Kidd. Grandma had passed away quite unexpectedly the

month before and the guys missed her greatly. They missed her sitting there on the swing with them in the morning sharing the sunrise. They missed her ham and mushroom omelets and her chicken fried steak. Most of all, they missed her smile, her love, her tenderness - the way she always knew just what to say to raise their spirits (on those rare occasions when they were feeling down).

Kidd was an orphan and had lived with Gramps and Grandma as a foster child since he had been a baby, so they were not blood relatives. Even so, they were his loving family and he was their precious child - no one who really knew them would dispute that.

On numerous occasions, they had tried to adopt the boy but the Child Welfare Department thought they were too old, so disapproved their applications. Gramps would retire at the end of the school year - just one month away. He had taught art and shop there in the little town of Springfield for the last forty years. It was the town where he had grown up, and the town where he hoped to retire. Something was about to happen, however, that would make that all quite impossible!

“How about if I make breakfast this morning?” Kidd stated more than asked.

“Sure! That’s great! It’s my omelets, isn’t it?” Gramps said, pretending a sad frown.

“They get an ‘E’ for effort, but, ya, they are really awful. I helped Grandma make them. I think I can do better.”

“Carry on, then, Chef Kidd. I’m all in favor of any improvements we can make around here.”

Since he felt himself on a roll, Kidd was moved to continue.

“Well, if I make breakfast, I suppose you won’t mind taking out the trash then.”

Gramps’ eyes twinkled. He’d just been hoodwinked and my how he enjoyed it.

“Breakfast in exchange for garbage! That seems fair unless of course the omelets turn out to be garbage!”

Kidd gave Gramps a hug and went inside. Gramps remained on the swing. He looked back toward the horizon and spoke as if his wife were there beside him.

“We have a big problem, Mary. I’m not sure how to handle it.”

He took an envelope from his shirt pocket - one that had arrived by registered mail the day before.

“I received this letter yesterday. It seems there is a man named William Nevins who thinks he has some claim to Kidd. Apparently, he believes that he is the boy’s biological grandfather and he’s just recently found out about Kidd’s existence. The parents are both dead - they’d never been married and the grandfather hints there may be some doubt about whether his son was actually the father.

Anyway, this Nevins is a very wealthy man and has decided that he wants Kidd to come and live with him. He wants a male heir to carry on the family name and business. From what I have been able to learn about Mr. Nevins, it seems he usually gets what he wants - one way or another.

“He’s filed a petition in Family Court. There’s to be a hearing on June first. That gives me about a month to work something out. Nevins, with all his money, could probably give Kidd a whole lot more than I’ll ever be able to - the best college, traveling the World and all the “stuff” any youngster could possibly want.

“I just don’t like what I hear about the man though, Mary. He’s a scoundrel. I can’t stand the idea of giving Kidd up to that sort of a person.

“I haven’t mentioned it to Kidd yet. I have to soon, however. I’m meeting with Russell (his lawyer) after school today. Then I’ll have a better idea of where we stand.”

He sat and thought in silence as he listened to Kidd

clanking and thumping around in the kitchen. 'At least he's an enthusiastic cook, I'll give him that,' Gramps thought to himself, thoroughly amused by the racket.

Kidd's mother had died in an auto accident on the way home from the hospital just after having given birth to him. The driver was a young man who had been assumed to have been the father although that was never established. He was never heard from again after the accident. The birth certificate read simply "Boy Kidd" - Kidd being the mother's own last name. Later, he had been legally given the first name Kevin, but everyone knew him as Kidd. He had lived with Gramps and Grandma since he was six days old.

Gramps was officially Leon Joel Wilson but he had always gone by the initials L. J. Sometime during his early years Kidd had begun using the names Gramps and Grandma to refer to L. J. and Mary. It seemed more appropriate than Dad and Mom due to their ages, and they thought it was cute - so let it stick.

Presently, Gramps refolded the letter, put it back into his pocket, and went inside. He set the table as Kidd finished up at the stove. How the boy could have dirtied seven bowls to make two omelets Gramps couldn't figure, but he smiled in wonder as he watched the lad at work.

"Ready in a minute," Kidd announced.

"Milk or juice?" Gramps asked.

"Both, please. Got a big day ahead. A track meet after school, remember."

Gramps had not remembered.

"I may be a little late. I have to see Russell at 3:15."

"Russell, the lawyer? What about?"

Since Grandma had passed away, Kidd felt he was now an equal partner with Gramps in most family matters.

"Oh, just some left over legal stuff," Gramps said, hoping that would satisfy Kidd's curiosity and end the

conversation. It did. Kidd trusted Gramps completely. The man had never let him down.

“The mile run is always last anyway. Probably won’t start ‘til about five,” Kidd explained, suggesting there was no problem about Gramps being late - well, a little late.

“I’ll be there to see you run,” he promised as Kidd delivered the skillet and flipped out two beautiful omelets.

“How’s that for morning garbage?” Kidd joked.

“Looks great!”

“I had a great teacher.”

A special glance passed between them and Gramps nodded, biting at his lower lip.

As they ate, Kidd talked non-stop about his plans for the day - computer club before school, a history test, lunch with his friends, rope climbing in PE, and the track meet. Then he began making plans with Gramps for the evening.

Kidd loved life and people and was pretty satisfied with himself. He knew he’d probably not win the mile race that day but winning wasn’t why he ran. He ran because he just loved to run. Cross country was his best sport. He could run forever and never seemed to tire. He often won that event.

Kidd was slender and perhaps a little taller than most boys his age. He had wavy, sandy hair (seldom combed), blue eyes and a natural smile that gave him an immediately friendly appearance. He walked with confidence and had a bounce in his step that telegraphed his great energy. The face he saw in the mirror seemed pretty average to him, though the girls appeared to think it was rather handsome. He liked girls – a lot – mostly from a distance, so didn’t have a special one. Everybody liked Kidd.

His best boy friend had moved to California right after Christmas that year. They kept in touch by e-mail. Kidd had lots of guy friends but no one of them had surfaced as a new best friend.

Kidd loved computers and was known as an authority on the subject there in the small town of Springfield. When the computer teacher would get stuck, he'd privately seek out Kidd for advice. Kidd offered his help willingly and never let on about it to the other youngsters. He would never try to make someone else look bad. That was one reason Kidd was so well liked.

Gramps, well L. J. or Mr. Wilson to most everyone except, Kidd, was a super teacher. His students loved him and when graduates came back to visit they always looked him up first. He was a man of many talents - an artist, a sculptor, a carpenter, a mechanic, a writer and a gardener. He too, loved life and living it. Perhaps that's where Kidd had acquired those same grand traits.

The two of them never got tired of doing things together. That may have been due to the fact that Gramps, though grey of hair and feeling a touch of the arthritis in his old joints, had never lost the little boy who lived on inside of him. Kidd had always seemed mature for his age - wiser and more thoughtful one might say. So, they were more alike than might meet the eye.

Kidd always had wonderful questions and Gramps, though he had most of the answers, often answered Kidd with a question of his own. That way Kidd had grown up being encouraged to think for himself, but was never ignored or left to feel as though his inquiries were unimportant.

Had the two of them been the same age, they would have undoubtedly been best friends. In fact, even being of such different ages, they were best friends. Oh, there was no doubt in either of their minds who the parent was and who had final say in crucial matters, but still, they felt equal in most areas of their lives. They enjoyed each other's company and learned much from one another.

Their life together had been wonderful and although it

was now still a sad time for them, they knew things would eventually be wonderful again. On that particular morning, Gramps may have had some doubts about that, however.

After breakfast, they did the dishes together. Then with their usual parting hug and kiss, Kidd hefted his backpack and was off on the trot to school. Gramps would follow a few minutes later. Although everyone at school knew the relationship between Kidd and Mr. Wilson, it never caused problems. Kidd was in his shop class that semester and no outsider would have ever suspected the boy was anything other than just another student. Kid went out of his way to do so well that no one could have any doubts that he did deserve the A's he received there.

Kidd's day played out according to his plan. Gramps was upset about the letter but no one would have guessed. He smiled his way through class after class. Gramps saw no purpose in sharing his troubles with others. His mission in life was to help those around him feel good about themselves.

After school Kidd headed for the locker room and Gramps for the lawyer's office. What he heard from Russell upset him even more.

"If this Mr. Nevins can prove he is the grandfather, he has a good case for full custody. With his money and reputation for getting what he wants - at any cost and by any means - I'd say we have a real fight on our hands."

"What you mean is, we have a losing battle on our hands," Gramps said, cutting to the bottom line.

Russell shrugged his shoulders as if to agree without actually saying so.

At the track meet it was difficult for Gramps to keep his mind on the events. Kidd finished third in a field of twelve, so he felt pretty good about it. He had improved his time by almost five seconds over his last race.

"Another fifty races at this rate and I'll be under three

minutes,” Kidd joked as he met up with Gramps at the conclusion of the meet.

Gramps smiled and put his arm around the boy as they walked toward the car. Kidd sensed a problem. In fact, he had sensed it the day before as well.

As they strapped themselves into the front seat, he turned to Gramps and said: “I suppose it’s about time you let me in on what’s been bothering you.”

Gramps nodded, slowly and deliberately. He looked at Kidd.

“I suppose it is.”

During the drive home Gramps laid out the situation. (He carefully avoided calling it a problem.) He finished by encouraging Kidd to give serious consideration to this new option.

“Mr. Nevins could certainly provide you with a great deal that I will never be able to.”

“Ya, sure, like love and caring and family and belonging? I don’t think so! Nothing else is really important and I believe that’s a direct quote from the grey-haired gentleman in the seat beside me.”

They pulled to a stop in their driveway. Kidd removed his seat belt and turned, looking directly into Gramps’ face.

“I won’t leave you, you know. Not even if I have to hide out in the hills ‘till I’m eighteen.”

Gramps put his hand on Kidd’s shoulder and looked lovingly into the boy’s beautiful blue eyes.

“Then that’s how it will be. We’ll stick together. I have a plan. I discussed it earlier with Russell. It may come down to a choice between what I believe is right and what the court says is legal. When those two things are at odds, it’s always a very difficult choice. If Mr. Nevins gains legal custody, you and I will be on the run from both him and the law. That’s not the kind of life I wanted for you, Son.”

“Let’s hear your plan. I’ll make lemonade.”  
They went inside feeling even closer than usual.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Plan**

While Kidd fixed the drinks, Gramps arranged the kitchen table with a yellow pad, ballpoint pens, a sketch pad and pencils. Gramps always did his best thinking when he had a pencil or a tool in his hand.

“So. Lay it on me,” Kidd said, placing the pitcher and glasses on the table.

He scooted his chair close bedside Gramps so he would be in a better position to see whatever Gramps might draw or write. Gramps began.

“Any plan that we devise means we have to leave Springfield and that won’t be easy for either one of us.”

“Ya. I was just thinking about that, but we’ll have each other wherever we go.”

That seemed to handle the first hurdle as Kidd’s words echoed Gramps’ thoughts exactly. Gramps continued.

“From what I’ve been able to learn about Nevins, he doesn’t give up. He’ll keep after us wherever we go and that will happen whether he gains legal custody of you or not. So, our plan needs to allow us to be able to pick up and move on at a moment’s notice and probably often so he can’t get a fix

on us.”

“Avoid the Nevins and see the World,” Kid joked paraphrasing the old Navy recruitment slogan. [Join the Navy and see the World.]

“That’s just how I think it will be. It means no long-term friendships, though, Kidd - no best friends forever.”

“But I’ll bet we’ll find nice people to hang with wherever we go,” Kidd said, putting a positive spin on it. Then it hit him. “What about school?”

“I’ll teach you. We’ll get material from the home schooling groups. That’s something you can begin researching on the internet. We have until September to get that underway.”

Gramps slid the yellow pad toward Kidd.

“Make that number one on your list.”

Kidd picked up a pen and began his list. Gramps’ eyes moistened as he noticed the title the boy had given his list. The Grand Adventure of Gramps and Kidd.

“What about transportation?” Kidd asked. “We’ll need to take lots of stuff.”

“That’s number one on my list. Here’s my idea. You tell me what you think. We’ll buy the biggest school bus they make and remodel the inside to fit our needs. We can have a kitchenette, a bathroom, a sleeping area, a living room, and a study/computer/studio area.”

Kidd’s eyes widened. It sounded great. As usual he had some ideas of his own.

“We could put solar panels on the roof to keep a bank of batteries charged for light and electricity. We could even have a retractable windmill to use as an auxiliary power source. We could heat and cool it with a propane gas system. We can have a satellite dish and wireless internet set up.

He talked faster than he could write. Gramps continued.

“We can close up whatever windows we don’t need and insulate it with rigid sheets, then panel over them. That wouldn’t add much weight. A little carpet on the floor and we’d be set.”

The two of them were becoming more excited about the plan with every new idea. Gramps began sketching a floor plan of the bus home. A narrow bathroom, kitchenette and sleeping area with bunk beds would be across the very back. The rest of the bus would be split into two sections with the larger, study and studio toward the middle of the bus and the living area with a sofa, chair and table up front open to the driver’s seat.

“We can have the roof raised a foot to provide more headroom and overhead storage space along each side.”

“Let’s paint the outside blue, like the sky we’ll be traveling under,” Kidd suggested. “And, it’ll need a name - not something like Betsy but something that’s filled with meaning for us.”

“Sounds fine to me. I have an idea about a name.”

“What?” Kidd asked, clearly excited.

“Get the book on South American Primitive tribes. There’s a passage in there that just may fit our needs.”

Kidd was soon back with the large volume. There was a family that loved books and all the wonders they had to share.

Gramps opened it to the index and was soon thumbing through the pages.

“Here!” he said at last. “I always liked this idea. There is a tribe that uses a phrase that refers to what each person thinks his own personal mission in life is. The phrase is Walooma Watooka. When hearing about a stranger or meeting someone for the first time, rather than asking how old he is or what his job is, they always first ask, ‘What’s his Walooma Watooka?’ In other words, what is his main purpose

in life? Does he intend to be a good guy or a bad guy? Is he helpful or hurtful? Is he dependable or unreliable? Is he trustworthy or not? In other words, what does he see as his guiding mission in life, his Walooma Watooka?"

Kidd agreed it was a great name. He said it over several times:

"Walooma Watooka. Walooma Watooka. It just rolls off your tongue. I like it a lot."

The name seemed to be settled but Kidd suddenly felt the need to give some serious thought to his own Walooma Watooka - what was his guiding mission in life? It would become the source of many long conversations with Gramps and others he would meet along the way.

Gramps sat back and removed his glasses. He turned toward Kidd.

"Okay. We have just outlined one possibility for our immediate future. There's one aspect of all this I still want you to consider very seriously one final time."

Kidd furrowed his brow. He thought it was a done deal. Gramps continued.

"This thing with Nevins - it just might help you find out who your father was, you know. It might be the only chance you'll ever get."

"Without a second's hesitation Kidd shot back, "You're my father and that's all I need to know."

Gramps swallowed hard and then tried one more time to clarify what he meant.

"I meant ..."

Kidd interrupted.

"I know. You meant my biological father. I thought that through back when I was just a kid - right after one of our first sex talks. From what we know, we're pretty sure that man didn't mean to give me life - I was like an accident. Well, I've never been like an accident to you. You and Grandma always

treated me more like a ... well, like I overheard you two talking once ... Grandma said I was like a miracle in your lives. I'm still not completely sure what she meant by that but I determined I'd take being a miracle over being an accident any day. So, F A T H E R (he drew the word out for emphasis), let's just close that chapter and get on with the next one."

The moisture in Gramps' eyes began rolling down his cheeks. He opened his big arms wide. Kidd stood and moved into them. They melted together - happy, safe, and content. It was their silent pledge to see life through as a team - a family.

With his head still gentled against Gramps' shoulder, Kidd spoke.

"One thing about our living room wall in the bus - It will need to have a big picture of Grandma on it. We can't just leave her behind, you know."

Gramps nodded silently.

After they each added a few more items to their lists, Kidd was off to search the net while Gramps fixed supper. It was an exciting time. It was a scary time. Gramps surmised that neither one of them would get much sleep that Friday night. The coming weekend would be busy.

\* \* \*

The next morning Gramps had just finished shaving and was examining his face in the mirror as Kidd stepped out of the shower and began toweling off.

"What would you think if I grew a beard?" Gramps asked, turning his face first one way and then another as he continued to view it.

"A beard? Cool!"

Kidd moved close so the two of them could also see his face in the mirror. He mimicked the way Gramps had been moving his head about. He stroked his chin.

"I think I'll grow one, too - in about six years, maybe."

They had a good chuckle.

A few minutes later they were at the kitchen table, each attacking a stack of pancakes. It was the one and only dish that Gramps had always been able to make better than Grandma or Kidd. Grandma said it was because Gramps was such a patient person – he never turned them until exactly the right moment.

The evening before, Gramps had been on the phone with Russell and had arranged to use an empty barn on some property his friend owned just south of town.

It was in there, out of sight, that they would remodel the bus. Russell had agreed to have a third person make the actual purchase for them so Nevins wouldn't be able to trace it to Gramps, Kidd or Russell. With only a month until the hearing, they didn't have much time to make their preparations.

After they left Springfield, Russell would sell the house and car for them. He would also set up a bank account they could access over the internet and at ATM's. He would deposit Gramps' social security and teacher's pension checks each month. Gramps figured that between those sources of income and what he could earn selling sketches, mini-sculptures and jewelry they would be very well set financially.

"So, what are we going to use for money during this great adventure of ours?" Kidd asked.

It was the first time he had ever actually thought much about the family finances. Gramps explained the arrangement he had made with the lawyer. Kidd nodded his approval as if to say that he assumed from then on he would have a part in all such matters.

It tickled Gramps. More than that, it pleased him. His son was still a boy, but he was well on his way to thinking like a responsible young man.

Kidd was not without artistic talent of his own. He had

been carving civil war soldiers - about ten inches tall for over a year and was both quite good at it and fairly fast.

“I’ve been thinking that I can sell soldiers for my spending money, so you won’t need to budget an allowance for me.”

“We’ll have plenty of money for your allowance. Money’s my responsibility. Just being a normal, growing boy and a good student is your responsibility.”

Kidd rephrased what Gramps had just said.

“Being a good, normal, growing boy - person - and a great student is my responsibility. Maybe that’s part of my Walooma Watooka. So! What’s on tap for today?”

“Last night while I couldn’t sleep I made a list of the materials we’ll need to remodel the bus so I thought we’d go down to the discount lumberyard at Cartersville and get things ordered.”

“Great!” Kidd responded in his usual enthusiastic manner. “Last night, while I couldn’t sleep, I looked up some sources for solar panels. I printed out the information. They’re about the same price no matter where we buy them but I figure freight will be cheapest from Chicago.”

“Nice going. We’ll look over all that when we get back and figure out what we’ll need in order to meet our electrical requirements.”

The shopping trip took until noon. Gramps arranged to have the material delivered to the barn on the following Friday afternoon. That would give them just three weeks to meet their deadline. The bus would be delivered on Wednesday. It had been ordered without seats or windows. While Gramps and Kidd were in school on Thursday and Friday, Gus, an old friend of Gramps who ran a junk yard, would cut off the top of the bus and raise it an extra foot. By Saturday, everything would be ready for Gramps and Kid to begin their big job.

At Kidd’s suggestion, they had Gus cut holes in the roof

for two skylights - one over the studio area and one further forward over the living room. Gramps called in the order for the skylights so they would be delivered with the other material.

\* \* \*

Everything was delivered on schedule and the following Saturday morning found Gramps and Kidd arriving at the barn just as the sun peeked up over the horizon. They would repeat that schedule every day until finished - working a few hours before and after school each day and all day Saturdays and Sundays.

The first job was to erect 2 X 4 wooden framing inside the outer walls of the bus. Wires were run for the electric outlets and lights. Windows were installed where they were needed. Insulation was inserted between the upright framing pieces. Attractive, white, wood paneling was nailed in place over the frame. Then the R-V type bathroom fixtures were installed and the wall put up around them. The bunk beds and built in dressers were secured in place in the very small, cozy sleeping area. Then, with the kitchenette in place (between the bathroom and the bunks), the final wall across the bus separating the study and the living room was built and finished. The skylights were installed in the roof and ceiling tile glued in place. The carpeting was laid last. Finally, the furniture was moved into place.

"It has all the comforts of home as far as I can tell," Gramps said, trying out the swivel recliner in the living area.

"All except one," Kidd said. He left the bus and was back in a minute carrying the large picture of Grandma which he hung on the wall over the couch.

"There! Now, we have all the comforts of home!"

Gramps nodded his agreement.

The only thing left to do was to paint the outside and add the name. When the time came, Gramps asked Kidd to

do the lettering since he was very neat about such things.

They chose a place just behind the front door. Kidd worked solemnly, fashioning each crisp, white, letter with great care. When he was finished, they stood back and took a long look at their grand accomplishment.

The soft blue color and the gentle curving corners and roof line seemed to set just the right, tender, tone for their new home.

The month had passed rapidly and suddenly it was just two days before the hearing. They had not seen or heard from Mr. Nevins or his attorneys but were sure they would show up at the courthouse in full force for the hearing on Monday.

Saturday morning was the annual, end-of-the-year, all school picnic at Shaffer Woods. It also turned out to be a surprise retirement party for Gramps (well, Mr. Wilson, to most of them). Little did the students know that as they shook his hand in the reception line that morning it would probably be the last time they would ever see him or Kidd.

After the picnic, Gramps and Kidd visited Russell's office to thank him for his help and to sign some last minute legal documents relating to finances and the sale of the house and car.

Kidd handed Russell a brown envelope, explaining, "I figure the judge should want to hear what I think about all of this so I wrote it all out." Russell accepted it with a nod and had Kidd sign it. The secretary notarized it.

After leaving the office, they drove around their beloved Springfield for one last look. It was mostly a silent time. They both had lots of things to think about and many memories to replay.

Back at the house they packed the last few things they would be taking along and carried them out to the car. Then it was to bed before sunset because at midnight, under the

cover of darkness, their Grand Adventure would get under way.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Hearing

With the barn doors closed behind them they boarded Walooma (a shortened version of the name for the bus that had developed between them as they had been remodeling it). Gramps strapped himself into the driver's seat and Kidd settled into the swivel-recliner which he positioned so he could see out the front windows and remain close to Gramps.

It was not until that moment that it hit them. Gramps turned and looked back at Kidd. Together they asked, "Where are we going?"

They chuckled about the fact that throughout all of the planning and building they had not decided on a first destination. Kidd had an idea (of course!). He looked up at the picture over the couch.

"Grandma always wanted to take a trip to Montana. How about we head in that direction and just play it by ear along the way?"

"Sounds like a good plan," Gramps agreed.

He turned the key, shifted into drive and pulled out of the barn yard onto the gravel road that would lead them to state highway 64-West.

"There is one more thing," Kidd said.

Gramps could sense a smile in the boy's voice as he continued.

"Are you really sure you know how to drive this thing?"

Another chuckle. It didn't relieve the churning in both of their stomachs. It didn't take away the sadness they felt about leaving their home and friends. A chuckle was always good, however, and they enjoyed it just for what it was.

Kidd had installed sophisticated encryption software on the computer so they could correspond with Russell by email without having to worry about it being intercepted and read by Nevins. A few miles down the road, Gramps suggested, "I suppose you should let Russell know that we are safely on our way."

Kidd nodded and went back into the studio where the computer was. Moments later he returned.

"We made one small miscalculation in our bus design."

"What's that?" Gramps asked.

"We are going to need to find a way to secure the chairs to the floor so they don't move around as the bus turns. We also probably need to add seat belts to all of them."

"You're right. I'm sure we will discover other things like that. Better begin a list of things to modify," Gramps said.

"How would we function without yellow pads?" Kidd joked, as he began still another list.

\* \* \*

The first night saw them settled into a state park in southern Illinois. The gas refrigerator worked just the way refrigerators were supposed to work. The bank of storage batteries held more than enough electricity to meet a full night's requirements. The gas burners on the stove operated perfectly.

They each slept pretty well. The shower with water from the big, black, flat, storage tank on the top of the bus was a bit cool by six a.m. so the plan was changed to shower in

the evening while the water was still warm from the sun's heat. All things considered, the bus design seemed to be working out just fine. (Gramps DID know how to drive it, by the way!)

With breakfast over they went for a hike on the trails in the park. It was a beautiful place with low bluffs that Kidd just had to climb and large rocks on which Gramps just had to sit. Back at Walooma they got out the atlas and marked the westerly route they would follow that day.

Neither spoke of the hearing that would take place the following morning back in Springfield, but it was on both of their minds. Russell said he would email them as soon as he knew anything. In some ways, it seemed like a lose-lose situation. If Nevins was granted custody of Kidd, they would be on the run from him and the law. If Gramps' custody was upheld and continued, they would still have to be on the run from Nevins. He was not the kind to accept defeat. If the courts wouldn't give him custody, he would find some other way to get the boy - kidnapping the most likely probability.

They traveled northwest across Illinois, crossed the Illinois river at Ottawa, the Mississippi River at Moline, and were about a third of the way into Iowa before nightfall. They received permission to stay in a city park and treated themselves to a steak dinner at a nearby restaurant. Not having a car, they were on foot for such outings. That would have to be taken into consideration when they chose their place to land each night.

Gramps was feeling quite comfortable driving Walooma and Kidd found ways to amuse himself with books or at the computer as they traveled. They stayed up a bit later than usual, knowing it would be hard to sleep with the biggest day in their lives just ahead. The hearing was set for nine o'clock. They would be well on their way by then.

Eventually Gramps called lights out and they each climbed into their new beds - Gramps on the bottom and Kidd

on top. The beds were narrower than either was used to but aside from that, they were quite comfortable and the two began feeling at home there in the small alcove at the rear of the bus.

\* \* \*

Kidd had bacon and eggs, toast, coffee and juice ready for breakfast. Gramps had traced the route for the day and went over it with Kidd as they ate. He figured that they would be just west of Des Moines by noon - the time he expected to receive the first piece of news from Russell. Neither of them seemed hungry but both ate knowing they needed a good start for the day regardless.

Kidd felt the need to stay close to Gramps so he took his seat in the recliner as they pulled out onto the street and headed west. He chattered nonstop about this and that. From time to time he would go check the email, "Just in case Russell needed to contact us for some reason."

At ten fifteen the first news came in. Nevins and three attorneys had arrived for the hearing. The Social Worker from the Department of Child Welfare was there with her supervisor. The Judge had read the statement provided by Nevins' lawyers and asked for proof of parentage from him. The attorneys rambled on for half an hour without producing any positive, physical evidence. It was all hearsay and coincidence. The Judge called a recess to consult with the social worker. Russell would get back to them later.

"Well, that sounds reassuring," Gramps said with a sigh as Kidd finished reading the report aloud.

"What does he want from the social worker, do you suppose?" Kidd asked and then answered himself. "They are the ones that have always said you couldn't adopt me. What if they tell the judge they still feel that way so Nevins should get me? This could be pretty bad."

"Just hold on. We don't know what is being said. It

could be just the opposite. Remember what Grandma used to say: 'The only thing worry can do is make you feel bad. It can never solve a thing, so stop it and get on with your life!' We'll just have to wait and see."

At eleven thirty they pulled into a truck stop and made sandwiches for lunch. Kidd checked the email every few minutes. At ten minutes after twelve the next message arrived.

"The Social Worker recommended that Kidd be removed from Gramps' one parent home and placed in foster care with younger parents. The judge asked Nevins to tell why he wanted custody of the boy and what he had to offer him. The judge listened to the man drroll on for forty-five minutes outlining the things he could provide - a large home and a private suite of rooms, clothes, a large allowance, a private tutor, an indoor swimming pool, a fitness room, a car when he turned sixteen, a college education at the best university in the country, a substantial trust fund so he'd never have to work, and on and on and on. Now, the judge has retired to his chambers to consider the material presented. I'll get back to you as soon as we hear his decision."

"Why is it so hard for that social worker to see that the right thing is for me to stay with you?" Kidd asked.

"Right is a strange concept, Kidd. We each define it according to our own feelings about things. Like some of the kids at school think it's right to spend large amounts of money on expensive clothes they really don't need. You think it's right to use that same money to help the needy instead of yourself. Right, you see, is a very personal thing. It's based on the values one holds dear. You value making life better for others. The kids who spend on themselves, value having lots of stuff and making life better for themselves, instead."

"So, I believe I'm right and they believe they're right."

"That's the way it goes," Gramps said. "Why don't we

get a few more miles down the road while we wait for the judge's decision?"

"Sure. I'll keep watch on the email. Want a sandwich?"

"Not really hungry, Son. Go ahead, though."

"Not hungry either. Just need something to do."

Walooma had rolled across another hundred miles of Iowa before Kidd called out that he had the letter from Russell. Gramps pulled into a small gas station and joined Kidd in the studio. Russell summarized the judge's remarks and said he would include the full text of the written decision as an attachment. His letter went on to say:

"First, the judge addressed the social worker saying he was bewildered by how the Child Welfare Department could possibly conclude that Kidd was not already in one of the finest homes he had ever encountered. He dismissed the petition to remove Kidd. More on that later.

Kidd cheered and danced and administered a lung deflating hug to Gramps.

"Then, the judge addressed Nevins saying he had not presented one shred of solid evidence that his son was the father. Further, he went on about how he was appalled that after almost an hour of outlining all the things he could provide for Kidd, that Mr. Nevins had never once referred to such things as family, love, guidance, or companionship. He then denied Nevins' petition. At that point Nevins stormed out of the court room stopping at the door to turn around and point at the judge saying, 'You haven't heard the last of me! I will have that boy!'

"After Nevins and his attorneys left, the judge turned back to the social worker and the representative from the Department of Child Welfare. He said that not only was he going to deny their petition in the matter of removal, but was going to grant L J Wilson the right to adopt Kevin Kidd if that were still his desire. He went on to say that the four-page

letter submitted by Kidd was the most touching, compelling and well formulated plea he had ever read.

“So,” Russell went on, “I just need the two of you to sign those adoption papers you have (in front of a notary) and get them back to me immediately. It’s been a great day for the good guys!!!”

The hug that followed was long and tearful. Eventually with eyes dried, they left the bus to ask directions to a notary’s office.

“My wife’s a notary,” said the young owner of the gas station. “She’ll be back any minute - just gone to make a deposit at the bank.”

Kidd couldn’t contain his joy and while the man filled Walooma’s gas tank and checked under the hood, the boy told him the whole story. The man seemed genuinely pleased about the outcome. His wife returned, the papers were signed and notarized, and an hour later had been mailed special delivery back to Russell. The notary wouldn’t hear to being paid so Kidd gave her one of the little soldiers he had carved. That, she gladly accepted, and planted a big kiss on his forehead.

“See. What did I tell you,” Kidd said to Gramps as they prepared to again head Walooma, West. “We’re going to find nice people wherever we go . . . Pop.”

They traveled the next few miles in silence and were soon moving along a little traveled blacktop road through the flat, green fields of central Iowa. Kidd was the first to speak.

“Well, do you feel more secure about things now?” he asked.

“More secure? I’m not entirely sure what you mean.”

“Well, I’ve always been your unofficial son, you know, and I knew you’d always take care of me. But now that it’s official, I suppose I’ll be responsible for you when you get old and feeble.”

Gramps shook his head and chuckled.  
“You willing to do that for me, are you?”  
Kidd nodded and smiled.  
“I would have regardless, you know.”  
“Yes, Son. I know.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Comfort, Iowa: The calm before the storm

By six-thirty they were ready to find a place for the night. The road sign read: Comfort Iowa, population 862.

“Comfort! That sounds like a pretty nice little town,” Kidd said.

“Let’s look it over, then,” Gramps said with a nod.

It was clean and neat with well-trimmed lawns and mostly older homes. There were flower gardens in the front yards and vegetable gardens in back. It was nestled in front of a low hill which had but one, large, unpainted old house silhouetted against its skyline.

The streets were gravel except in the block-long downtown area which had been black topped some years before. There were kids on bikes, little boys pulling wagons, and older couples out for evening walks. Dogs chased cats and birds chased birds. Squirrels did their high wire act crossing the streets from pole to pole on the electrical cables. It looked to be a fine place.

Gramps pulled to a stop at the town’s only gas station. It sat across from a green, tree-filled park not far from the highway. They were soon in conversation with Jimmy, the attendant, a young man in his early twenties. They arranged to park beside the low, cement block building and run electricity from a nearby outlet.

They cleaned up and set out to find Jake's Cafe - highly recommended by Jimmy. As it turned out, Jake Somebody had built the place in 1942 and it had survived a dozen different owners since then. Mary Lou, a plump, jolly, chatty lady about Gramps' age was the current owner. The grill had already been shut down for the day since she closed at 8:00. They settled for chef salads and pecan pie.

"So," Gramps began as Mary Lou busied herself washing glasses behind the counter, "Tell us about the fair city of Comfort, Iowa."

"A nice, quiet place. Friendly folks and friendly dogs - My daddy always said that friendly dogs were the sure mark of a good town. The folks that aren't retired mostly work down at Council Bluffs. We still got our grade school but the state's after us to consolidate. High school kids are bussed thirty miles north. The bank went under during the depression - before my time, of course. It still stands empty right over there. Free movies on Main Street every Wednesday night, June through the end of July. Lots of fun - like one big picnic - rain or shine. Stores stay open. I sell mostly pop and candy those nights. Them's the highlights, I guess. You guys here for a while or just passing through?"

"Just passing through," Kidd answered, feeling his presence made him a partner in the conversation.

"I'm guessing Grampa and Grandson on a cross county vacation," she said, hoping to get their story.

Kidd looked across the table at Gramps and answered.

"I can see why you'd think that, but actually we're father and son."

Kidd beamed into Gramps' face.

"I should have guessed. You're too comfortable together to be anything else. I intended no offence," she added looking at Gramps.

Gramps smiled back and made the introductions.

"I'm L. J. and this is Kidd."

"With two d's," Kidd added.

"Kidd with two d's. A pretty classy name. First time I've heard it. How old are you, Kidd with two d's?"

Gramps answered, his eyes twinkling.

"As a boy, he is twelve years old – almost thirteen. As a son, he's about eight hours old now."

Mary Lou cocked her head and wrinkled her brow. Kidd eagerly filled in the missing information.

"I'll be thirteen on December 23rd. I've lived with Gramps and Grandma since I was a baby. She passed away earlier this year. Anyway, this afternoon Gramps and I finally signed the adoption papers so now we're official, I guess you could say."

A big tear rolled down Mary Lou's ample cheek.

"Well if that isn't the sweetest thing I've ever heard," she said, wiping her face with her apron. "It calls for a celebration. Tell you what, the pie's on me!"

"Would that be one piece or two?" Kidd joked.

"You can have the whole darn pie, how's that? Heck, the whole meal's on me."

"You are a very kind and generous lady," Gramps said.

"Never had a kid, myself – that's a kid with one D. I get on with them real well. Thought about being a teacher when I was younger. Didn't ever work out. No regrets about what I've done. I love this place and all the people - lots of regulars and lots of travelers. Lived here all my life."

"Then you can tell us about that large, old house up on the hill to the north. I'm a sometimes artist. Looks like an intriguing place to paint."

"The Witcher place. Belonged to Frank and Edna Witcher. He disappeared mysteriously about twenty years ago. Edna lives there alone. Never had kids. She hardly ever leaves the place - maybe once or twice a month to get

groceries and stuff like that. It's fallen into terrible disrepair. We were in school together. She was Edna Benson back then. Her grandfather owned the bank. I used to try and get together with her but she didn't seem to want it. Always had excuses if you know what I mean. I feel really bad for her. The kids aren't very nice to her. They call her Witch Lady - an unfortunate natural connection from her last name, I suppose. Big kids make the little kids scared of her - tales of her baking little boy pie and little girl shortcake. The lore is she killed her husband and buried him in the basement. Just mindless chatter, you understand. It's been going on for years now. It's like part of our culture around here, though. I doubt if she even knows about all that. Like I said, she keeps to herself. Probably a lot more than you wanted to know."

"We're always interested in hearing about intriguing people," Gramps said.

"I think she's the first witch I've ever run across," Kidd joked. "Any other good stuff about this place?"

"That's about it. Generally, pretty quiet."

Kidd finished a second piece of pie, sat back and patted his stomach. "That is the best pecan pie I've ever had. Do you share your recipe?"

"Page 224 of the old Betty Crocker cookbook."

"What time do you open in the morning?" Gramps asked.

"Five. Lots of farmers in these parts. Hearty appetites. Good for the register."

"Well, we'll probably see you then," Kidd said. "And thanks for giving us such a nice Officializing Celebration."

"My pleasure, Kidd with two d's. I can tell that you guys belong together."

They left and headed back to Walooma. It was more dark than light outside and street lights were few and far between. Since nothing was far away from anything else in

Comfort, they were soon back at the gas station, which had closed for the day. There was a note taped to the bus door. It was from Jimmy.

*I left the back door open so you can use the restrooms and have hot water if you need it. There's a shower in the corner by the back door if you don't need fancy. If you get a sweet tooth, there's candy up front - just leave the money on the counter. I'll be back about five a.m. Have a good night.*

*Jimmy*

"The folks are sure friendly and trusting around here," Kidd said as they boarded the bus.

It had become Kidd's habit to touch the name – Walooma Watooka - every time he entered or left it.

"You'll wear her name off before we reach Montana," Gramps joked.

"White paint's easy to come by. It just makes me feel good to do it. You should try it."

"We'll see. Say, would you take this change and get a newspaper out of the machine by the front door of the garage?"

"Sure. Dibbs on the comics."

As he was withdrawing the paper from behind the door of the dispenser, a boy, somewhat taller and quite a bit heavier than Kidd, approached him.

"Hi. How's it going?" Kidd said in greeting.

The other boy ignored the question.

"What you doin' here?"

"Just passing through. My . . . Pop and I have that blue bus over there. My name's Kidd."

He held out his hand to shake. His hand was ignored as the boy walked over to the bus.

"What's those crazy words by the door?"

“Walooma Watooka. It’s a word from a South American Indian tribe. It means . . .”

The boy interrupted.

“Don’t care what it means. It’s dumb. We speak American here in Comfort and I hate Indians.”

Kidd sensed the boy had no intention of being friendly, so he tried to end the conversation.

“Well, nice meeting you. I better get back inside. Pop’s waiting.”

“I don’t like new kids. I’m like the boss of the kids in this town. Cross me and I’ll pulverize you.”

“I have no intention of getting out of line. We’ll be moving on tomorrow morning. Have a good evening.”

Kidd pushed past him and boarded the bus, immediately closing and locking the door.

“Meet one of the kids?” Gramps asked.

He had been watching but had not been able to hear the exchange.

“Not a very friendly sort, for sure. Oh, well. He’s probably the exception. Here’s the paper. Looks like it’s published in Des Moines. Probably day old news by now.”

They split up the paper. Gramps perused the front section, chuckling at Kidd as he cracked up over the comics. Before long they were ready for bed. Kidd had checked the email. Nothing of importance though he did have to wonder what he would have found if he had clicked on some of the XXX rated ads he found there. Gramps had asked him not to so he wouldn’t - but he wondered just the same.

It had been a long and eventful day and they were both tired as they finally got into bed.

“Good night, Kidd. Love you.” Gramps said, just the way he had said those words every night for the past twelve years.

“Good night, ... .” There was a long pause from up

above. Then Kidd's head appeared over the side of his bunk looking down at Gramps.

"Ever since we signed those papers I haven't been sure what I should call you. What do you think?"

"I want you to call me whatever seems comfortable. Gramps has always been fine. I noticed that you tried out 'Pop' a few times this afternoon. That would be fine, too. It's up to you. Maybe you just need to try out a few different things and see what fits."

Gramps reached up and gently ruffled the boy's hair. Kidd smiled down at him.

"That's a good plan. Well, good night and I love you, too, whoever you are!"

He pulled himself back up into his bunk and laughed out loud at his little joke. Presently, they were sound asleep – father and son – each wearing the smile of all smiles.

Neither the sleep nor the smiles would last long. At twelve thirty they were awakened by a siren. They sensed the wind was blowing very hard outside. Walooma began swaying from side to side even though it was parked in close to the wall of the garage.

"Get some pants and shoes on, Son. I think we'd better take shelter inside the garage. I just imagine that's a warning siren about an approaching storm. I think we'll be safer inside than out here in case it develops into something bad."

"Bad like a tornado, you mean?"

"Well, yes, that's one good possibility out here on the Iowa plains."

Five minutes later they were standing at the back door of the garage. Kidd pointed toward the sky over the house on the hill to the north.

"If I recall The Wizard of Oz right, that's a tornado funnel swirling around up there."

"Yes, indeed. Inside quickly! Find the restrooms."

Small, inside areas are safest.”

The roar increased. The windows shook. The siren kept screaming. Gramps had grabbed two blankets as they left the bus. They wrapped themselves for warmth and sat on the floor. Kidd snuggled close against Gramps whose big arm gently enfolded him.

“Well,” Kidd said almost seriously, “If I wet my pants at least I’m in the right room.”

The roar became deafening. Kidd had more to say.

“I’ll tell you one thing for sure. If this thing kills me before our adoption is even one day old I’m really going to be steamed.”

Even given the dire circumstances, Gramps had to chuckle.

As suddenly as the noise had grown, it began dying down.

“I believe the sound is coming from east of us now,” Gramps said, appearing relieved.

Within a few more minutes the siren stopped sounding.

“Either the tornado’s gone or it got the siren tower,” Kidd said still shaking with cold, fear and an uncharacteristic pessimism.

Presently, Gramps stood up and cautiously opened the restroom door. He went out into the hall and then to the back door. Kidd was as close behind as one could be without being in the man’s back pocket. They looked through the window in the door. The trees had stopped swaying. The sound of the wind was gone. No lights could be seen in the nearby houses indicating that the power lines were down.

Gramps opened the door. It was calm outside, though much cooler than before. They stood and looked around. The garage had not been damaged, though limbs were strewn everywhere. They were relieved to see that Walooma looked as good as ever. They boarded her. Books had fallen to the

floor. The picture of Grandma was reclining on the couch. In the kitchenette, the cupboard doors were open and Gramps' bunk, just across a narrow aisle, was littered with canned goods. Other than that, things seemed to be fine.

Kidd switched on the battery operated electrical system. It had not been damaged.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. Gramps answered. It was Jimmy. He had come to make sure they were alright. They invited him in.

"Lots of damage to the school roof," he reported, "But that seems to be about it as far as the buildings are concerned. Lots of trees down and a few vans overturned. I'm surprised you have power - it's off all over town."

Kidd explained the battery system.

"Anybody hurt?" Gramps asked.

"Nobody that I've heard about but then we'll know more come dawn."

"What about Mrs. Witcher's house on the hill?" Kidd Asked. "It looked like the funnel was heading right for it as we entered the garage to take cover."

"I hadn't thought to look. Edna's here but she isn't here - a loaner. I forgot about her. I'll take a run up there in my jeep. You two be okay here?"

"Yes, but isn't there some way we can help? Gramps asked.

"Let's see what morning brings."

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Comfort, Iowa: The Morning After**

They had both slept but it had been that restless sort of sleep from which you wake up feeling tired and listless, with red eyes followed by a morning filled with uncontrollable yawning.

By five fifteen they had made their way to Jakes Cafe - not at all sure it would be open. The row of pickup trucks out front singled it was and they entered. The only light came from the two large front windows. The coffee was brewing atop the flame from a propane hot plate. A second held two frying pans from which the sizzling of frying bacon and over easy eggs could be heard. Clearly, Mary Lou was prepared for such situations.

The promised group of farmers was gathered at the front tables nearest the light from the windows. Kidd and Gramps took seats at the counter.

“Morning, L. J. and Double-D Kidd,” came Mary Lou’s cheery greeting.

“Looks like you’re well prepared for power outages,” Gramps said.

“Happens a lot out here in the flatlands. This one was a doozie, though. Be days before things get back to normal. Gas line broke south of here. You have your choice of bacon

and eggs or eggs and bacon, this morning.”

“I’ll have the bacon and eggs, scrambled if that’s an option,” Kidd said playing along.

“I’d prefer the eggs and bacon I believe, over hard, please,” Gramps added. “What’s the news on the damage?”

“School roof’s gone I hear. Lots of trees down. Tore one side of the roof off the old bank over there. Jimmy says Edna’s roof was also badly damaged. She’s okay though. He couldn’t get her to leave. Took out the barn at the Richards’ farm about three miles east of here. Nobody hurt but they lost everything that was in it - hay, grain, a sow and her litter. We’ll recover. Iowan’s are a hardy bunch.”

Jimmy entered looking around and came directly over to the counter, sliding onto the stool next to Kidd.

“Morning. No power so I can’t pump gas. Wanted to thank you for mentioning Edna’s place last night. Lots of damage - mostly to the north side of her roof. Luckily the rain stopped before the roof went, so if she gets some sheeting on there today, the damage to things inside will be minimal.”

“Kidd and I are carpenters at heart. Let us help.”

“Well, there’s nothing planned to help her, I guess. A work party will be gathering to start on the school at eight this morning. Some of the farmers are coming in with tractors and trucks to clear out the fallen trees and limbs. The power company will get to us eventually. I keep half a dozen propane tanks on hand at the station - mostly for RV’s but they’re already taken this morning. I’ll need to run over to Atlantic in my truck and pick up more after breakfast. You’re welcome to use the jeep while I’m gone if you’re planning to stick around a while.”

“Thanks. Yes, I think we’re planning to stick around a while,” Gramps said looking at Kidd who agreed with a major nod.

“I’ll leave it parked at the station. The key’ll be under

the seat. Wouldn't want no little kid starting it up and getting hurt, you know."

Mary Lou had fixed him a coffee to go. He peeled off a dollar bill from a roll taken from his pocket and put it on the counter. He leaned over and planted a big kiss on her cheek.

"Mary Lou here's my aunt. I don't go around kissing just any beautiful old broad, you understand."

"You drive careful, now, Jimmy. Nobody's going to starve 'til you get back with those tanks."

"Yes, Mamma," he said, underscoring her overprotective nature.

Her eyes followed him as he left. Gramps and Kidd finished their breakfasts.

"Anything we can do around here for you?" Kidd asked.

"Not really, but thanks for asking. Suppose you could look in on Edna?"

"I think she's at the top of our list, right ... Pop?"

"That's the way I read our list."

Gramps placed a ten on the counter and the two of them left.

"Let's walk around the town a bit and see what really happened," Kidd suggested.

"Okay. Tell you what," Gramps said as an afterthought. "Why don't you do the looking and I'll go back and get the jeep. Just keep yourself on a westerly course and I'll meet up with you over there at the edge of town. Then we can go on up to the Witcher place"

"Sure. Later, then."

Kidd walked north to the end of Main Street and then west along Maple. Every yard seemed to have somebody working in it. He helped an older gentleman move a big limb off the sidewalk and climbed a tree to rescue a cat for a grandmotherly looking lady. He spotted a shed that had collapsed and went to investigate.

The sign, which had apparently once hung over its door, was on the ground and read, "Old Well House." Kidd pulled back the door that was lying atop the rubble.

"Help me!" came a faint cry from somewhere underneath.

Kidd looked around to see if anyone else was close enough to offer assistance. There being no one in sight, he began removing boards and two by fours, windows and broken glass. He called out.

"I'm working my way down through the rubble. Where are you? Call back to me."

"I'm in the well. I've been holding onto the edge all night. I can't hold on much longer. Hurry!"

The voice was weak and sounded like that of a youngster, though it might have been a man's - hoarse from calling out all night.

"Hold on. I'm coming as fast as I can."

Kidd was a careful person - methodical in his approach to things. Soon he uncovered a hole which led into what appeared to be a shallow basement. He removed several more boards to let in additional light. The voice called again.

"I can't hold on much longer. Hurry!"

As Kidd slipped down into the darkness he called out.

"Count to one hundred - outloud. I'll be there before you get to ninety."

He had read somewhere it was good to keep victim's minds occupied in situations like that.

It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the darkened conditions. It was a twelve-foot square dug out area about seven feet deep that must have had the shed built around it up at ground level. The basement walls were of ancient looking brick and the floor badly cracked old concrete. Near the center was a round hole about five feet across with a bucket and handle arrangement like he had seen in pictures of

old fashioned wells. He quickly moved to the opening. He saw the fingers still gripping the edge. In the darkness, he could see little else. It was a man or boy - too heavy for him to merely pull to safety. What could he do?

In a flash, he had the solution. He lowered the bucket on the rope so it was in line with the person's feet. He locked the reel in place with a gadget installed there for that purpose.

"I've put the bucket beside your left foot. Carefully feel for it with your leg and step into it. Don't move quickly. Just take it easy. Easy does it. You can then rest your weight in the bucket. I can't see down that far so you'll have to tell me when you've done that."

"I got my foot in," came the response, the voice still panicky and weak.

"Okay. Now turn your head until you see the rope. Easy now. Can you release one hand and grab the rope?"

"I see it. I think I can. Here goes."

"Got it. I'm stretched out. I have to move the other hand too."

"That's fine. Move it now. Just hold on tight to the rope. I'm not sure the bottom of that old bucket will hold all your weight."

"Okay. Boy! That feels better. My fingers are numb. My arms and shoulders feel like they're dead. Now what?"

Kidd really wasn't sure. From the beginning, he realized that additional support for the person was needed immediately but he hadn't thought much beyond that.

"You're safe now. Just rest there a minute. Get the circulation back into your hands. Let your shoulders rest a bit. I'm going to see if I can get this handle to turn and pull you up. If I can just get you up about three feet I think you'll be able to flop over and pull yourself onto the floor up here."

He tried to turn the handle. It wouldn't budge.

"Can you climb up the rope?" Kidd asked.

“Not a chance. My hands are like hamburger.”

“Okay. Plan B, my friend. Are you able to hold on right there for a few more minutes?”

“Ya. I can do that now. For a few minutes.”

“I’ll be back with help just as soon as I can find my way out of this place.”

“There are some stone steps along the south wall. The shed got blown to the east so they are probably a couple of feet away from where the door was.”

“I found them. I think I can push the boards away and get out. Ya. I see daylight. You just hold on now, Okay?”

“Okay.”

Kidd pulled himself out. Once in the light he saw that both arms were bleeding from scrapes he’d received while digging through the rubble. He headed on the trot to the west to locate Gramps. He saw the jeep parked and empty. He stopped and looked around calling, “Gramps! Pop?”

“Over here, son. What’s up?”

They spied each other at the same moment.

“There’s a guy needing help over in that pile of rubble. I’m not strong enough. Hurry.”

Kidd led the way and Gramps followed on the run.

“It’s a bit tricky getting in but there are some steps underneath this hole. I’ll go on in first. I can help you get your bearings.”

The two were soon inside. Together they were able to turn the crank and raise the bucket. They locked it in place and Gramps reached out to pull the rope toward the edge of the well hole. Kidd took the person’s hand and he was soon safely on the floor.

“Boy. I thought I was dead. I mean I really thought I was dead! That’s a fifty foot drop to the water down there. Thank you, whoever you are. I don’t recognize your voices.”

“Let’s get you out of here first before the timbers

collapse and we're all trapped," Gramps suggested.

Kidd led the way then lent a hand down to the hobbling stranger. Gramps pushed from the back. Then the two helped Gramps out.

"You're the kid from the bus."

"You're the kid who offered to pulverize me."

The two stood looking at each other in silence. Gramps spoke.

"Well, it would seem that introductions are in order. I'm L. J. and this is my son, Kidd."

"I'm. I'm. I'm Chris - Chris Blackmore. Hey, I'm sorry about last night. You're bleeding something awful."

"Not the time for apologies," Kidd said. "We need to get you to a doctor for a checkup."

"And you, too, the way those arms look," Chris added. "Gee, I'm really sorry about getting you hurt and all."

"How do we go about getting to a doctor?"

"Doc Evans lives just up the street. He's retired but he still does most of the everyday kind of doctoring here in Comfort. My legs just don't want to walk guys."

"Put your arms over our shoulders," Gramps said. "We'll just take our time. One step and then another. No need to be in a hurry. Tell us if you need to stop."

They headed toward the street.

"How can you two stay so cool about stuff like this? I don't get it."

"Cool!" Gramps said. "Hear that Kidd. Chris says I'm cool."

"Don't let it go to your head, recently retired, grey haired older gentleman."

They chuckled.

"See. That's what I mean. You two are cracking jokes. I don't get it. I'm mad as hell and still twice as scared."

His questions were real and Gramps tried to address

them.

“People are different. We all learn to react in our own ways. Kidd and I have found that getting mad never helps and usually makes things worse so we just don’t let ourselves get mad. You might notice that we all lived through it even though we reacted differently.”

“Well, you two are something else, I’ll tell you that. That’s Doc’s house over there. Blue shutters.”

Kidd was soon knocking at the door. An older woman answered and ushered them into the office to the left of the entry hall.

“Mabel, these are L J and Kidd. They just saved my life. I guess we need Doc to take a look at us.”

The old doctor entered the room and began rolling up his long white sleeves.

“Another fight, Christopher?” he said sternly, looking at the boy over the top of his gold, wire-rimmed glasses.

Chris turned toward Kidd with a sheepish look and a shrug of his shoulders.

“Not this time. I was outside when the tornado struck. I ducked into the old well house to get out of the way. It blew the building to smithereens and knocked me over the edge of the well. I’ve been just hanging there ever since. Kidd, here, found me and then he went to get Mr. L J.”

“Chris, you sit down over there and remove your shoes and socks and shirt. We’ll talk later about what you were doing roaming around outside at that time of night. Kidd, hop up on my table here and let me attend to those arms. Looks like more splinters per square inch than I’ve ever seen. I’m going to swab your arms down with alcohol. It’ll hurt like hell’s fire but it has to be done. Hold on to L J’s hand and scream if you feel like it.”

There was wincing, and head turning, and tears, and knuckle breaking hand holding but no screaming. The doctor

continued to talk in his calm, deliberate voice.

“This is Mabel, my wife,” he said to Kidd. “She’s a nurse. She’ll start pulling out the splinters with tweezers. If it hurts too much tell her to stop. I mean that. I don’t need you keeling over in a dead faint.”

Kidd nodded that he understood. Chris turned away – afraid he’d be sick if he watched. Doc moved to the bigger boy’s side.

“It’s amazing you could hold all your weight for so long, young man. Those must be the strongest fingers in the county. I’ve been after you to shed twenty pounds you remember.”

Chris nodded but remained silent.

Doc drew a pan of hot water, dumped in some kind of powder, and had Chris put his feet into it.

“That will get the old circulation going. Now, lets take a look at the those hands.”

Half an hour later, Doc pronounced them both fit to leave. Chris was to take some pills and rest. Kidd was just to keep his gauze bandaged arms free from dirt and dust.

They stopped on the sidewalk out front. Chris spoke.

“I’d like to shake that hand you tried to give me last night, Kidd, if you’ll take mine.”

“Never refused a shake in my life, Chris. Just go easy.”

The deed was done though both winced in pain.

“I live a block back that way. Only green house in town. Let me know if you need anything.”

Gramps and Kidd gave him a lift home and Gramps explained things to his mother. She thanked them. Chris waved as they drove away.

“So, how are you, really?” Gramps asked.

“I feel great. My arms just tingle from the salve. I think we should go ahead and check out the Witcher house, don’t you?”

"If you're sure you're up to it."

Kidd grinned.

"Have I ever not been up for something?"

Gramps smiled. The road wound back and forth up the hill which was far steeper than it had appeared from a distance. Edna was removing some of the smaller branches from the front steps as they pulled to a stop.

Gramps introduced Kidd and himself. Kidd continued.

"Jimmy said your roof was damaged and we came to help you fix it."

"You're strangers to Comfort, aren't you?"

"Just passing through," Gramps explained.

"And you want to help me fix my roof?"

"That's right. And anything else we may be able to do for you," Kidd answered.

"I can't pay."

"We wouldn't take it if you could," Gramps said. "Can we go around back and take a look at things?"

"I suppose so," she said somewhat reluctantly, clearly baffled by their offer.

"You're not thieves, are you?" she asked.

"No ma'am," Gramps answered, realizing that would have also been the most likely answer if they had been thieves.

A twenty by twenty-foot section of the roof had been blown clean of sheeting and shingles. The beams seemed to be in pretty good shape.

"It'll take a dozen sheets of five-eighths inch plywood for starters and then two rolls of tar paper to get you weather tight. Shingles can come later. Are you insured?"

"Yes. Matt already came by. He says it's covered."

"What about a lumber yard?"

"Across the highway to the south. Can't call them. Lines are down."

“Well, then, it looks like we’ll have to go down there,” Gramps said.

“Even if we get the material, the two of you can’t possibly do the job alone,” she said. “And the boy’s clearly been hurt – his arms.”

Kidd had an idea.

“Drop me off in town when you go to the lumberyard and I’ll see what help I can line up.”

“You won’t find any, young man. I’m the Witch Lady from the haunted house. Nobody’s going to come to help me. I’ve spent the past twenty years running everybody off.”

“Well, let me take a stab at it.”

Kidd was soon on the sidewalk in front the café. The trucks were gone. He went inside and spoke to Mary Lou.

“Where’s everybody gone?”

“Down to repair the school. Looks like a two-day job even if all the able-bodied men in the area work at it.”

“I came to scrounge up some help to work on Mrs. Witcher’s place. With a few good hands, Gramps and I can have it weatherproofed by sunset.”

“Well, I don’t know where you’ll find them. Jimmy will help but he won’t be back ‘til afternoon. Edna’s not liked around here. She’s done folks wrong and I’m afraid they don’t forget.”

“Done folks wrong?”

“Her grandfather set aside money to improve the city park. When he died, Edna had her lawyers tied it up and eventually got it for herself. She scares the kids off when they go up there. I’m afraid she really hasn’t been a very nice person since her husband disappeared.”

“So, it’s tough luck, Witch Lady, is it?”

“I’m afraid so. Doesn’t speak very well for our citizens here, but they do have reason to carry a grudge, you see.”

Kidd sighed.

“Never understood the grudge thing myself. It can’t possibly ever help, you know. Can’t solve anything and really, it keeps things from ever being able to get solved.”

He shook his head and left.

Outside he met Chris.

“You’re supposed to be resting,” Kidd said, surprised to see him.

“I’ve never been very good at following adult’s orders. So what did you find out up at the Haunted House?”

“How did you know we went up there?”

“I watched you. The road is in plain sight, you know.”

Kidd answered his question:

“Lots of roof damage. Gramps and Mrs. Witcher have gone to the lumber yard to order in some sheeting. Looks like it’ll be up to Gramps and me to put it on. Everybody else seems to either hate her or is afraid of her. Just hope the rains hold off a couple more days. If you’ll take directions from another kid, go home and take care of yourself. Doc seemed worried about you.”

Chris shrugged his shoulders and Kidd turned and made his way back to Walooma to check the email. The news there wasn’t good either. It was from Russell.

“Your adoption papers arrived this morning. Congratulations! Nivins’s lawyers requested copies and now have them. I just received a phone call from the lady who notarized them for you in Iowa. Nevins has already located her and called her asking for information on your whereabouts. She says he implied a threat against her if she didn’t assist him. She didn’t tell him anything but is quite worried about you. If I were you, I’d move on immediately and quickly.”

“Well,” Kidd said out loud, as if talking to the bus, “We knew it might be like this, Walooma. I guess the cat and mouse game has officially begun.”

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Comfort, Iowa. The attack of the goblins.**

On the way back from the lumber yard, Gramps stopped to pick up Kidd at Walooma. He took Gramps aside and filled him in on Russell's message. They agreed to stay the rest of the day and do what they could for Mrs. Witcher. They would decide on their next course of action come nightfall.

The lumber truck was not far behind them as they arrived at the top of the hill. In addition to the wood they had also ordered several ladders, tools, nails and an assortment of other things Gramps knew they would need.

The first order of business was to clear the beams of nails and the small, splinters of boards that had resisted the force of the wind. While Kidd worked on that, Gramps checked the beams for strength and stability. After a few repairs he pronounced them ready for the sheeting. Noon came and left. Edna fixed sandwiches and lemonade. Jimmy had not arrived. Far to the west, the sky was darkening. It was now a race against time. The rain would be there before sundown. The task seemed impossible.

They were back on the roof, readying a rope and pulley to lift the big sheets into place when they heard a voice from

down below.

“Hey, Gauze Boy!”

They looked down. It was Chris standing there with his hands on his hips, looking up at them.

“That’s a joke in case you didn’t catch it, Kidd. Could you use some help?”

“We sure can. I’m afraid we need a lot more than you can give us, but sure, thanks.”

“Well, there is one more thing,” Chris called.

“What’s that?”

“I managed to round up a few high school friends who just insisted on coming along.”

From around the corner of the house came a dozen of the strongest looking teenagers you could imagine.

“Meet the football team,” Chris called.

Kidd descended the ladder and began organizing them, explaining their race against time. Some became the cleanup crew. Others manned the rope to hoist the sheets into place. Four said they’d had experience building so they scaled the ladder and were soon in place on the roof beside Gramps.

When Edna appeared with a large tray of lemonade and paper cups, worked stopped and as a group they gasped. There was the Witch Lady who they had all feared since they had been little boys. Kidd hopped up on a stump and addressed them.

“I want you to meet Mrs. Edna Witcher and to tell you that I’ve been here with her for almost five hours now and not once has she tried to make a boy pie out of me.”

Chris chuckled. Soon the others followed suit. Chris took the first lemonade and passed it along to another. A few minutes later work was back to normal, though suspicious glances continued to be cast in her direction. What you believe as a child isn’t easily cast off.

The sheets were hoisted up to the roof. Two of the

boys slid them into place. Gramps and the other two secured each one with nails and soon the sheeting was finished. It was four o'clock. The sky was growing darker by the minute.

Edna arrived again with sandwiches, homemade potato chips and the most delicious dip any of them had ever tasted.

After a short break the tar paper was rolled across the roof and nailed into place. By five-thirty the roof was sealed. At five-thirty-five the rain began falling in sheets. Edna invited everybody inside out of the weather.

The boys were amazed. The house was beautiful. The rooms were large and well lit with high ceilings, pictures on the walls and interesting rugs on the floor. The furniture was old fashioned but massive and comfortable. It was nothing like the Adams Family home the boys had envisioned. They made a fire in the fireplace and Edna brought in an antique corn popper – a small, wire-mesh kettle on the end of a long handle. It was held over the fire and shook to pop the corn.

“Tell us about this wonderful old house,” Kidd asked her.

She began a story that started before the Civil War. It was a fascinating account of all the historic events the house had witnessed from its vantage point up there on the hill during its hundred and fifty years.

By seven the rain had stopped. The roof had not leaked. They clapped and congratulated each other. New friends had been made. There was a knock at the front door. Edna opened it. Jimmy entered. To say he looked surprised would be a gross understatement.

“What are you goblins doing here?” he asked.

“Goblins?” Gramps asked.

Chris explained. “Our school teams are known as the Goblins.”

Edna turned and spoke to the boys as a group.

“Well, from one old Witch Lady to you fine young

Goblins, I want to express my thanks. This has probably been the best day of my life. You're all welcome up here any time."

Her moist eyes twinkled and a faint smile crossed her lips as she tore a sheet of paper from a stationary tablet. She took it to the fireplace and dropped it into the flames.

The others were puzzled.

"That was my recipe for Boy Pie so tell the little ones they don't have to be worried anymore."

The boys roared with laughter and clapped their approval.

Jimmy was bewildered. Kidd explained what had taken place.

One of the older boys – a senior – stood and approached Mrs. Witcher.

"I know we're all real sorry for the way we have treated you in the past. We just didn't know . . . I mean, well, we just weren't being very nice people – jerks I guess. We want to make you a deal."

"A deal?" she asked.

"Ya. We've been talking here and if you'll furnish the chips and dip for us, we'd like to come back and do the shingling and paint the outside of this place for you – make it look just like you described it back when it was built."

"Luckily, I didn't burn those recipes. You are wonderful young men. I don't know what to say."

She began weeping. Teen boys seldom know what to do when a woman cries so they said goodbye and hurried off toward town. On his way out the door, Chris reminded Kidd it was Free Movie night and hoped he'd come. It would begin at dark - about eight thirty.

Soon, the other three left as well. As important as the changes were to the roof of the house that day, even more important were the wonderful changes that had taken place to the home.

\* \* \*

Chips and dip or not, Kidd was starved and nothing in their cabinets looked good.

“I know we’ve been eating out more than our budget will allow, but how about just one more time.”

Gramps agreed but cautioned, “Mary Lou may still be limited to what she can prepare.”

“Can’t be worse than hash or tuna,” Kidd joked holding up two cans.

Gramps couldn’t argue with that. A visit to a good grocery store seemed to be in their immediate future.

Mary Lou was serving chili, omelets and Hungarian Goulash, each with French bread. Not bad considering the circumstances. Gramps opted for the Goulash and Kidd had a Western Omelet. It took several extra pieces of bread but finally the boy pronounced himself full.

The café was filled with folks, presumably awaiting the movie on the street outside. A girl about Kidd’s age had been doing her best to make eye contact. Kidd knew what was going on but was hesitant to follow through. Eventually Gramps spoke.

“So, you going to just ignore that pretty young lady over there or are you going to do something about it?”

“You noticed, too, did you?”

“Well, I just assumed that she wasn’t making eyes at me, though that’s not to say I wouldn’t make somebody a pretty good catch.”

“So, how do I do this?” Kidd asked.

“Take your coke with you and casually walk over and introduce yourself as new to the area.”

“That’s great! How did you . . . later on that.”

Kidd proceeded just as Gramps has suggested. Soon the two were sitting at a table in the back of the café, surprisingly well-lit that night by candles at every table.

Gramps could not hear what was being said but their faces and non-stop conversation suggested things were going well.

“Movie in five minutes,” Mary Lou called at last.

Most everyone got up and made their way out the front door. The kids stocked up on popcorn and candy and the older crowd refilled their pop cups. Kidd and the girl approached Gramps.

“Pop, I’d like you to meet Brenda . . . somebody – I guess last names haven’t been important. She wants to know if I can sit with her at the movie.”

Brenda tried to improve on Kidd’s pitch.

“I have a blanket that’s saving a good spot out on the street. Mom popped corn.”

She held up a very large, butter saturated, brown paper bag.

Kidd was standing just behind her nodding his head up and down to let Gramps know he was in favor of the arrangement.

“Sure. Sounds like fun. Have a great time. Just don’t keep my boy out after midnight. I know you big city girls.”

“P o p!” Kidd said, as if embarrassed by his carrying on.

They left, leaving only Gramps and Mary Lou in the café.

“She’s a nice kid,” Mary Lou offered. “Two big brothers and a little sister. Her dad’s a state cop. Mom runs the beauty shop down at the corner.”

Gramps nodded and sipped the last of his coffee. She brought the pot for a refill.

“I heard what you did today, L J. Pretty nice. You two are the buzz of the town – like heroes who ride in out of the night to save the frontier village.”

“Nothing like that, I’m afraid. We are glad we were able to help, though. I think Edna is ready to renew old acquaintances if any old acquaintances are willing to take the

first step. Wish there was something useful she could do with her life besides just sitting up there on the hill.”

“I’ll put on my thinking hat. Not much available in a wide spot like this.”

There was a sudden burst of laughter from outside. They walked to the open door to investigate. There stood Chris in front of the screen, his head shaved bald as an eagle. He held his hands above his head – Rocky style – and everyone clapped – some whistled. Gramps and Mary Lou had no clue.

Presently the movie started, the crowd quieted and Chris entered the café.

“Corn and a coke, if you got any left,” he said.

Gramps returned to his place at the counter and Chris took a seat next to him.

“So, it seems like we old folks in here are missing something,” Gramps began, reaching over and rubbing the boy’s suddenly shinny head.

“Short version: Most kids in this town hate my guts. When I realized you and Kidd were going up to help the Witch – I mean Mrs. Witcher – I figured that for all you’d done for me I could try to do something right for once, too. So, I talked to Bud, the captain of the football team, and made him a deal; the jocks hate me the worst. If he’d get some guys together to help you two up on the hill, I’d let the team shave my head. They couldn’t resist a deal like that – payback time you know.”

“Pretty nice gesture,” Gramps said, patting him on the back. “You have a good heart, Chris. I hope you’ll find ways to let others keep seeing it.”

“Funniest thing about it all,” Chris went on. “When I showed up for the guys to do my hair, they said they really didn’t want to, considering the way the day had turned out. In fact, they thanked me for what I’d done. I didn’t feel right about it so went home and shaved my head myself. Dumb

maybe but it makes me feel good. Like maybe I have a chance at a new start.”

There was another roar from the gathering in the street – longer and louder than before. Again, they went to the door to investigate. Standing in a row in front of the screen, the projector flashing in their faces, stood the football boys – all of them also shaved bald as cue balls.

“Seems like you’ve started something, my boy. It looks like you’re not the only one wanting a fresh start around here.”

In disbelief, Chris stepped out onto the sidewalk. The newly bald teens turned in his direction and clapped. Everyone else joined in. It had been a touching moment. The movie continued. The bald-ones moved on to sit with their girlfriends. Chris took a seat on the curb at the rear of the crowd feeling he finally belonged. A girl came and sat beside him. Many nice things had happened to the people of Comfort that day. For Kidd, one of the best parts still lay ahead!



## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Comfort, Iowa: Kissing Comfort Goodbye**

It was a little after eleven when Kidd boarded Walooma and locked the door for the night. Gramps was sitting on the couch reading. He put down his book, took off his glasses, and smiled up at the boy. Kidd was beaming.

“A nice evening, I assume,” Gramps said, taking his cue from the boy’s expression.

Kidd sunk into the recliner and breathed heavily, nodding his head somewhat tentatively.

“I kissed her. I guess, really, she kissed me, first. I’m not sure how you tell who kisses who.”

Though not entirely unexpected, neither had it been entirely expected.

“How was it?” Gramps said, fumbling for some response.

“I’m not sure. It was my first time to really kiss with a girl.”

“Oh, you’ve just kissed with boys before?”

“P o p! You know what I mean!”

“Yes. I do. Thanks for taking my teasing so well.”

“It seems to me there are three problem areas with kissing,” Kidd said, somewhat philosophically.

Gramps was tickled at his analytical response to the big

event.

“Three?” Gramps asked, giving him the opportunity to say more if he wanted to and struggling just a bit to keep a straight face.

“Nose, hands and tongue.”

“I see. They pose problems, do they?”

“Ya. I don’t think she’s had much more experience at it than I have. At first our noses crammed into each other. Then I got the idea of tilting my head and that helped. I didn’t know how long I should keep sucking on her lips or how hard. She seemed to want it to go on and on and then I couldn’t find a good place for my hands while I waited for it to end. We were unstable and weaving back and forth so I thought I should hold on to her somehow but I didn’t know where I was allowed to touch her. I ended up with my hands on her shoulders. She seemed to like that. She put her hands on my waist. I figured that was alright.

“We stopped a while so we could breath, I guess. She said I was a good kisser. I told her she was too, though when it comes right down to it I really have no idea whether she is or not. Then she wanted to start again so we did. I did the nose thing right that time and felt well stabilized with our hands back where they had been before.

“But then, I felt her tongue pressing against my lips and I didn’t know what to do. I kind of pressed mine back against hers. I’d never thought about tongues as a part of kissing.

“Anyway, hers backed off and then so did mine. We kissed like that about a dozen times I guess. I didn’t know what to talk about in between. She’d lay her head on my chest and play with the buttons on my shirt. I really liked that. I could smell her hair. After the first kiss, I said something dumb like, ‘thank you.’ From then on I figured just being quiet was probably better than stumbling around like that.

“I hope it’s okay that I kissed her. You said I’d know

when I was ready. It sure seemed like I was ready, although I'm not sure I'd have started it. I guess I'm glad she did. I always figured one would ask the other one first if they wanted to kiss. She didn't ask. I felt lucky my mouth wasn't full of popcorn at the time she snuck up on my lips. If I'd have started it I think I would have asked her if she wanted to."

"So, after replaying it, how do you feel about it?"

"I don't really know. It's not how I thought it would be but I'm not sure how it's different. I thought it was supposed to be wonderful. Give me some excellent feeling like I've never had before. I liked holding her close to me and smelling her hair. That was special. It was like I could be tender with her. Like I could show her she was precious.

"The actual kissing part didn't really thrill me all that much. I guess part of it was nice and part of it wasn't really that great. I did it more because she wanted to. Actually, she didn't give me much of a choice. All of a sudden, her lips were sucking against mine. At the start, I just sucked back out of self-defense."

Gramps couldn't control his chuckle.

"What?" Kidd said, his smile returning full blown.

"Come over here and sit beside me, Son."

He pulled the boy close and kissed the top of his head.

"I love you so much. It's just rather strange for me to begin thinking about you as having reached the girl kissing stage. Believe me, it will be absolutely wonderful one of these days and there will be a very special feeling."

"I probably just need a few more jolts from my hormone factories," Kidd said all quite seriously.

"I imagine that will be occurring quite soon. Just let it happen in its own time. Mother Nature has your clock set. When it's time you'll hear the alarm; believe me you will hear the alarm!"

Kidd cocked his head up toward Gramps.

“You know, all things considered, it’s been a pretty fine day. I think we’ll be leaving Comfort a better place than we found it. Until right now, this very minute, I never really understood what you meant when you said that every time you meet someone during the day you try to leave them in some way better than they were before. That’s a huge responsibility but if it makes you feel this wonderful at the end of the day, I can see why you keep at it year after year.

\* \* \*

Kidd quickly drifted off into a peaceful sleep to reassuring thoughts of how the kissing thing was just going to get better and better. The more he thought about it, it really hadn’t been all that bad for the first time.

Gramps suddenly realized he had a young man in his care. He was pleased but knew things would be changing between them – not for the worse – just for the different. He doubted that after Kidd’s sixty-fifth kiss, they would still be sitting down to discuss how it went. He hoped they could always talk and that when the big questions came his way, he would have the correct answers for his son. Eventually, sleep also came for Gramps.

\* \* \*

With the light of morning came a new set of decisions. Which direction to take? How long to travel before finding another place to stay for a while? Which would be safer: large cities or small towns? Stick to the highways or travel the back roads? Perhaps they needed to be less open about who they were and where they were going.

They both felt the need to say goodbye to Mary Lou so after early morning, hot water showers in the corner of Jimmy’s garage, and a few minutes applying new salve and gauze to Kidd’s arms, they were on their way to the café. She was full of interesting news.

“Edna released the money for the City Park last night.

Got it straight from Mayor Compton a few minutes ago. Maggie Wilson, the grade school principal, says she's going to ask Edna if she wants to become the school's cook – the former one retired at the end of last year. I'm going up to see her later this morning. Jimmy's going to watch things here for me."

Chris came through the door, rubbing his smooth scalp and smiling.

"Still can't get used to this," he said. "Doc says I look like a pudgy, young, Lex Luthar from Superman."

"Your usual?" Mary Lou asked.

"No. Won't be into pie for breakfast anymore. I decided to drop the twenty pounds Doc says I should. Figure I lost at least one just by shaving my head. I really just came in to see if you two were leaving and to thank you for everything."

"Ya. We'll be on our way within the hour," Kidd said. "It's been a really nice time here, strange as that may sound."

"Well, stay just like you are, Kidd."

He turned to Gramps.

"If he doesn't, give me a ring and I'll come and pulverize him for you."

He smiled one last time at Kidd, then turned and left without waiting for a response.

Words weren't enough for Mary Lou. It took two long hugs and a few tears to say her goodbyes.

They met Jimmy on the sidewalk.

"Hope you drop by Comfort again. You'll always be welcome, you know."

"We feel welcome. Thank you," Gramps said.

"I got a few guys lined up to help get those shingles on Edna's roof. The boys are going start painting tomorrow. Tom from the lumber yard offered to supervise them. Most of them had him for their coach in little league. That should go well.

The town just won't seem the same without the witch's haunted house up there on the hill."

Gramps took out his wallet to settle up for the parking and electricity.

"That bill's been paid in full many times over, Sir. Couldn't possibly take your money."

"You are very kind, Jimmy. Thank you. We probably won't be back but we'll certainly never forget you folks."

"By the way," Jimmy added reaching toward his back pocket and removing a folded copy of the morning paper, "Did you see the story?"

"The story?"

Jimmy handed Gramps the paper.

"Keep it. It'll help you remember us. You two take care now and have a great trip." He entered the café.

As they walked back toward the gas station they read the headline. It was the worst of all possible things. "L J Wilson and his son, Kidd, save local boy from tornado disaster."

There was even a picture of the two of them in the jeep.

"Want to bet Nevins finds this?" Kidd said.

"Well, we can't cry over it," Gramps said. "We need to learn what we can from all this and change our approach accordingly. I just hope he doesn't come here and make trouble for these folks."

Their pace quickened and they were soon back at Walooma ready to get underway. Gramps did a walk around to see that the tires were okay and to make sure no fluids were leaking. Kidd unplugged the electric cord from the side of the building and stowed it in the compartment on the back of the bus. Then with the hose in hand, he climbed the ladder on the back of the bus and filled the water tank. They would need to fuel up on down the road since the electricity was still off in Comfort.

“One more thing,” Kidd said, as Gramps was making ready to pull away.

He scribbled something on a sheet of paper, grabbed the cellophane tape and left the bus, taping the note to the door of the garage.

Once back on board, he motioned Gramps to leave.

“I’ll tell you about it when we’re too far away to come back.”

Gramps knew Kidd was up to something that he figured he wouldn’t totally approve of but he trusted his son.

Twenty miles later the truth surfaced.

“So, about that note I left back there. It was only partly a falsehood. I told Jimmy if anybody comes asking questions about us he might consider telling them we are in a yellow bus. Truth is, of course, under our blue paint job, old Walooma is as yellow as they come.”

“I don’t approve but then I suppose I don’t really disapprove either. Sometimes the line between right and wrong is pretty foggy when your survival is at stake. There is some of the rascal in you, you know, Son. Must have got that from Grandma.”

They smiled and headed north, following the back roads that shadowed Interstate Highway 29.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **Green Prairie, Minnesota: An angry little town**

The morning passed quietly. Kidd had spent the time carving figures. From time to time one or the other would comment about something seen through the windows. The further north they went the more rolling the terrain became. Small lakes began to dot the land.

By one thirty Kidd was hungry. He went to the atlas to look for a nearby campground or park.

“I never thought of this as Indian territory,” he said. “But we are about half way between Sioux [Sue] Falls to the north, and Sioux City to the south. And right now, we are just a few miles east of Sioux Center, Iowa. Looks like a little park with a lake about three miles up ahead off to the East. That would be a good spot to stop and make lunch.”

Gramps agreed. They pulled off route 60 onto a gravel road and a few miles later came upon a beautiful wooded area surrounding a huge meadow sloping down to a small lake in the center. Fireplaces, shelters and picnic tables were sprinkled here and there around the lake.

“I could live in a place like this,” Kidd said as they pulled to a stop near a shelter. Not far away, at the edge of the lake, were a school bus and a dozen or so people, apparently having a good time if the laughter coming from that direction

was a true indication.

“Looks like a bunch of kids,” Gramps said. “I’ll fix some hot-dogs and beans on the fireplace here if you want to go down and check it out.”

“Thanks. If it looks like I’m intruding, I’ll just come right back.”

“Give me twenty minutes here,” Gramps said as Kidd checked his watch and took off on a trot.

Gramps smiled seeing the young man darting down the gentle slope, jumping logs and grabbing at branches overhead. He felt so fortunate that Kidd had never had any serious health or physical problems. He remembered the day Kidd took his first steps - not the typical, faltering, two or three steps and then fall on his rear end kind of first steps. He had pulled himself up into a standing position at the couch, let go, turned around and ran across the room into Grandma’s arms. From then on, the boy ran everywhere.

As Kidd approached the group he saw there were six boys about his age and four men. The sign on the little bus read “Cerebral Palsy Association.” Kidd knew that CP, as it was often called, was a disorder in which a person’s coordination was impaired. There had been a girl named Joan back in Springfield who had it.

He stopped beside the bus - just out of view of the others - to watch and determine if he might be unwelcome. The boys were swimming; well, they were playing in the water at least, and having a wonderful time. Two of them needed an adult to hold them. The others romped about on their on, giggling and splashing water in each other faces the way boys always do in such situations.

One came out to dry off and warm up. His legs were thin and his feet pointed in toward each other. He walked awkwardly on his tiptoes. His arms would not extend all the way open but remained bent in toward his stomach. Kidd’s

first inclination was to feel sad for the boy, however, the smile he wore, and the constant, good natured chatter he kept up with those still in water led Kidd to believe that he was a pretty happy person.

He stepped out from the shadow of the bus and approached the boy.

“Hey. Hi. I’m Kidd from the blue bus up there.” He pointed. “Pop and I just stopped to have some lunch. I saw you guys and thought I’d come down and say hello.”

“I’m Larry. Hey, guys. This is Kidd.”

“Hi Kidd,” came a chorus of greetings from the water.

Larry pointed at each of the others. “That’s Jack, Bobby, Carl, Donny, Frankie, Doyle, Willy, and Kyle.”

“I hope there won’t be a test over that,” Kidd joked, “But hi, everybody.”

“So, what you doing out here?” Larry asked as he continued to dry off.

“Just passing through. Pop and I are on like a vacation, I guess you could say. We just saw this place on the map and thought we’d pull in and check it out.”

“Glad you did. We already ate or you’d be welcome here. Probably some chips left in the sack on the table.”

“Thanks, but Pop is fixing hot-dogs.”

He looked out over the kids in the lake and asked, “Is this like a club of some kind?”

“I’ve never thought of it that way but, ya, I guess it is, sort of. We were all born with CP and take physical therapy at the Easter Seal Center. In the summer, we get to come out here two or three times a week. It’s a great bunch and the physical therapists are the nicest guys you’d ever want to meet. Kyle is the head guy, you might say.”

“Where are you from,” Kidd asked.

“Green Prairie, Minnesota, just over the boarder a couple of miles. The other guys are from all around. We’re

Monday, Wednesday, Friday friends you might say. That's when we all go to the center for therapy. The rest of the time we each live in a different town."

"What kind of a place is Green Prairie?" Kidd asked, making conversation and wondering if he should offer to dry Larry's back - he seemed to be really struggling to get the towel arranged so he could do that.

"It's an okay place, I guess. My Grampa says it has fourteen hundred souls - the best thirty of them dogs."

"Your Gramps sounds like fun."

"He is."

The boy's face took on a serious expression.

"He's about my best friend, I guess you'd say."

"No other kids close by?" Kidd asked, taken by surprise at that sort of comment coming from such a pleasant and friendly boy.

"Well, you have to know our town. It's sort of a rich kid, poor kid town and a thirteen-year-old with CP doesn't seem to fit into either group. Everybody's into sports - parents, kids, everybody but me, I guess."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Sounds really unpleasant."

"I get by. I got these guys and Grandpa and a great family. I do pretty well in school. I like to read and surf the net. I watch a lot of baseball on TV."

"I love the net, too. We got wireless in the bus." Kidd said.

"Cool."

"Well, I suppose I better get back up to Pop. I smell hot dogs and my stomach keeps screaming, 'Feed Me!'."

"If you get up to Green Prairie look me up," the boy said. "I'm Larry Brooks the third. I got a gorgeous little sister your age."

"Sounds better and better. Just might do that."

"After you eat come back and swim with us if you want

to. We'll be here all afternoon."

"Thanks. Maybe. We'll see. Nice talking with you Larry Brooks the third."

Kidd waved to the others and made his way back up the rise to Walooma. He filled Gramps in on what he'd learned. He got out the atlas to see where Green Prairie was.

"It's just barely up into Minnesota - just west of Worthington which seems to be the biggest town in the area."

"Sounds like you'd like to stop there."

"I guess. Sort of. Larry seems like a really nice kid, and . . ."

"And?" Gramps repeated, smiling.

"And he has a sister my age. I figure if a brother calls his sister gorgeous she must really be a knock out!"

"Ah ha! The truth comes out. Well, that's about as far as we'd want to go today anyway so I don't see why not."

The hot-dogs and beans were soon gone, along with a bag of chips and left over cheese puffs from the evening before.

"Got ice cream bars in the freezer," Gramps said.'

"Larry asked me to come and swim a while after lunch. Do we have time for that?"

"I don't see why not. Let's see . . . it's about two now. Say you swim 'til three and then we'll be on our way. That okay?"

"Sound great. I'm sure you'd be welcome to come and watch.

"Tough choice. Watch a bunch of loud, obnoxious twelve-year-old boys swim or take a nap. I think I'll opt for a nap. I'm not sure you even have a swimming suit that will fit this summer. Did you pack one?"

"I thought I'd put on some cutoffs."

"That should work fine. Put them on our list. We'll pick up a real pair for you."

“A really tight, sexy pair?”

“That will depend on definitions. There will be time for that discussion later.”

Kidd was soon changed and on his way toward the lake, his large, blue, towel flowing behind him like a cape from his shoulders. Gramps cleaned things up and settled into a folding chair - perfect for the occasion. He was soon asleep.

His next awareness was that of the drip, drip, drip of water from Kidd’s hair onto his face.

“Time to rise and shine,” he heard Kidd saying.

Gramps roused back into consciousness, aided by a giggling Kidd’s attempt to dry off his face for him with the already wet towel.

“So, have a good time?” Gramps asked, getting up, refolding the chair, and slipping it back into the cargo bay.

“Ya. Nice kids. I can’t help but fell sorry for them and yet they seem to have adjusted to their problems so well, I guess I don’t need to. I mean if I couldn’t walk straight or take hold of things with my hands, or wipe off my back after a shower, I think I’d be pretty depressed about it, probably even mad about it, but they just seem so patient and accepting. I really admire them.”

“Sounds like it was a useful time as well as fun.”

“Ya. It was. Gave me lots to think about.”

Kidd draped his wet cutoffs over the shower head, dried off – thankful he could do that himself - and slipped into a pair of jeans. They were soon on the road north toward Minnesota. Kidd was in an especially good mood – singing, whistling, and chatting about everything they saw. That made Gramps happy. His biggest worry about their Grand Adventure was that things might not go well for Kidd.

At last they spotted the sign: Green Prairie, 3 Miles.

“It’s too small to be listed in the index of the atlas. Larry says about 1,400 residents. That’ll probably seem big

compared with Comfort.”

There was a roadside cafe and gas station just off the highway on the road leading into the town - only a block or so from Main Street. Gramps pulled in. They needed to fill up and get directions to a place they could park for a day or so.

An old man - older than gramps - came out to meet them.

“Evenin’ folks,” came his cheery greeting. “Quite a vehicle you got there. About ten miles to the gallon?”

It wasn’t clear whether that had been a question, a statement, or a guess. Gramps attempted a response.

“I haven’t really checked that out but that’s about what the owner’s manual says we can expect. Let’s fill it up and check under the hood. It’s brand new so I’m not sure what to anticipate yet.”

The old man went about placing the hose in the gas line and opening the hood. He brought out a step stool so he could work in there. Grampa made conversation with him as Kidd checked out the station and cafe.

“Any place around here that would let us park for a day or so? Prefer a place where we could plug into 120 volts but we could survive without it.”

“I suppose you could pull in out back. Plenty of room, electricity, even water hook up from a hose if you want. Nothing fancy and it probably smells like stacks of tires and motor oil. You’re welcome though. Glad to have the company. Mostly just locals come by here now. Not much traffic anymore. Super highways, you know. Took everything west of here.”

“It does seem pretty quiet out there” Gramps said looking toward the road. “Sounds like you have just what we need out back, however.”

“How about five bucks a night or twenty-five a week. I s’pose the first night can be free with your fill up. Amy makes

a great breakfast at the café, here. There's a fancier restaurant down on Maple just off Main."

With Walooma re-filled with all its vital fluids, Gramps pulled it around back where Kidd met him. They soon had power and water and were ready to take a walk around town.

"I got her ... er, Larry's address from the phone book in the Cafe. It's on East Maple - 124 Maple. I figure we should go by and make sure he got back okay."

Gramps reached out and ruffled the grinning boy's hair.

"Sounds like the neighborly thing to do, now that we are hooked up to the same city utilities as she ... er ... Larry is, and all."

It proved good for a chuckle.

The village was neat and clean - much like Comfort had been in that respect. They found Main Street which seemed to run the length of town. The homes to the West of Main were generally large with huge lawns. Many had pools or tennis courts in back. The houses to the East of Main were smaller, built closer together and had a more middle class look to them.

"There's West Maple," Kidd said pointing to the street sign. "East must be that way across Main Street."

They crossed at the corner and soon passed the restaurant the old man had mentioned. The first house beyond it was 124. The little bus from the park was just pulling away and Larry was facing the other direction waving to his friends as they drove away. When he turned and saw Kidd his face lit up.

"Well if isn't Kidd the kid from the lake. I really didn't think I'd ever see you again. And this must be . . ." He was looking at Gramps.

"Everybody calls him Gramps. He's my father. Actually, I'm adopted. A few days ago, he chose me to be his son and I chose him to be my father."

“That’s strictly super!” Larry said.

Larry’s back pack was on the sidewalk. Kidd picked it up, as he would have for anybody, and they started up the walk toward the front porch. He placed it on the top step. Larry’s mother and sister appeared at the door. She was gorgeous (the girl not the mother though even she wasn’t really so bad considering she was a mother.) They came down the steps to meet Larry and there were family hugs all around.

“This is my new friend, Kidd, and his dad who, I’m told, everybody calls Gramps.”

Handshakes and small talk followed. It turned out that Larry’s father ran the restaurant next door.

“Can Kidd stay a while?” the mother asked. “I got brownies cooling in the kitchen. Larry is always famished after his therapy.”

Kidd looked up at Gramps.

“I see no reason why not,” Gramps said. “I’ll just look around town a bit more and meet you at the restaurant in about an hour.”

“Hour and a half?” the girl - she had been introduced as Sue - asked.

“Sure. Have fun. Remember your Walooma Watooka.”

He said good bye and left.

After an explanation of Walooma Watooka – the necessity for which had been neatly set up by wise old Gramps’ comment - they played trivial pursuit, downed a pop apiece and generally had a very good evening together.

Right on time, Kidd stepped through the door of the restaurant. Gramps was drinking coffee and making a sketch on a napkin at a booth near the front.

“Hungry?” Gramps asked.

“Not really. The brownies came with unannounced ham salad sandwiches and veggie dip.”

“A good time?”

“Ya. They are a really nice family.”

“And Sue.”

“She is a really nice part of the really nice family. We hit it off right away. She asked if I could come back tomorrow. Larry and his mother made eyes at each other. I told her I really didn’t know what our plans were but I’d let her know either way.”

“I suppose Walooma could use another day’s rest. I’d like to get started on a painting of Edna’s house. I’ve been sketching it. Can’t get that place out of my mind.”

“Can I go over and tell them? Make some plans?”

“Make it quick. It’s been a long day and I’m ready to hit the hay.”

\* \* \*

As they got ready for bed Gramps asked what Kidd thought of the town of Green Prairie so far?

“It’s a strange mixture I suspect. While Larry and I were tossing a ball around, a bunch of guys came walking by on the street. They said, ‘Well, there’s GP’s geeky CP’. I didn’t catch it at first. Larry called a friendly, ‘Hi. How ya doing,’ back at them but they just snorted and walked on. I guess I looked puzzled. Larry explained. ‘GP for Green Prairie and CP for Cerebral Palsy. I guess the geeky part you understood’.

Kidd continued.

“They were real jerks. One of them has a thing for Sue but she says he’s the last person on Earth she’d want to go with. I was amazed at how Larry just took it and smiled. It was a terrible thing for those guys to say to him.”

Gramps nodded his agreement.

“People often make fun of things that make them uncomfortable. They’d rather remain ignorant and put somebody down than take the time to learn about them.”

“How sad. I can’t imagine ever choosing to remain ignorant about something when the answer is always as close as a book or a teacher.”

Again, Gramps nodded his agreement.

“You say you two played catch? I wouldn’t have thought Larry could do that.”

“He has what you might call a unique style but if the ball comes right at him and not above his head, he catches it almost every time. He has to throw underhand and really can’t throw more than ten or twelve feet, but he loves to play. I could tell.”

“Well, after all, having fun should be what a sport is all about,” Gramps said.

“Ya. That’s what I think, too. Interesting. I probably think that because you think that.”

“I’d say you might have started out believing that because I did, but I imagine somewhere along the way you decided about it for yourself. You’ve become pretty independent minded, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

It was good for a chuckle and a round of rib tickling from Gramps as Kidd climbed the ladder and into his bunk. As Gramps turned off the light Kidd announced, “In case you’re wondering I didn’t kiss her - I think I’d like to, though.”

Gramps couldn’t resist.

“Can I safely assume you are not referring to Larry’s mother.”

“P O P!”

“Love you, Son. Goodnight.”

“Love you, Pop. Goodnight.”

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **Green Prairie, Minnesota: Sports aren't for fun!**

It was about nine thirty the following morning. Kidd had been gone several hours and Gramps was well on his way to getting the new painting blocked onto the canvas in the studio. He heard a group of boy's voices approaching the bus and soon Kidd appeared through the door.

"I got some guys outside who'd like to see our place. I told them it was okay but wanted to check with you, first."

"Of course. It's fine. Your friends are always welcome here. How many. It will get crowded in a hurry you know."

"Just three - Larry, Stan and Brandon."

Kidd motioned them in. The step was way too high for Larry but Brandon hoisted him from behind - clearly something he was used to doing.

"Wow!" they said in unison.

Kidd began the guided tour. Larry was interested in the computer. Stan was fascinated by Gramps' painting and Brandon checked out the bunks.

"So, this is where you live. Looks like a great place," Larry said. The others agreed.

"You guys into baseball?" Gramps said, trying to get a conversation started.

"I wish," Brandon said from where he had sprawled out

up on Kidd's bunk. "Marty won't let you try out if you can't promise to be at practice four hours a day all summer long. I gotta do my paper route right in the middle of practice."

"Ya," Stan agreed. "I have to help dad at the grocery during the rush hour from eleven to two. Practice is one to five every day."

Larry continued the conversation.

"Well, you both say you wouldn't play for Marty anyway - the way he takes all the fun out of the game."

"Who's this Marty?" Gramps asked.

"Marty Martin, the Little League Coach," Brandon offered. "It's not really little league. Our team plays six other little towns around here. They have their own set of rules, I guess. Not connected with the real League."

"And there's some problem with Marty?" Gramps asked.

"He sucks all the fun out of the game. Drill, drill, drill. He yells a lot. If you make a mistake you run laps. We wouldn't have a chance to make the team anyway. We're East-siders. It's mostly just West-siders who make it."

"So, do you guys play pickup games? That can be fun, can't it?" Gramps asked.

"Marty won't let us use his precious diamond. It's the only one in town."

"So, isn't there just a plain old field or vacant lot somewhere you could use?"

They all shrugged their shoulders.

"How many kids do you suppose would want to play but don't have the chance?" Kidd asked.

The three of them began counting up on fingers as they reeled off a list of names. They agreed on something around twenty for sure – maybe as many as thirty.

The conversation ended and Kidd and his new friends left. He promised to be back by noon. Gramps continued

painting but he grew more and more troubled about the boys and their baseball problem. He put up his paints and went to speak with the old gentleman who ran the gas station.

“Freddy. I always just been Freddy,” the man said in response to Gramps’ question about what to call him.

Freddy liked to talk and it didn’t take long for him to confirm everything the boys had related.

“What they need is an unused lot or field somewhere close by. Boys can play ball anywhere there’s room,” Gramps said, thinking out loud.

“Like the field across the road there?” Freddy asked.

Gramps looked it over.

“Yes. I’d say just like the one across the road. Know anything about it?”

“It’s mine. Not used for anything. Always thought someday I’d put up a big truck stop over there but then the traffic stopped. You think two old geezers like us could get something going? Nothing would tickle me more than putting that piece of land to some good use. It’s got water. No restrooms but then I guess all a boy needs is a tree.”

He giggled a high-pitched giggle. The two men chatted for some time. Before long, Kidd was back - alone that time. They met with a long hug.

“Gee, I was going to go to the grocery this morning but Freddy and I got to talking and time got away from me. Looks like it’s still hash or tuna onboard.”

“Hash with an egg wouldn’t be too bad if we could maybe get a piece of pie at the cafe for dessert,” Kidd said, seeing just how far he might be able to push things.

“Hash and eggs with pie. Sounds okay to me. I got an idea to hash over with you anyway.”

Kidd groaned and added, “Lucky for you I’m such a good egg.”

Freddy shook his head and smiled as the two climbed

the steps into the bus.

As they made lunch together Gramps talked.

“Remember Scramble Ball we used to play back in the neighborhood when you were six or seven?”

“Scramble! Sure. It was probably the most fun I ever had playing ball. What you got in mind?”

“Well, I was just wondering if we could get something like that started around here for the guys who like to play but aren’t on the team.”

“I think if somebody took the lead there’d be lots of kids who’d like that. The more I hear about this Marty guy the more I don’t like him – well not him, I guess – I don’t know him – but the way he goes about coaching.”

“Freddy - the guy who owns the station, here - offered the use of his field across the road. If the kids would all bring their own equipment - gloves, balls, and bats - I think we could make some good times over there.”

“We’d need bases and helmets.”

“Twenty-pound potato sacks half-filled with sand make great bases,” Gramps said. “The helmets are another matter, though. Those probably aren’t things the kids would have are they?”

“I wonder if the school would have any.” Kidd said. “Larry’s mom is a teacher. I can ask her if she’d make a call about it. And his dad might have potato sacks at the restaurant.”

“Those sound like good places to start.”

“Only one problem,” Kidd said, his eyes sparkling. “I’m afraid this is turning into a two piece of pie undertaking.”

Lunch finished and two pieces of cherry pie under his belt, Kidd trotted off in the direction of town. Gramps wrote a simple explanation of Scramble Ball on the computer and added a few general ground rules. He printed out two dozen copies.

It was soon two o'clock. Kid entered Walooma, panting.

"We got five helmets from the principal at the grade school. Larry's mom is going to pick them up and bring them to Freddy. His dad called the lumber yard and got us fixed up with three small sacks of sand for bases. We need something for home plate. I'll nose around here. Freddy may have something that will work."

Gramps showed him the flyers.

"Great job for an old guy. I might have added a few pictures here and there, but it will do."

It had been said in fun of course.

"Now. How to get the word around town," Gramps said.

"Larry is making some calls. I suggested he call four guys and ask each of them to call four. That should get the word out in a hurry. I took the liberty of telling them there would be a meeting about it all over at Freddy Field at four this afternoon. Hope that was okay."

"Sounds great. Freddy Field, I like it! We'll need to get the diamond laid out and marked in some way." Gramps said.

"Maybe Freddy has some white powdery something or other we could use. I'll go ask."

"And a long tape measure," Gramps called after him.

Ten minutes later Kidd was back dragging a foot square piece of inch thick rubber for home plate.

"He's got a big bag of lime that's left over from his composting days. It'll work fine to lay out the base lines," Kidd said. "He's bringing it and a big funnel around in a wheel barrow."

By four o'clock the diamond was measured and lined out. The bases were in place and dug into the ground a few inches to prevent them from sliding around. Home plate was secured in place with four huge spikes provided by Freddy. The front of the pitcher's mound was marked by a short piece

of two by four dug in flat with the surface.

Soon after that the boys began gathering and by three forty-five Gramps had them sitting in a semicircle on the grass in front of him. Kidd passed out the sheets, several of which were promptly folded into paper air planes and sailed across the group. Gramps caught one as it flew by.

“Looks like we have a pitcher over there in the orange shirt,” he said, letting them all know they were there for fun and yet that he would be in charge.

He began his explanation of Scramble Ball.

“Any number can play and everybody who shows up always plays. A game has six innings and if the teams are tied after six it’s a tie game, no overtimes. The rules are like baseball with just a couple of exceptions. Every inning the players do the scramble. In the beginning, you each put your name on one of these cards. We put them in this shoebox and shake them up. At the start of every inning we choose up sides again by drawing names. There will always be a Red Team and a Blue Team but every inning each team will have a different set of players.”

“How will we know if our team won or lost?” one boy asked.

Kidd answered.

“You won’t. Isn’t that great? When you’re playing Scramble Ball nobody cares who wins. You just play for the fun of it.”

The boys looked at one another clearly puzzled. They had never heard of a sport in which winning wasn’t the most important goal. Gramps saw their frowns.

“I think you’ll find that when you start playing to have fun instead of to win, you’ll begin looking at the game in a wonderful new way,” Gramps assured. “Just give it one game and see what you think. I’ll be the coach for both teams and the umpire today.”

“Now, there is one other rule - I call it the Prime Directive - when you’re here at Freddie Field. Disobeying it will be the only reason you would ever be asked to leave.”

The boys’ ears perked up expecting some complicated demerit system like Marty’s.

“Nobody ever puts anybody else down, and everybody always does what he can to help everyone else enjoy the game. That means if you make an error nobody’s going to get on you about it. It means if someone else makes an error you are never going to get on him about it. If you have any suggestions about helping someone else improve their skills, you will ask them if they want to hear what you have to say before you say anything. Never give advice if it hasn’t been asked for – I’ve found that’s a pretty good guideline for life in general, by the way.

A boy raised his hand and Gramps nodded in his direction.

“You mean this is like a no-complaint zone.”

“Well said. I can see you have the idea.”

Each boy - twelve showed up - put his name on a card and Gramps drew the names, alternating the players to the red and blue teams.

“Red always bats first.” Kidd announced, realizing Gramps had failed to mention it.”

“Okay. Now, the order in which you were selected tells you what position you will play during the first inning. If the pitcher or the catcher want to trade their positions to someone else and someone else wants to trade, that’s allowed but even if you’re the worst pitcher that every lived and you want to pitch it’s your position for the inning so go to it. With only six on a team, choice number one will pitch, two will catch, three will double on first base and right field, four second base and shortstop, five third base and left field, and six a very broad center field.”

“Any questions? ... Hearing none, let’s play ball.”

With that, the first game of Scramble Ball was underway. Kidd kept up a constant chatter. That was partly because Kidd just always kept up a constant chatter and partly to help the other guys hear what kind of things they could be saying to each other in this new, “No Complaint Zone.”

“Nice throw, Bill.”

“You almost outran him, Jason.”

“You’ll catch that fly ball next time, Kyle.”

“Great catch, Carl!”

“My fault, Timmy. I threw it way too high.”

Before the inning was over the others had the idea and Kidd began just listening. He and Gramps exchanged a knowing glance and nod. Things seemed to be working just as they had hoped.

At the start of the second inning, Larry and Sue showed up to watch.

“Hey, we need all the players we can muster,” Kidd said. “Put your names on cards for the second inning draw.”

The other boys weren’t sure what to think. They were all sure that Larry couldn’t play ball. What was Kidd thinking? Bad enough to ask a girl to play. They did, however, keep those negative thoughts to themselves; it was, after all, a no complaint zone.

It turned out that Sue was picked first and Larry third on the blue team. Kidd number two. That put Sue on the mound pitching, Kidd behind the plate catching, and Larry on first base. With her first pitch, Sue put the guy’s minds at ease about whether she belonged on the field with them.

“Strike one,” Gramps called.

“Strike two,” Gramps called.

Then the familiar clunk of bat to ball rang out. It was a grounder to second base. Kidd ran to within ten feet of Larry at first. The second baseman threw to Kidd who relayed it to

Larry. The runner beat them and was safe, but a cheer went up for Larry. From then on, that same adjustment would be made for him wherever he played. The closest fielder would assist with the catch and toss the relay to him.

Later in the inning when Larry came up to bat for the first time, he held the bat the only way he could, straight out to the right. It was doubtful he would be able to swing it in any useful way. The boy who was pitching to him aimed at the bat and hit it. The ball dribbled out toward the mound. Larry ran toward first - well, he couldn't run but hurried off in that direction wearing the biggest smile of his life. He was playing ball. The pitcher wasn't sure what to do. He quickly had the ball in hand wondering if he should throw Larry out or just let him make first.

"Throw the ball," Kidd yelled. It was thrown and Larry was out. It didn't matter. He was playing ball with the guys. No one cared that he was out. It wasn't about giving him special privileges. It was about letting him join in on the fun and do however well he could do.

After all was said and done, Red won 22 to 7. The score was relatively meaningless since each player had been on both teams. They were playing just for the fun of it for the first time in their lives. They had even found themselves cheering for good plays by the other team. There was a sea of smiles, whoops of joy, and rolling on the ground laughter. In the end, they all agreed it had been the best game they'd ever played.

Sue made the announcement.

"Dad says a free pop at the restaurant for everybody who played the first game at Freddy Field."

Another cheer and off they went toward town. Freddy had been taking it all in from across the road. He spoke first as Gramps made his way back toward Walooma, pushing the wheel barrow filled with helmets.

"I can't remember a time around here when so many kids seemed to be having so much fun playing ball. I must admit I couldn't figure out some of the rules."

Gramps took a sheet from his back pocket and handed it to him.

"Probably like nothing you've seen before. Kidd and I invented it when he started school. We both felt there was too much emphasis placed on winning instead of having fun so Scramble Ball just sort of evolved over the summer he was five. When Kidd and I leave, they'll need an adult to supervise. I imagine you're the best choice, Freddy."

"I'm not good with kids like you are. I watched you. They respected you from the first time you opened your mouth."

"I'll bet you'll be surprised at how well you do. Tomorrow you need to come over and begin taking part. Okay?"

"Okay. I'll give it a try."

In the meantime, the kids entered the restaurant and were ushered into the empty banquet room - a place where they could enjoy themselves without making the other patrons uncomfortable with their giggles and loud, happy, voices. Marty happened to be having coffee and saw them enter carrying their bats and gloves. He followed them into the other room.

"What's up, guys?" He asked, clearly puzzled.

"Just finished a big ball game," Larry announced.

"Who won?" was Marty's first question.

"We did," came their answer in chorus.

"You were all on the same team?"

"No. There were two teams," Kidd added, playing with the man's head.

"Then you all couldn't have won."

"Yes, we sure all did win." Sue said, getting into the

spirit of it.

“Ah ha. A tie,” Marty said.

“Nope. 22 to 7!” one of the other boys announced.

The others muffled giggles into their hands, enjoying Marty’s confusion.

Kidd took a folded sheet of rules from his pocket and handed it to the man.

“It’s Scramble Ball. You may have never heard of it. It’s just played for fun. Nobody ever makes a mistake and nobody ever loses.”

“You’ll never become the best players you can be if you take that attitude,” he said.

They all looked at Kidd to make the response. He was ready.

“It depends on how you define best I suppose. We try to become the best sports we can possibly be. We try to be the best in helping others improve any skills they want to improve. We try to be the best at enjoying just being kids playing a game for the fun of it.”

“You just don’t understand. Baseball is serious business and you’re making it into some happy-go-lucky kids’ game.”

The room grew silent as everyone hoped the man had heard how dumb his statement sounded. He hadn’t, but was moved to make one more comment.

“You’ll never make it on my team with an attitude like that.”

The boys cheered and clapped. Several finger-whistled and stomped their feet. Marty clearly didn’t understand so turned and left shaking his head. Kidd was a bit embarrassed about the group’s behavior.

Presently Larry’s dad came into the room.

“Well, who won?” was his first question.

The group burst into laughter.

“I’ll explain later,” Larry said. “Let’s just say we had more fun playing ball today than any of us can ever remember.”

“You played, Son?” he asked, quietly, to Larry.

“First base, third base, center field. It was great.”

His father’s eyes watered and he left the room. Sue brought more pop. They laughed on, remembering the afternoon’s high lights and low lights (which were usually much more fun to recount!).

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **Green Prairie, Minnesota:**

#### **Scramble Ball looks like a success.**

The next afternoon twenty-four kids showed up. Sue bought two of her girlfriends. With that many players it put one extra player between first and second, and two extras in the outfield. They played two games. A number of parents and grandparents drove up and parked so they could check out what was going on without being conspicuous. Soon, they were standing on the sidelines cheering, and laughing and have as good a time as the kids.

At one point the shortstop on the Blue Team spotted his father in the crowd so when a grounder came his way, instead of throwing it to first base, he turned and tossed it to his Dad. Everybody cheered and laughed. (The father threw the runner out as he tried to take second! Pretty impressive for an old guy!)

Gramps had put Freddy in charge and only helped when it seemed necessary. The man was better with kids than he thought he'd be. He just needed a little practice and with practice came self-confidence, of course.

After the games, the kids were talking.

"We need a sign that says, Freddy Field," one said.

"My Grampa can probably make one in his shop,"

another boy offered.

Soon they had a rough picture drawn on the back of a burger sack. It showed an arched sign between two poles which would each stand about eight feet tall. The boy folded the sketch and said he'd see what his grandfather had to say.

"Where did this Freddy Field thing come from?" Freddy asked Gramps, privately, clearly pleased at the name.

"I truthfully don't have a clue. I told Kidd that you said the kids could use your field and by the time he got home several hours later, it had been christened, Freddy Field."

"I think it'll make a better ball field than it would have made a truck stop," Freddy said, thoughtfully. "I really like this idea."

"If interest continues to grow, we may need to lay out another diamond over to the West. That way the teams won't need to be so large," Gramps suggested. "Need to let each kid bat as often as possible. Nothing less fun than standing around waiting your turn to bat."

"Easily done," Freddy said.

By the time most of the players and spectators had left, it was going on six o'clock. A boy Gramps didn't recognize as having been there to play approached him.

"Any chance there could be a morning game? Some of us would like to play but we got Martyball practice all afternoon."

Gramps looked at Freddy.

"What do you say, Mr. Manager?"

"I don't see why not but I'll tell you right now, Marty will be pretty upset about it."

"Well, we'll just have to see about that," the boy answered. "What time in the morning?"

"Nine, okay?" Freddy asked.

"Sounds good. Larry said there were some rules we had to know - something about a no complaint' zone."

“Gramps had churned out another two dozen sheets and handed him several copies. It’s all here. Mostly we just play for fun and to make everybody feel good about themselves regardless of how good or poor a player he or she is.”

“Sounds pretty different. Some of us may have trouble remembering. I hope we get a second chance if we mess up.”

Freddy answered.

“Catch yourself and apologize and we’ll be pleased to have you stay. It’s really all on your shoulders here. No pressure. Just be a good guy and you’ll get on fine.”

The boy left eager to round up his friends.

“Nice job, Freddy! You handled that like a pro.”

“That was the easy part. Marty will throw a flyin’ fit when he gets wind of it.”

\* \* \*

Kidd returned from town at about seven, happy and still excited. He talked all the while Gramps fixed supper. He talked right through supper. He talked while they did the dishes and while they sat in the living room together afterwards. He quite clearly had just had a wonderful day.

“Sue said she might drop by later. I thought we could go for a walk and stuff.”

“Sounds like it should be a good time. I’m sure you will remember just what kind of stuff a gentleman like yourself does while walking alone in the evening with a girl he respects.”

“You are good, Pop!”

“Good how?”

“In that one sentence, you prompted me to remember everything we’ve ever talked about when it comes to boy-girl stuff. I’ll treat her right.”

“I know you will, son. I never doubted it. Probably shouldn’t have even said what I said, but there are some

things a father just can't resist saying, I'm afraid. You'll have to learn how to smile and let me go on about things some times. It makes me feel like I'm doing my fatherly duty – whether I need to or not.”

Kidd grinned. “I've done that all my life, Pop. Why should anything be different now?”

Gramps soon had Kidd on the floor in a friendly headlock and was applying his knuckles to the top of the boy's head. They were both laughing through the make-believe struggle when Sue stuck her head in through the open door. At that point Kidd was on his back, flailing his legs in the air. He looked up at her.

“Pop. There is an upside-down girl at our door. How do you suppose she does that?”

Kidd got to his feet, brushed himself off, and gave Gramps a hand up.

“Come in. Want the guided tour of Walooma?” he asked.

“I'm always up for a guided tour,” she answered.

The two disappeared into the rear of the bus. A few minutes later they were back.

“We thought we'd walk down to the creek and skip a few stones and stuff,” Kidd said grinning toward Gramps.

“When can I expect you back?”

“Say nine-ish?”

“Sounds good. Be sure to see Sue home first.”

“Nine thirty-ish, then.”

“Nine thirty's fine. Have fun. Skip a stone for me.”

“Stones for you. Stuff for me,” he giggled over his shoulder as they left the bus.

“What was that all about?” Sue asked

“Just a father-son thing. Stuff is like our code word for what I should and shouldn't do when I'm alone with a girl. It's sort of new since I've only recently really become interested

enough in girls to consider doing any kind of stuff with them. That should confuse you sufficiently. Where's this creek?"

"The other side of the woods down there. There's a path we can take that follows the fence."

Before long they were emerging from the other side of the woods. Sue had taken his hand in hers almost immediately. Kidd liked that. She was a good conversationalist. When she asked about Kidd's past and he said it wasn't anything he wanted to talk about in detail, it was okay with her. They sat down in the grass at the edge of the creek. Sue slipped out of her sandals and dangled her feet in the water. Kidd lay down on his side, propping his head up with his hand so he could look into her face as they continued to talk.

Sue had soon given him her own life story. Much of it had to do with Larry and how much of their home life revolved around him and his special needs. Kidd could tell she didn't mind. She plainly loved him and wanted the best for her brother. They were very close and Larry, though only fifteen months older, felt quite protective of her. He always had comments about the boys she was interested in and often tried to veto those he disliked. She laughed about that. Kidd could tell she came from a good and caring family.

"So, what kind of stuff are you allowed to do when you're alone with a girl?" she asked, obviously leading up to something.

"It's not so much what I'm allowed to do as it is what Gramps and I decided on together. He knows that once I'm out of his sight he doesn't have any control over me - no parent does. So, instead of making lots of rules that he can't be with me to enforce, he has always spent his time helping me develop a set of values that I believe are good to live by. That way whether he's around or not, I do what's right because it's how I believe I should act. I guess that sounds

more complicated than it is.”

“It sounds great! You and your dad are both very comfortable people to be around.”

She lay back against him, her head resting on his chest. Kidd broke the silence.

“You were asking about stuff?”

His voice cracked.

She turned her face toward his.

“Do you kiss girls?”

Kidd grinned.

“Not all of them.”

She, playfully, slapped at his chest.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ll be honest. I have only ever really kissed one girl. It wasn’t great but it was something better than bad. The more I look back on it the more I think I would like to kiss some more. I’m hoping that with practice it will seem better.”

They kissed several times and then lay beside each other in the grass looking up at the darkening sky. Kidd slipped his arm under her neck. She held his other hand where it lay on his chest.

They watched for the first star to appear. Kidd pointed out several of his favorite constellations as the sky grew darker. They kissed several more times but mostly they talked about the world, themselves, and the future. Kidd explained more about the name on the bus. They discussed Kidd’s developing Walooma Watooka – his life mission. It was a comfortable time for both of them.

“Time to get you home,” Kidd said after one final, very pleasant kiss, and, hand in hand, they began the walk back up the path.

Larry was waiting on the front steps.

“Right on time. I like that in a boyfriend,” he said smiling.

Kidd and Sue broke into laughter.

“What?” Larry asked and then realized how his words must have sounded. He corrected himself.

“I like that in Sue’s boyfriends.”

Sue and Kidd stood quietly, facing each other, still holding hands. The scene became a bit awkward to everyone but Larry. Sue spoke to her brother.

“You have things to do inside, I imagine, Larry.”

“Me. Inside? No. Oh. Oh! Yes. Things. Lots of things.”

He turned to Kidd.

“You have two minutes, pal and stay out of the shadows.”

It was a short, light kiss – all either of them wanted – and yes, Kidd had decided he wanted it. He watched until she was inside, then trotted toward Walooma. He was soon sitting in the recliner with a soda in hand.

“Good time?” Gramps asked from his spot on the couch.

“Yup. A good time. She’s a pretty smart person. Easy to talk with. What is it with girls and great smelling hair? I’ve smelled guy’s hair all my life and it doesn’t smell anything like that.”

“Son, women put more things into and onto their hair than it’s legal for us guys to even think about. Just enjoy it and don’t question it.”

Kidd smiled and then became philosophical.

“Girls are different from guys.”

“Oh, you’ve noticed that, have you?”

“P o p!! I mean when I’m talking with them it seems different from when I’m talking with guys. I’m not sure how but it’s different – it’s nice.”

Gramps sat silent. Kidd’s relationship with the opposite sex was something the boy would have to develop on his own.

Despite Gramps' earlier statement to the contrary, he really seldom offered advice that wasn't asked for but was always there when questions arose.

"Do you want to know if I kissed her?"

"Your time with girls is your private time. I want to know anything you want to share with me, but I'll never pry."

Kidd nodded that he understood.

"I'm tired. A shower and to bed I think."

He got up, kissed Gramps on the forehead and headed for the back without any further comments about kissing Sue. Apparently, his separate life with girls had begun.

Gramps sighed. His little boy was becoming a young man. He hoped he had prepared him properly for his life away from a parent's supervision. He and Grandma had always said the grandest complement they could receive would come when Kidd was properly prepared to face the world all by himself – no longer needing their help but still wanting their friendship. It was a wonderful thought and it was a sad thought. Gramps sighed again and went back to reading his book.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **Green Prairie, Minnesota: Suddenly, a friendly little town.**

Several days passed. Interest in Scramble Ball grew both among the kids and the adults. It kept two diamonds busy most of every day. Freddy had taken charge and found himself loving the kids and loved by the kids. He was already thinking ahead to Scramble football and basketball.

There was more bad news from Russell. Nevins had found a way to track Gramps' ATM card withdrawals and was probably on his way to Green Prairie. Russell had arranged a letter of credit at a bank in Pierre, South Dakota, so they could pick up what money they would need for next several months and stay away from the electronic banking system for a while.

Kidd had become very popular among the towns people – young and old alike. They referred to him as the Kidd Kid. He spent most of his time with Larry and Sue – not usually at the same time! Larry had acquired half a dozen good friends. Gramps had finished his painting of the house on the hill back in Comfort. It had been boxed and mailed to Edna. The time had come to leave Green Prairie.

Kidd hurried into the bus. Gramps was brushing his teeth and admiring his growing grey beard in the mirror. He was running a little behind his usual morning schedule.

“We got a problem, Pop. The kids are quitting Little

League left and right. I don't think it's so much that they don't want to play regular ball as it is they've just had it up to their eyebrows with Marty. What can we do? That wasn't what we intended to have happen."

Gramps finished at the sink and put his arm around Kidd. In his always calm and unhurried voice he said, "Probably time for a reality check."

"A reality check?" Kidd said, a question in his voice.

Gramps avoided the question and continued.

"Let's see, it's nine o'clock now. Can you get all the kids to meet at the Field at ten?"

"I imagine we can get most of them. Lots are already there waiting to play."

"It seems to be a case of cutting off their noses to spite their faces. You get them there and I'll talk with them."

Kidd wasn't entirely sure what that meant but left on the trot and Gramps sat down in the recliner to prepare his talk. By the time Kidd got back, Gramps had spoken with Freddy about the problem and told him what he proposed to do. Freddy agreed and was happy to let Gramps handle it.

By ten o'clock the field was crowded with nearly a hundred, young people and several dozen adults. Freddy got their attention and asked them to gather in close and take seats on the ground. The grownups stood to one side. Gramps began.

"When I was eighteen, I decided I wanted to be a teacher – not just a regular run of the mill teacher, but the very best shop and art teacher there had ever been. In order to accomplish that I selected a great teacher's college and studied hard. I did my required student teaching and then completed one more semester on my own so I could learn as much as possible about children and teaching them. In order to become a great teacher, I needed the help and supervision of the best teachers I could find. I owe much of my success in

the classroom to those fine folks who wouldn't let me just get by, but urged me to do better and better.

"I enjoy painting pictures. I never intended to be great at it – I just paint for my own pleasure. I enjoy playing golf. I never intended to be the best golfer in town – I did that just for pleasure. I enjoyed coaching pee-wee league baseball. I had no intention of being known as the best pee-wee league coach or to have the best teams. I did it because I enjoyed it and wanted to make sure the kids also had a chance to enjoy it.

"When I had the opportunity to become a father, I decided, of course, that I needed to learn how to be the very best father I could be. I read books. I took parenting classes. I spent time watching parents I admired and learned from them.

"What I am saying is this: There are some things in life that we want or need to be the very best at. There are some things we just do for the heck of it – the pure joy of doing it.

"Some of you youngsters here have the potential to become excellent ball players, but that won't happen without the best coaching you can find. Freddy and I can show you how to have just pure old fashioned fun playing ball but neither of us is knowledgeable enough to coach you – to help you learn the important things about the game that will allow you to improve and become as good as you can be if that's your goal.

"There is a man in this town who can help those of you who want to be the best ball players you can become. He truly knows the game. He can see immediately how to help you improve your moves, your skills, your knowledge of the game – those things that can set you apart as a great player. If you want to develop your ball playing talents, that is the man you need at your side. If you just want to have fun, then this is the field you need to come to. Don't throw away your futures in ball just because the help you need comes wrapped in a

gruff, all business, and humorless package.

“You each need to make the decision for yourself. I hope you’ll talk it over with your family and friends. Perhaps you will want to talk with Marty. When he yells at you – and from the little I know about him I assume he will continue to yell at you - just remember all the good things he can do for you. Smile inside and silently say, ‘Thanks coach. I appreciate your concern and help’.”

Gramps was finished and turned to Freddy.

“Well, I’d say that it’s time to play ball!” Freddy said. “Let’s get those teams lined up.”

As the youngsters went about the task of getting organized, Gramps was approached by some of the adults. They thanked him for his words of wisdom.

About that time, Marty drove up. He slammed his car door and walked directly to where Gramps was standing among the other grownups.

“So, you’re the trouble maker I’ve been hearing about,” he began, hands on his hips and standing nose to nose with Gramps.

“I’m sorry you look at it that way, Sir. By the way, I’m L. J. and I assume you must be Marty.”

Marty ignored the comment and the extended hand, and continued.

“What gives you the right to waltz into my town and ruin my baseball program? I got kids with real potential here and they’re ready to give it all up for your childish Bramble Ball or whatever you call it.”

Several adults chuckled nervously. Most felt embarrassed about the whole scene. One mother tried to explain but Marty was dead set on having his say through to the end.

“I don’t like your attitude,” he continued. “And what the hell is this Wallow Wuba mumbo-jumbo your kid is spreading

around town? Are you two from some other planet? Life's not like you make it out to be."

Gramps stood silent, not feeling he had to defend himself, Scramble Ball or Walooma Watooka. Marty had run out of things to say and appeared infuriated that the old man wouldn't fight back. One of the older men in the group put his arm around Marty's waist and walked him some distance away, well out of earshot of the others, explaining what had taken place just before he arrived.

A few minutes later the man returned alone and whispered to Gramps that Marty would like to speak with him in private. The ball game had stopped at the beginning of the commotion and all eyes were fixed on the two men.

"I understand I just made a complete fool of myself," Marty began, quietly, to Gramps, not able to look him in the eye.

"If I had a nickel for every time I'd done the same," Gramps said, trying to ease the situation for Marty.

"There's no excuse but thanks for the out. The thing is I only know how to be one way. The kids obviously love you. They're afraid of me. I don't know how to be like you are. I see something wrong and I point it out. I don't allow my players to repeat the same mistakes over and over."

"If, somewhere in that statement, you are asking for my advice, I'd just make one suggestion" Gramps said. "In addition to all that, also let your players know when they've done something right. That may not improve their skill as players but it will do wonders to improve their self-esteem. Ball playing for most of them will be over in a couple of years. Self-esteem, however, will help guide them throughout their lives. I'd suggest one more thing if I may. Stay and watch how Freddy and the boys interact with each other out here. You just might get some pretty good pointers."

"Like Paul just said to me, you are a wise old codger.

Again, I'm sorry and thank you."

Gramps smiled, pleased and amused that he had finally graduated from old geezer to the status of wise old codger. He put his arm around Marty's shoulders and guided him back toward the diamond. The players stood as if frozen to the field awaiting some angry, earth shaking, outburst. Marty sensed the tension so he spoke.

"A little hustle out there! Play ball!" and then as an afterthought he took Gramps' arm and raised it into the air saying, "Have fun! And Walla-my-tutu or whatever the heck it is."

It was probably the first time anyone had dared laugh out loud at anything Marty had ever said, but my how they laughed and cheered, whistled and hooted. Marty smiled and shook Gramps' hand. Allowing himself to appear human might not be so bad after all, he thought.

\* \* \*

That evening Kidd met Sue at the creek to say good-bye. He had known that good-byes would play a big part in his life as he and Gramps pursued their Grand Adventure together. He had not realized just how difficult some of them would be.

"I've never met folks like you and your dad," she said as they again sat in the grass beside the water. "In less than a week you two have changed our angry little town into a wonderful, caring place to live in. You've given all of us – especially me – a lot to think about. I'm beginning to see what my Walooma Watooka will be and having that in mind every day really helps me keep on track. It's like you said about the values you and Gramps have developed for you. My Walooma is always with me. I can always refer to it when I need to decide about whether something is right or wrong or whether it will probably be helpful or hurtful. I know our whole town wants to thank you. It's just that nobody knows how."

“When you live by your Walooma Watooka,” Kidd began, “You never expect thanks. You do the right things just because you believe they are right and helpful - important. Seeing this town unwind itself is a pretty wonderful thank you, you know?”

“Well, I’d like to thank you in my own special way,” she said, drawing her face close to Kidd’s.

‘There was no doubt about it,’ Kidd thought to himself as they kissed the longest kiss of his kissing career, ‘I am definitely going to like this boy-girl stuff - a lot!!!!’

He walked her home and went inside for cookies and lemonade. He told her parents good-bye and thanked them for their help and hospitality. He spent a few minutes in private with Mr. Brooks. Eventually, Larry walked him out onto the porch.

“Boy, I hate to see you go!” Larry said. “You’ve changed my life, you know.”

“Well, that’s worked two ways, my friend. Thank you. You have changed mine as well.”

Larry was puzzled but his question was muffled as Kidd drew him close and administered a Kidd-sized bear hug. “I love you, man. Find your Walooma and let it always be your guide.”

Kidd tuned and left, walking for a change, as if to make his stay last just a little longer. The next morning would see them on the road again heading for Pierre. It was the capital of South Dakota as Kidd recalled. He wondered what new adventure awaited him. Although he was sure he would find nice people there and make new friends, there was some excitement in wondering just how it would all play out.

He was concerned about Nevins, but felt safe with Gramps – after all Gramps had just recently been dubbed a wise old codger.

**CHAPTER TWELVE**  
**Lakeville, South Dakota:**  
**A sad looking place**

During most of the day, Walooma had been rolling west along highway 14, headed toward Pierre. Although Pierre was a good deal smaller than most state capitols, it was still larger than felt comfortable to Kidd and Gramps. So, as they drew near they began looking for another inviting small town.

“Lakeville,” Kidd said as if announcing an important guest entering a Grand Ball.

“That’s a pleasant-sounding place. It’s north about ten miles at the next intersection. The map shows a small lake, probably a wide spot in the Medicine River. There’s not a park marked there but where there’s a lake there must be a park.”

Gramps nodded.

“Let’s go have a look. Just because we find it doesn’t mean we have to stay there, you know. How large a metropolis is Lakeville?”

“Under fifteen hundred. Not listed in the atlas index and it lists all the towns bigger than that.”

At the next crossroad, they turned right and soon discovered the road they were traveling doubled as Lakeville’s Main Street before winding on north to higher ground. The

town was laid out much like Comfort had been – one, short Main Street with businesses on both sides, and houses spreading out east and west from there. The Lake was just as Kidd had figured, a natural basin about three miles long and a mile wide with the small river running into the north end and out the south. The lake formed a bend that cradled Lakeville on the North, West and South. The surrounding area was fairly flat with gently rolling terrain evident in the distance.

The roads in the area were straight and well maintained though many were gravel or white chat. In Lakeland, the streets were paved. Unlike Comfort, it did not present a picture of personal pride. Many homes were in need of paint and the lawns, such as they were, were poorly kept. No gardens could be seen from the streets and flowers were few and far between. On the eastern edge of the town was a large city park that had fallen into a state of severe disrepair. The roofs of the shelters had fallen in, the stone fireplaces broken down, the empty swimming pool was filled with debris, and a sign on the padlocked front gate said, No Admittance: Trespassers will be prosecuted. A high, old, rusty, iron fence surrounded the area.

“Not Eden, by the looks of it,” Gramps said.

“I’d agree that there must be some basic problems here,” Kidd said, sounding like some soon to retire college professor.

“So, do we look for a spot to park or just move on?” Gramps asked as Walooma idled patiently at the park gate waiting for direction.

“Well, a big part of our Walooma Watooka is about making life better for the people we come in contact with,” Kidd said, clearly giving the question serious consideration. “We’ve been pretty good at it up to now on this adventure of ours. I vote we stick around at least long enough to see what gives.”

Gramps nodded in agreement, quietly proud of his son's way of thinking.

"Clearly, we won't be allowed to stay in the park," Gramps said. "Let's head back to that gas station we passed. They seem to have become our best sources of information."

It was a small, white, 1940's looking station with a sharply peaked roof, one pump out front, a one room office area filled with dusty Valvolene cans, faded road maps, and a glass-globe gum-ball machine. On the long overlooked, dirty, window glass in the door was a time worn, hand written sign which read, No Checks or Credit Cards.

As Walooma pulled to a stop at the gas pump, a man – well, maybe a woman – at any rate, a person came out to meet them. He, she or it wore a one piece, grease stained, brown mechanic's uniform.

"Fill up?" came the question as the two stepped down from the bus.

"Yes, please," Gramps said, pleasantly. From the quality of the voice it appeared to be a woman in her late sixties. Her face was leathery and deeply tanned. Her grey hair was cut short and mostly covered by a soiled baseball cap. She wore heavy, work shoes with metal toes.

"I don't take checks or credit cards. Got cash?"

"Yes, ma'am. We have cash."

Plainly she was not used to being called ma'am and she warmed up at the term, ready to continue the conversation.

"An interesting vehicle you got here," she said giving it the once over and eyeing Gramps out of the corner of her eye.

The gas cap was within a few feet of the Walooma Watooka sign by the door. She mouthed it, silently, to herself.

"You two Indians?"

Kidd answered.

"I often wished I was but no, just plain old, mid-western

Americans.”

She didn't pursue the name.

“Remolded busses are usually old Junkers. This one's new.”

It wasn't a question. As they would come to learn, Ernie - probably short for Ernestine though they would never find that out - wasn't one to pry. When she wanted information she'd just open up the topic and then listen, in the hope the answer to her real question would surface. Gramps assumed that because of that she probably got along very well with teenagers.

“Brand spankin' new you might say,” Gramps began. “This is my son, Kidd. I'm L. J. but everybody calls me Gramps. We're on a cross country expedition, you might say. Ready to invest as many years as it takes to see everything we want to see. Figured we'd better start out with good equipment.”

“Lived here all my live, myself. Been down to Sioux City once and into Pierre a few times. Too many people in cities. You just passing through then, I suppose. Nothing here in Lakeville to catch the eye of a couple of sightseers.”

“Actually, we saw the lake on the map and figured we'd stick around a day or so to check it out.”

“Only one marina. Take Justice Street west.” She pointed. “You'll run right into it. You can rent boats and tackle there. Billie runs it. Tell her I sent you and she'll treat you right. Don't pay more than ten bucks for an out of state fishin' license. I got 'em for that. Not many strangers come through here.”

“Thanks for the information,” Kidd said. “By the way, what's the story on the city park?”

Ernie sighed as she coaxed the last of the gas into the tank and screwed the cap back into place.

“Vandals. This town should be named Vandalia.”

She chuckled at her little joke.

“We’re what you might call a rough community. Over the past thirty years the classy folks all moved to the bigger places. Riff-raff moved in. They let their kids run wild. It’s them that’s ruined the park. No respect for nice things.”

“We didn’t see a school.”

“Bussed out of town. Been that way for years. When we still had our school, we had some town pride, I think. Once it was closed we lost a lot. It was like the heart or soul of the town was just ripped away from us. The kids had the building in shambles within a year. It’s that pile of bricks you may have seen down on South Street.”

“Little League?” Kidd asked.

Ernie chuckled.

“The kids in this place think bats are for cracking skulls and bashing mail boxes. Not really anything for the kids to do here. Probably can’t blame them for trying to find stuff to stay entertained. The grownups have just given up on them.”

“Is there a Mayor?” Gramps asked.

“Jessie Fields. Been the Mayor since I was a kid. Never been opposed. Last election he got all twenty-seven votes that was cast.”

“And how big is Lakeville?” Kidd asked.

“About six hundred. Used to be twice that. People in and out all the time. Hard to keep a count. Few around here care enough to vote. Most everybody claims to be on their way to somewhere else.”

She clunked the gas nozzle into place at the pump and snapped a padlock to secure it there.

“Looks like eighty-nine sixty-six,” she said, rubbing the grime from the pump window with the elbow of her outfit. “Need anything under the hood?”

“No. I think that’s all fine,” Gramps said, counting out five twenties. “Do you know of any place we could park for a

day or two? Someplace where we could hook up to 120 volts and maybe water from a hose.”

“Billie has a spot or two for RV’s out at the marina. I imagine they’re vacant. I’ll give her a call if you want me to.”

“Thanks, but we’ll want to look the marina over anyway. We appreciate all your kind help.”

As Kidd boarded the bus, Ernie took Gramps aside. “Don’t let the boy out on his own. It’s a devilish bunch of kids we got here.”

Gramps nodded his appreciation for the tip and climbed up the steps.

Her warning weighed heavily on Gramps’ mind as they made their way to the marina, which, as it turned out, was not really outside of town at all.

“Looks like nothing’s more than a five-minute trot away from anything else in this place,” Kidd said, as a comment on the size of the community.

Billie had clearly heard from Ernie and was in the process of getting a place ready for Walooma when they pulled up. She motioned them to back in and was searching for their electrical connection as they came around the side of the bus to meet her.

“I’m . . .”

“Gramps and Kidd,” she interrupted, pleasantly. Ernie can’t keep anything to herself. If she wasn’t my sister I’d probably have buried her long ago. I’m Billie – the levelheaded one in the family. Ten dollars a day in advance or sixty for the week. You can pay by the day and still get the break if you stay long enough.”

She held out her hand, assuming they had struck a deal. Gramps peeled off a ten. She continued; “I’m supposed to see your driver’s license but you can plainly drive so I see no need to look at it.”

The three of them soon had electricity and water

hooked up. Billie was intrigued by all the gadgetry she saw and asked about the solar-electric system, the reclining windmill, and the water tank.

“You’re welcome to look over the inside,” Kidd invited.

“Later maybe. Got a boat coming in and I need to go tend to it. Boats rent by the hour or day, by the way – most of them are even seaworthy.”

She chuckled herself onto the bare, plank, dock and around the corner of the low, white, building.

Kidd tried the electricity and water to make sure they worked, then took a seat at the computer. Gramps entered the room and Kidd looked up at him.

“I suppose now’s as good a time as any,” the boy said.

“For what? And I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“Well, I sort of took something into my own hands back in Green Prairie.”

“Oh! Sort of!”

Gramps took a seat beside him at the long desk.

“Since Nevins is tracking our ATM withdrawals I figured that if we made a withdrawal in, say Kansas City, it might throw him off our trail.”

“Kansas City?” Gramps asked, clearly puzzled.

“Sue and Larry’s dad was flying down there for a meeting of restaurant owners – an annual thing, I guess. Well, I took him aside and asked him to buy Larry a Chief’s football team sweat shirt and Sue something he thought she’d like – for their birthdays which are both coming up soon.”

“You are confusing me.”

“I gave him my ATM card – telling him it was an extra one – which it really is now that we can’t use them anymore – to reimburse him for the money he spent on the gifts. He agreed to destroy the card after he used it. The man can be trusted, I’m sure.”

“I wish you would have consulted me first, but you know

that of course or we wouldn't be having this conversation, now. I have to admit it was a brilliant idea. Just, please, run big things like that by me first from now on, okay? It's my skin as well as yours that's at stake here."

Kidd agreed, both relieved and a bit bothered by having done it on his own. He had been assuming that the Nevins thing was just about him. Gramps had helped him realize they were both involved. It called for a hug (but then between the two of them most everything called for a hug!).

There was a knock on the side of the bus by the door. It was Billie and a boy about Kidd's age.

"This is Barry, my nephew. He lives over by the park. His ma runs the grocery store. I thought Kidd might like to get to know somebody around here."

Kidd jumped to the ground and offered his hand for a shake. Barry seemed unpracticed at shaking hands but managed to get through it. He had a nice smile, curly black hair, and was wearing only cut-offs. They were damp which suggested he had been there to swim.

"Barry helps around here a few hours a day," Billie added as if to explain.

"It's part of my probation. I gotta pay back for a bay window I busted at old man Fields' house."

"That's Mayor Fields house," Billie said, correcting him.

She rolled her eyes at Gramps who was still standing in the doorway of the bus.

Kidd didn't pursue the probation but thought the boy was being pretty open by mentioning it.

"Looks like you've been swimming," he said to Barry.

"It's a good spot. I like to dive for stuff."

"Sounds like fun." Kidd looked up at Gramps, who looked at Billie.

"Sure. It's safe off the small dock," she said. "Deck chairs there if you want to watch."

“Thank you,” Gramps said. “You guys go have fun.”

Barry accompanied Kidd into the bus where Kidd slipped into some cutoffs of his own. They were soon whooping their way along the wooden dock toward the water.

“Barry’s basically a good kid. Just not many other good kids for him to hang around with here in Lakeville. His dad deserted them when he was a baby. My sis has done a pretty good job with him considering how busy she is with the store.”

“Ernie indicated the kids are a rough lot,” Gramps said, walking along side Billie toward the boat house.

“She’s right. And, I’m afraid they don’t take well to strangers. New kids have it really bad around here the first couple months or so.”

It wasn’t the environment Gramps wanted for Kidd, and Walooma Watooka or not, he decided they would stay the night and then move on. He sat and took in the beautiful view across the lake and enjoyed listening to the boys laugh and carry on. They seemed to be getting along quite well. Gramps guessed Barry was perhaps a year younger than Kidd though also tall for his age.

The late day sun was still warm and the breeze gentle. Before long Gramps had drifted off to sleep.

“Sir! Gramps!” he heard as he roused back to consciousness. It was Billie shaking his shoulder. “We’ve got a problem. You were asleep and Barry asked if Kidd could walk him back to Main Street and I said yes and some of the hooligans roughed him up, I’m afraid. I just feel terrible. He’s inside the boathouse.”

Billie led the way.

“It’s going to be a beautiful shiner,” Kidd said looking at his face in a hand-held mirror as he lay on a counter.

“What in the world!” Gramps said noticing the bruises and cuts on Kidd’s face, chest and arms.

Kidd, who was plainly in pain, tried to grin.

“Well, it’s the first time I’ve ever been beat up, so I guess that’s sort of like the good news – I have that behind me now. The bad news is I hurt like a certain four letter word beginning with h-e-l-l.”

“Doc Thomas is out on the lake in his boat. He’s from Pierre. I radioed him and he’s coming in. That’s probably him we hear now. We don’t have a local doctor.”

A distinguished looking middle aged man wearing white shorts, T-shirt, and deck shoes soon entered the room.

Billie explained the situation. He walked over to where Kidd was still laying on the counter, a child’s inner tube for a pillow.

“Well, young man – that shiner will be the talk of the town. Girls love guys with black eyes, you know.”

He had a very easy going manner and Kidd liked him immediately.

“I must admit cuts and bruises are a bit out of my specialty. I’m a gynecologist – I deliver babies.”

Kidd managed a smile.

“Well, you could say my situation is pregnant with pain.”

The doctor turned to Gramps.

“I like this kid. Can I have him?”

“Afraid not. He and I have a lifetime arrangement.”

Doctor Thomas opened the first aid kit that Billie had brought over and began swabbing the abrasions. That done, he asked Kidd to sit up. With help from the doctor and Gramps he soon had his legs dangling over the edge of the counter. The doctor examined him for broken ribs.

“It appears you lucked out in the rib department. I don’t believe any are damaged. We’d need an X-ray to be sure but I suggest you wait a few days and see if the pain persists. If it does, then I’d seek out an emergency room.”

“Any other areas of pain?” he asked.

“I think my man parts were permanently damaged but I

suppose that's really out of your area of expertise," Kidd joked.

"Well, I know enough not to suggest X-rays for that part of your anatomy, but I imagine they survived regardless of the pain. Nature made them pretty tough. Otherwise the human species would have died off centuries ago."

He got some pain medicine from the bag in his car and wrote a prescription in case Kidd needed more. Gramps walked him back out to his boat, thanking him and reaching for his wallet.

"I never take payment until I have made the delivery. I doubt if that will happen in this case. Just glad I could help."

Kidd walked gingerly back to the bus and with help from Gramps, was soon resting on his back on the bottom bunk. All in all the first five hours in Lakeville had not been entirely enjoyable. Gramps was ready to leave. Kidd had other plans.

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN**  
**Lakeville, South Dakota:**  
**Determined to destroy itself.**

By morning Kidd reported that he was feeling much better – if being able to sit up without assistance qualified as ‘better’. It was Gramps – who had been stowed in the cramped upper bunk all night – who had difficulty getting his old bones going.

“It’s the shiner to beat all shiners, alright,” Gramps said, examining the eye up close. “How does the rest of you feel?”

“Sore. Bruised. Stiff. I can take deep breaths without feeling any pain in my chest, though. That’s bound to be a good sign.”

“I didn’t know you had a pain when you breathed,” Gramps said clearly concerned.

“I didn’t and I don’t today either. Isn’t that great?” he chuckled through his wonderful grin.

Under other circumstances it would have been worth a head lock and knuckle rub but not that day. They smiled and that was that.

“Let’s make breakfast and then get out of this place. What do you say?” Gramps asked.

“Leave? Why?”

“Let me see. Do you really want me to count the reasons?”

“Okay. So, I got off to kind of a bad start.”

“Kind of a bad start? A band of young thugs blackens your eye, almost breaks your ribs, bruises you from head to toe, and may have neutered you for life. That’s kind of a bad start?”

“It’s this sick town they’re stuck in. There’s nothing constructive for the kids to do. There’s nothing for them take any pride in. There’s no reason for them to want to think of themselves as good guys. This place really needs our help, Pop ... Gramps ... Dad ... Father ... best friend in the whole wide world.”

Gramps sighed. He had learned long ago that once Kidd was this far down a path, he wasn’t going to be easily persuaded to change course. His tilted head and puppy dog eyes clinched it.

“I’ll listen to your ideas, but that doesn’t mean I’ve decided that we’ll stick around,” Gramps said, getting out the skillet and cracking four large eggs into it.

“Well, I don’t have all the details worked out. You’re usually my detail guy. But, here’s the general plan. We talk the mayor into letting us fix up the city park using the kids to do all the work. There wouldn’t be much money involved. It’s mostly just cleaning and rebuilding things with the material already at hand.”

“And why will the kids turn out to help, when they are the ones who ruined everything in the first place? And how would putting up a few shelters and fireplaces make the town any better for them? The kids who worked you over just don’t seem like the picnic and barbeque crowd to me.”

“All that’s true. So, we just have to find ways to make it into a place for the kids.”

“For the kids?” Gramps repeated, really just thinking out loud. “The pool really isn’t needed with the lake right here and having sat idle for so long it’s doubtful we could get it to hold

water anyway.”

“But, with a ramp built up from the deep end it could become a killer skateboarding arena,” Kidd suggested. “The old campground could be cleared back just a little more and a ball diamond could be laid out.”

“Sounds like lots of things for the boys. What about the girls?”

“It wasn’t the girls who beat me to a pulp, Pop!”

“I see. You think they’ve worked out ways to survive this place.”

“Well, I can’t be sure until I meet some of them. Barry has an older sister and a passel of girl cousins. I was thinking of calling the extension office, or whatever it’s called around here, and looking into starting a 4-H club – that would be for both boys and girls.”

“Did you sleep at all last night or just lay awake thinking.”

“Thinking and groaning, mostly, I guess.”

“I suppose filing a police report about the trouble would be out of the question, then,” Gramps said with that typical twinkle in his eyes.

“Ya, like getting them all put on probation is going to change how they think about things. It will only make them angrier, which will lead to more vandalism and, even worse, to more, stranger bashing. You’ve often said yourself that punishment never really changed anybody’s beliefs or even their behavior once they’re out of view of the one having the power to punish them.”

“So, now you’re going to throw the old codger’s wisdom back his face, are you? Okay, what you say makes sense, of course. After breakfast, we’ll go have a talk with the Mayor.”

Through a progression of groans, ooo’s and ahh’s, Kidd managed to shower and dress. The omelets were acceptable, though not as good as Kidd could have done. The toast,

sausage and milk made up for it.

Mayor Fields looked ancient in Kidd's eyes. In fact, he looked ancient even in Gramps' eyes. His wife invited them into the living room. Gramps began the explanation – adults usually seemed more willing to listen to another adult than to a kid in such matters. Once it became clear that he was warming up to the idea, Kidd entered into the discussion.

"You know," the Mayor added, "There are swings and teeter-totters and slides behind the old school building we could take over to the park for the younger children. My son, John, runs a cement products business not far from here. He's always saying he has sheets of plywood left over from the forms they make for basements and the like. They could be cleaned up and used for new roofs on the shelters and restrooms."

"And for the skateboard ramps," Kidd added.

"Well need mortar to re-lay the stone fireplaces" Gramps said, "And tools."

Before noon, the four of them – the Mayor's wife, Audrey, was also eager to help – had outlined a plan.

"The basic problem remains," the Mayor said. "Regardless of this wonderful proposal, these kids aren't going to volunteer. Maybe we should just round up some adults and do it ourselves."

Kidd stood up as he often did when things got serious.

"I disagree, Sir. These kids aren't going to value anything somebody else makes – they've already proved that. But if they have made it for themselves, you can bet they'll take good care of it."

"What you say makes sense, young man, but still. You haven't met these kids."

Kidd pointed to his eye and the bruise on his left arm.

"Oh, yes, Sir. I've met them. I'm not going into this blind – well not in both eyes at least."

Kidd and Gramps chuckled at each other.

“I can’t understand you two,” the Mayor said sitting back and hitching his thumbs inside his belt. “Why would you spend your vacation working here in Lakeville for a bunch of people you don’t know and will probably never see again?”

Kidd looked up into Gramps face and smiled, then turned back to the Mayor.

“It’s a matter of our Walooma Watooka, Sir. Once we get all this underway we’ll explain it.”

Before they left, Mrs. Fields had prepared a list for each of them. She would look into the 4-H organization. The Mayor would handle supplies and tools. Gramps would organize the steps that would be used in making the repairs and be available to supervise the various activities. Kidd would round up the workers.

As they left the house, Kidd looked up and down the street.

“I need to find Barry. He lives across the street from the park. He’s my key to this whole plan.”

“And does he know this yet?”

“No, but he owes me.”

“He owes you? I don’t understand.”

“When the other five guys jumped me, Barry got in his own licks on me. He had to, you know. He has to live with those guys. He couldn’t just wimp out. I understand that. Probably good he did or right now we’d be up a park without a ranger, so to speak.”

Gramps shook his head. It’s one thing to thoughtfully show your child how you think it is best to live a life, but it is another to see him actually living that way. Kidd saw Gramps’ eyes watering but didn’t understand. He figured it was probably some memory about Grandma, so he pretended he hadn’t noticed.

They walked toward the area where Barry lived and

found him in his front yard, repeatedly throwing a knife into the ground.

“Hey! Barry,” Kidd called from some distance.

Barry looked up and initially moved toward his porch.

“Come on, Pal,” Kidd said in a more serious, quieter tone of voice. “I need to talk with you.”

Barry folded his pocket knife and put it away ready to head for the safety of his house if things turned ugly.

“What about? It’s about yesterday, isn’t it? Hey, I’m sorry about that. I should have warned you when I saw them coming.”

“And you shouldn’t have joined in to beat the stuffing out of me. Okay, now that we have that out of the way, I want you to come over to the park with us. Gramps and I have some things to show you.”

“We can’t go in there. It’s against the law.”

“We have special permission from Mayor Fields,” Gramps said.

“When we get over there you’re going to work me over.”

“You have to be the thick headedest friend I’ve ever had, Barry. You think we’d get permission to take you into the park so we could beat you silly. I wonder who they’d think might have done that to you, huh!”

Barry looked sheepish and shrugged his shoulders.

“Friend?” he asked, referring to Kidd’s words.

“Seemed that way to me yesterday at the lake. Come on.”

“Better let your mother know where you are going,” Gramps suggested.

“She’s at work. She won’t care.”

“Then we’ll wait here while you call her.”

Gramps sat down on the porch steps and Kidd joined him.

“Call her? Call my ma and tell her that I’m going to the

park with two strangers – one who I helped beat up yesterday – who say they have permission from old man Fields for us to go into a place she knows we aren't allowed to go?"

"Yes. That should cover it nicely," Gramps said looking up at him. "You can tell her to call Mrs. Fields to verify it all if she wants to."

Barry shook his head and went into the house. A few minutes later he returned.

"You know what she said?"

The other two waited in silence.

"She said 'thanks for calling, son.' She never thanks me. She never calls me, son. You two voodoo guys or something?"

"Or something," Kidd said, standing and putting his arm around Barry's waist, nudging him to walk along with them. He did and soon they were at the park entrance.

"The sign's gone," Barry said.

"The Mayor must move faster than one would think," Gramps said.

The padlock was also gone and the three entered and walked around the park. Kidd laid out the plan as they moved about. A half hour later, they had their first recruit.

"We need some kind of badge to signify who the helpers are," Gramps said.

"Like a sheriff's badge?" Barry asked.

"No. I mean just something that would be a symbol. It could be T-shirts that says Park for Kids Program or even just an armband of some kind."

"Ma's got a roll of wide green ribbon at the store that she says she'll never sell. We could use that. Let me see to it. When do we start?"

"Right after lunch. Come on back to Walooma and eat with us."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that name you

gave your bus.”

It was all the opening Kidd needed and he made the explanation as they walked back to the marina.

“So, that’s why you’re doing all this.”

Neither of them responded since it was clearly a statement and not a question.

The surprise of the day met them when they walked onto the dock.

“Lunch is ready. The price is right – free!” Billie called from the open door of the combination boathouse/café.

“How thoughtful of you,” Gramps said.

It was delicious and was punctuated by non-stop conversation about the new project. Barry called his mother about the ribbon. Billie brought out some of her extra tools and offered nails, bolts and screws from Ernie’s back room at the gas station.

“She’s a pack rat. Still got the first nail she ever took out of a flat tire.”

By one o’clock they were on their way back to the park. They stopped at the grocery for the ribbon. They stopped at the gas station to look over the supplies Billie had promised. Ernie offered the use of her old pickup truck. Things were beginning to come together.

As they drove the final block to the park, Barry had a question.

“How can just the three of us get this all done?”

“The idea is that when the other kids see what’s going on they will pitch in and help,” Kidd said.

“Like I asked, how can just the three of us get this all done?” Barry repeated shaking his head, in a sad commentary about the young people in Lakeville.

“You don’t have much faith in the kids here I take it,” Gramps said.

“You got that right.”

“Do you know just one other kid who you think might be willing to listen to you and give us a hand.”

Barry thought for a moment.

“Kathy, but she’s a girl. I think she might. Let me out here and I’ll go over and see what she says.”

“Let’s get your ribbon on your arm, first,” Kidd said unrolling about fifteen inches and holding it out for Barry to cut with his knife. They then cut several more strands so Kidd and Gramps would have theirs with a few left over for new recruits. Kathy seemed eager to help.

By three o’clock the four of them were well into cleaning out the old swimming pool. The skateboard arena was to be the first project. By six, they had hauled ten truckloads of branches, bricks, garbage and other assorted items to the dump. It was time to stop for the day. They would meet at the front gate at seven the following morning. Kathy and Barry would each try to recruit one or two more volunteers. Barry rode in the truck and Kathy returned home on her bike.

“Drop you off at home or the store?” Gramps asked him.

“I’ll ride on out to the marina. I still have to put in two hours of work or I won’t be able to make my window payment on Saturday.”

“How about I help you,” Kidd suggested. “Then you’d only have to put in one hour for the same pay.”

“That’s a nice offer, but I think my Walooma Watooka is probably going to say I have to be responsible for my own actions.”

Kidd smiled, nodded, and didn’t press further.

“That park’s never had a name,” Barry said. “If we really do pull this off, we gotta give it a great name.”

“How about something like Kid Park?” Kidd suggested.

“Ya. Something like that. Good idea.”

Barry went to work. Kidd and Gramps went into the

bus and fixed sandwiches. They were both excited. Gramps began fashioning a map of how the park would look when it was finished. Around the edges, he drew little pictures to show how each of the areas would appear.

When he finished, he waterproofed it with a clear spray he used to set his paintings and chalk drawings. They would put it up on a tree near the Park gate the next morning.

Barry stuck his head in the open door to say good night and that he'd see them bright and early the next morning. He still had several kids to call. He'd get that done before he went to bed.

All in all, the second day in Lakeville had been a pretty good day.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

### **Lakeville, South Dakota: A minor setback**

Day three began with a setback. When they arrived at the park they found two trees had been cut down in such a way as to have made them fall into the shallow end of the old pool.

Barry blew his top.

“I told you this thing wouldn’t work. All that the kids in this town understand is to destroy, destroy, destroy. Now what?”

Gramps put his arm around Barry’s shoulders.

“Well, I remember at least two local kids from yesterday who seem to understand build, build, build. Did you have any success last night with your calls?”

“I’m not sure. Two of the four said they’d think about it. I couldn’t explain it as well as Kidd does.”

Kathy pushed on one of the trees.

“It’ll take another whole day to cut these up and carry them off.”

She was clearly downhearted about it all.

“Oh, no,” Gramps said. “We won’t be doing that. The deep end is still clear of rubble and Bill Fields will be here any minute with the lumber we need to build that part of the ramp. Today is our ramp building day!”

Kidd thought he knew what Gramps had up his sleeve but didn't say anything. The truck with the lumber arrived. Two of Barry's contacts showed up - "Just to watch," they announced. One of Kathy's friends had come with her and she said two more promised to be there about eight o'clock.

Gramps pulled out the plans and showed the kids just what needed to be done. Bill had brought an electric circular saw, and several saw horses for them to use. Kidd soon had a work bench fashioned and the saw plugged into an outlet on a light pole. Kathy marked the boards according to the diagram. Her friend and Kidd carried them to the edge of the deep-end where Gramps and Barry set them in place.

Soon they were joking, laughing and having a really good time together. Kathy's two other friends arrived. Everybody got a bright green armband. (Kidd called it 'slime green'. There was no doubt why it had not sold at the store.)

The two boys who had come to watch moved closer and began doing little things like helping carry wood and removing nails from the second-hand plywood sheets. Kidd approached them.

"You guys can't help us."

They looked puzzled and turned toward him.

"Not until you get your official Slime Green Arm Band, that is."

One of them had been part the gang that had assaulted Kidd. Nothing was mentioned about it. After Bill left, that made eight kids and Gramps. The ramp went together just as planned and by noon that part of it was finished. It still couldn't be used of course because the shallow end was filled with trees and a smaller ramp with a gentler slope needed to be constructed up there.

Barry's mother and Mrs. Fields arrived with a picnic lunch for the workers. While they were sitting around eating sandwiches and chips and drinking Kool-Aid, a group of four

boys - young teenagers - walked up to the pool and looked over the morning's work. One of them spoke to the others, loud enough so the workers would be sure to overhear.

"When they get the trees out of there it might not be too bad."

Gramps walked over to them, casually, munching on a sandwich, and introduced himself.

"I'm Gramps. We're glad you approve of our work. Hope it provides a lot of fun for you guys, but you have one really mistaken idea about it all."

They looked at him.

"You see, nobody will be able to use the arena until the guys who chopped down those trees come and cut them up into fire wood for the shelters around here. None of us here will be touching the trees. We'd sure appreciate your help with our next project - clearing off the old campground and laying out a ball diamond. We still need bases and a back stop and it would probably be nice to have some seats of some kind for spectators. I think there's probably a sandwich apiece left over on the table if you're hungry."

Gramps walked back to where the workers were cleaning off the table and putting the trash in the nearby steel barrel. They were soon on their way toward the campground some thirty yards away. The new boys followed at a distance.

"I'll bring the truck," Gramps said. "It looks like another afternoon of hauling rubbish to the dump."

He walked toward the gate where the truck was parked.

Kidd soon had the others organized and they began a sweep of the area, picking up paper and cans, and dragging logs and fallen branches to the pickup. When it was loaded, Gramps spoke directly to the new boys.

"I could sure use some strong backs to help me unload out at the dump. If you're up to it climb on."

He turned and got into the driver's seat, taking his time

to turn the key and shift into drive. As he began pulling away the other door opened and two of the boys hurriedly climbed inside. The others vaulted into the back. At the dump, they made short work of the load. Gramps thanked them and they returned to the park where several more piles were waiting.

Kidd had cut ribbons for them and he stuffed a length into each of their pockets not wanting to force the issue with them. By the time they were back from taking the second load, they were all sporting the armbands. Gramps suggested that the kids trade off jobs for a while so the new boys began the cleanup activities while Barry and his friends rode the truck.

By four the grounds were clear.

Gramps asked: "Any of you know anything about laying out diamonds?"

The oldest boy said that he had helped at a school he attended before moving to Lakeville.

"How about you help Kidd here and mark where the bases will go. We still need some gunny sacks or some such thing to make them from. The rest of us will move on to that shelter over there. It looks like it will take the least amount of work to get back into shape. By the way, does anybody know anything about laying up stones with mortar? We have a lot of that kind of work to do around here."

"I helped my uncle build a barbeque this summer," one boy said. "I can probably do okay at that."

Gramps pointed out the fireplaces close to the shelter and showed him where the sack of cement and tools had been stored. They examined one that was still in pretty good shape so he would see how they should look.

"Pick a helper and let me know what else you need."

Gramps and the rest then began working on the shelter. Before they realized it, it was six thirty.

"Quitting time!" Gramps announced. "You did great

work today, guys. If just a few more show up tomorrow, we'll have this thing whipped into shape before the weekend. Oh, one more thing. We need a big flatbed truck to haul the swing sets and other outdoor equipment over here from the school grounds. If any of you can locate one that will sure be a big help. The whole area needs mowing. It'll probably take a tractor and pull mower to get through it the first time. I think a few flowers here and there would spruce things up. By tomorrow I hope you guys have some ideas, too."

Kidd approached Gramps as the others put their tools in the truck.

"That was really three more things - not one - you know."

"I've never counted well when I was having fun!"

Gramps sat down on a stump.

"I'm glad we stayed, son. I think I'll sleep well tonight. How are your aches and pains? I haven't taken time to ask today, I guess."

"It's almost bearable."

"You wouldn't have known it from the way you've worked."

"Couldn't let the bad guys know how much they hurt me. All five were here today."

"Maybe a long hot shower will help. You can have my water ration tonight. I'll take a quick, brisk one in the morning. Probably need it to get me jumpstarted anyway. I'm too old for this day labor stuff."

"Speaking of stuff, there were some really nice girls here today. I'd like to get to know at least one of them better. Too tired and too sore tonight. It is strange though how the guys in this town are so rotten and the girls are so pleasant."

\* \* \*

The next morning saw nearly two dozen kids waiting at the gate when Kidd and Gramps arrived. Kidd looked around

for the five new boys - the bruisers and kickers - from the day before.

“The new guys from yesterday aren’t here. That’s too bad,” he said, clearly disappointed.

“I have the feeling they worked all night,” Gramps said, smiling. “I doubt if we see them ‘til afternoon.”

Kidd looked puzzled until they approached the old pool. The trees were gone and had been cut into fireplace size lengths and stacked neatly between two tree trunks.

“All night, I guess!,” he said.

Gramps didn’t comment. It did send quite a buzz through the group of workers. Barry brought out the ribbon and soon all the new kids were wearing their SGA’s (slime green armbands).

There was a ramp to build in the shallow end of the pool to complete the skate board arena and Gramps supervised that. Barry and the older boy from the day before organized a group to finish the ball diamond and move sections of trunks from the recently cut trees to use as temporary seats for the teams and spectators.

Bill arrived with a flatbed truck and Kidd collected a group to load up the swings and such at the school and bring them to the park. Much to Kidd’s surprise all that rusty old equipment had suddenly received a fresh coat of aluminum paint. He suspected Ernie but would try to find out for sure later. By noon the supports for the equipment had been sunk into the ground and cement poured to hold them in place at their new home.

After lunch the five boys who had been missing all morning arrived on five riding lawnmowers. They didn’t speak to anyone but went right to work on the grass. Each one wore his armband, though one had it tied around his leg and another wore his like a headband.

Kidd, of course, waved to them and gave them the

thumbs up. They took it in but didn't respond.

The various groups worked on through the afternoon. The shelter was finished and three fireplaces were repaired. The dying old park was coming back to life. At six Gramps gathered the group together by the old pool.

"So, who gets to make the first run on the skateboard ramp?"

One of the girls stepped forward.

"Well, we already decided that honor should go to you, Gramps."

"Never been on a skateboard in my life. You trying to kill me off in my prime?"

A younger boy produced a skate board and rolled it toward Gramps.

"Gramps! Gramps! Gramps!" someone at the back of the group began quietly. Soon it was a chant that could be heard clear out at the Marina.

"Okay, but if it kills me I'll blame every last one of you for it."

He rolled his eyes at Kidd and whispered, "Hold onto that pain pill prescription. I may be the one who needs it."

Kidd was a bit worried. Gramps had been honest when he said he had never been skateboarding. He'd been a good athlete as a young man but that had been quite a few years before.

Gramps positioned the board on the edge of the pool, took a big breath (hoping it wasn't his last!), and pushed off with his right foot. He sailed down the gentle slope of the shallow end, across the flat bottom and then up the new plywood ramp. Half way up he lost his balance and twirled around three times. It looked like a well-practiced move and luckily after the spins he was headed back down toward the flat area on the bottom. He stopped, picked up the board and bowed deeply. The kids applauded and whistled. It had been

fun. (It had been lucky, is what it had been!)

“Who’d have thought a grey bearded old guy would have moves like that?” one of the older boys said to his friends.

Gramps, on the other hand, was just pleased he had survived and had not needed to be carried off in an ambulance. Of course, he never let on that his fancy moves had all really been a fortunate mistake!

“So, what are the rules going to be around here,” one of the lawn mowing boys asked, as if expecting a three page, single spaced list of things they couldn’t do.

Gramps put his arm on the boy’s shoulder.

“I suppose the rules will be up to you and your parents. I would suggest you begin by trying just one. Only do here those things that will make this park a safe and happy place for everybody to enjoy. That probably means that rather than griping about things or putting people down when you’re here in your park you’ll do what you can to make everybody feel good, and capable and welcome. It’s not a bad approach to practice at home, either.”

As they left for the day there were smiles and high fives all around. Gramps approached the leader of the boys who had beat up Kidd. They had remained together at the edge of the larger group.

“I have just one question for you guys,” he began.

The boys were plainly uneasy about the unpleasant encounter, which they expected was about to take place.

Gramps pointed to the well stacked cords of wood.

“Where did you learn how to saw and stack kindling so perfectly? Couldn’t have done nearly that well myself.”

He didn’t expect an answer so just smiled at them and patted the nearest one on the back.

“You knew all along that it was us who cut down the trees, huh?” one asked.

“I knew who did what?” Gramps asked smiling and looking the picture of innocence. He looked each one in the eye and said, “The important thing is that you did the right thing when you took time to think it through. I’m proud of you for that.”

He turned to leave.

“I don’t get you,” one of them said.

Gramps stopped and turned back toward them, saying nothing, assuming there was more to come.

“We beat the heck out of your son, cut down two beautiful old trees, and did our best to mess up all the work you put in out here the first day. And for that you tell us you’re proud of us?”

“Listen to me one more time. You missed my point. I said the important thing is that you did the right thing once you took time to think it through. Somewhere along the line you clearly decided it was better to be one of the good guys than one who goes through life ruining this world of ours for everybody else. That’s what I’m proud of you for. What you did to my son and those wonderful, irreplaceable, hundred-year-old trees is terribly sad and reprehensible, and no apology can ever make up for it. No matter how badly you may feel now about what you did, those terrible things can never be undone. But to have the insight and guts to change your way of living is something separate from all that and it is something to be very proud of.”

The boy who had asked the question extended his hand and Gramps gladly shook it. It was repeated with the others. They walked with him to meet Kidd and then on out to the front gate.

One of them who had remained silent through the exchange spoke through the truck window to Kidd as Gramps started the engine.

“Maybe we can talk about that *Walla Walla Bing Bang*

thing tomorrow or sometime?”

“How about seven tomorrow morning at the big blue bus?” Kidd suggested.

“Ya. Sure. Okay then. Seven,” he said with a series of short nods.

The truck pulled away to five raised hands. The boys stood talking among themselves for some time. It had been a day that would not soon be forgotten in Lakeville, South Dakota.

**CHAPTER FIFTEEN**  
**Lakeville, South Dakota:**  
**A Happy Town to Leave Behind**

The next morning Kidd reported that he had slept well. Gramps, on the other hand, had been regularly awakened by his son's groans as the boy would turn from one side to the other. The eye had turned from crimson to dark purple but was no longer swollen shut. Before Kidd dressed, Gramps looked him over to make sure none of the scraps, cuts or bruises had become infected. Apparently, the doctor had done his work well. They were all healing fine.

Kidd dressed and fixed breakfast as Gramps showered and got ready for the day. They sat in the living room using lap trays while they ate. Kidd spoke.

"Well, all things considered, I think things are going pretty well for the two of us, don't you?"

It required an answer.

"Yes. I suppose they are. I'm happy you feel that way. I know this picking up and leaving places just as you begin making friends can't be easy for you."

"It has at least one advantage."

“What’s that?” Gramps was curious.

“Well, if it turns out that I’m a lousy kisser, word can’t get around about me from the girls in one town to the next. I get to start fresh everywhere we stop!”

Gramps shook his head.

“You haven’t had much time for girls so far here in Lakeville, have you?”

“No but that’s okay. We had more important things to do here.”

Gramps smiled and wondered if, when Kidd was fifteen, the lad would feel the same way. As Gramps thought back to his own teenage years he could think of very few things that seemed more important than kissing girls.

Gramps offered to do the dishes. Kidd wanted to go for his morning run if his body would allow it. They had turned over the rest of the work on the park to the kids and their parents and planned to leave for Pierre later that morning. They would soon require more cash so needed to find the bank where Russell had arranged for them to pick it up.

Gramps dried his hands and left the bus, ready for his own morning walk. He heard Kidd’s voice coming from the dock. He looked at his watch. It was a few minutes after seven. He moved to where he could look around the edge of the boat house and see what was going on. There sat a dozen young people, cross-legged or sprawled out on the wooden dock. Kidd sat facing them. Apparently more than just the five tree-cutting, Kidd beating, lawn mowing boys had decided to come and hear about Kidd’s Walooma Watooka.

Without being seen, Gramps took a seat in a lawn chair just within earshot. Kidd was talking. He had apparently just finished telling about the origin of the term, Walooma Watooka, among the South American Indians.

“So, that’s where the idea came from. Every time I see the words, Walooma Watooka, I think of them as asking me,

‘What’s my most important mission in life and how well have I done at being that way so far today?’ Having it right there by our door gives me a chance to be reminded several times a day. Pop . . . er, Gramps . . . had me paint it there as the name of the bus but I have the idea he knew it was a great spot for a daily reminder.”

Gramps smiled. The days when he could keep one step ahead of his son were pretty well past.

The boy who had asked for the talk the day before had a question.

“Say some things about what a life mission is. I still don’t get it.”

“It’s all about the kind of person you intend to be – that you consciously sit down and decide to be. Let me try it like this. The way Gramps and I see it, there are four kinds of people. First, there are the People Users who do just that - they use you for their own purposes and then toss you aside when they don’t need you anymore. It’s like trying to get in good with somebody simply so they will help you get into some social group you want to be a part of – the A List, the Jocks or whatever.

“Second, are the Observers. They just sit around watching the world go by, never really getting involved to help or to hurt anybody. Of course, by not helping they probably are hurting the rest of us.

“Third are the Destroyers - and if I may say so, at the risk of getting another shiner - it seems to me there used to be a lot of them here in Lakeville. Destroyers take what they want, they hurt people who get in their way or just because they can, they rule through fear rather than love and usually hold the mistaken idea that when people are afraid of them it means people respect them. Believe me nobody respects a bully.

“If the World was run by any one of these three kinds of

people the human race would have destroyed itself long ago.

“The Fourth kind of person is the one I’m trying to be - A Builder. Builders have one main objective in life and that’s to make the world a better place to live in and to improve the lives of all human beings. I’m about the luckiest kid who ever lived because the mother and father in the home that took me in when I was orphaned were both Builders. They’re unselfish people who get a lot more enjoyment out of helping somebody than they do from having lots of money or a big house or car or bunches of clothes or other stuff.”

“So, to finally answer your question, Tommy, I think we each always choose one of those four missions in life and I try to help folks understand how important it is for the survival of this planet and for all of us human beings that everybody chooses to be a Builder. Then, once you make that decision you can refine it a bit to fit yourself. Gramps, for example has set as his mission to always leave the people he meets along the way every day, somehow better off than they were before they met. He smiles at everybody and waves and speaks to them when he can in order to let them know he cares about them and that they are important to him. He makes little jokes to brighten their day. He always finds ways to build people up and make them feel good about themselves. In my entire twelve and a half years I’ve never once heard him put anybody down – and, believe it or not, he was a junior high teacher.”

Everybody laughed.

“Doesn’t he ever get on you about stuff you do wrong?”

“I guess it depends on what you mean by get on me. He’s always kept me in line by helping me understand what he expects of me. When I mess up - and like all kids I do my share of messing up - he always talks with me about it. His usual line begins - (and Kidd tried to mimic Gramps’ voice by lowering his own) - Now, son, what do you need to do so this

never has to happen again?”

The kids chuckled.

“He sees to it, you see, that I think it through so when it’s all over, I’ve been able to help myself learn how to guide myself.”

A girl spoke.

“It sounds like you’re out to save the whole world. Isn’t that too much to ask of any one person - especially a kid?”

“I’m only out to save the part of the World that I come into contact with each day. I have no control over the rest of it. I have to depend on other people for that - mostly strangers I’ll never meet. I have to have faith that there are other Builders out there who will take good care of the lives they touch. I’d be pleased to leave Lakeville in your hands, Cindy.”

The group chuckled again.

“That’s really about all I have to say, I guess. Mostly it comes down to making a choice between thinking about just me on the one hand or us on the other hand. Just me people are self-centered and can’t seem to see beyond the end of their own noses - their own desires and wants are all that seem important to them I suppose you could say. They just ignore the fact that other people are hurting or sad or in need.”

“Us people are wise enough to understand that we are all in this life together and that when people are happy, well cared for and feel good about themselves they are able to build a better, more comfortable World for all of us to enjoy, compared to what happens when folks are sad, poor, hurting or have no reason to feel good about themselves.”

“Think about your own homes. When you help make the people there happier and more comfortable and to feel good about themselves, isn’t life there bound to be better than if you make them - or just let them - be sad, and angry and on edge?”

“I probably didn’t say that real well, but I hope you got

the idea.”

Gramps went back to Walooma – pausing to pat the name sign as he entered. He sat in the recliner. The young people continued to talk for some time. Eventually, Gramps heard them leaving and craned his neck to watch them through the front windows. He wondered how things would turn out in Lakeville. If not well, it would certainly not have been because Kidd hadn’t given it his best effort.

He was so proud of his son and the loving, helpful, concerned person he was becoming. He looked up from the recliner at the picture of Grandma and nodded.

“We did a good job, Mary. We did a very good job.”

Kidd boarded just in time to see tears streaming down Gramps’ face.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, his smiling face turning serious. He sat on the arm of the chair and snuggling close, slipping his arm around his father’s neck.

Gramps patted his hand.

“No, Son. Nothing is wrong. Something is all quite wonderful in fact. Just an old man’s private tears of joy. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Pop. I think Grandma would approve of how things are going for us, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes. I’m sure of that!”

“I told the kids we’d be pulling out shortly. They said they wished we’d stay. That’s always a nice thing - to be wanted, you know. Kathy and Barry made me promise that we’d drive by the park before we left town. Last night I guess they had like a town meeting and set up a Park Board with three kids and three adults on it. Barry said they took my suggestion to name it Kid Park - well that’s not really how he put it - something more like, ‘We sort of took your idea,’ or some such thing. Anyway, I said we’d see that old Walooma tooted at them as we drove by.

“Oh, one other thing. Billie says the rest of the rent for our parking spot is on her and she thanked us for stopping by. She had to leave for a little while. At this rate our rent budget is never going to get used up.”

They unhooked from the electricity and water, inspected the tires, and were soon rolling along toward Main Street. First there would be a quick pass by the park and then they would be on to Pierre. That was as far as they wanted to plan ahead. There was something exciting about not knowing exactly what lay out in front for them. It also made it impossible for Nivens to get wind of their plans ahead of time.

As they drove down the street that ran to the park, Kidd’s sharp eyes detected a new sign across the top of the gate. As Walooma pulled to a stop, it suddenly became clear to them what Barry had meant when he said they had sort of taken Kidd’s idea about calling it Kid Park. There, in large, slime green, letters it read, Kidd Park.

Half the town seemed to be there. They were standing just inside the gate waving lengths of green ribbon over their heads. Gramps tooted the promised horn honk and he and Kidd returned their waves.

“This is really embarrassing. I’d rather just keep going,” Kidd said, ducking his head out of sight. “I don’t have any idea what to say. This isn’t how it was supposed to turn out.”

Gramps nodded, put the bus in gear and Walooma was soon headed west once more. With Kidd speechless - for one of the few time in his life - Gramps took the opportunity to say a few last things about their experience in Lakeville.

“Be glad it feels embarrassing to you, Son. That let’s you know that what you did back there was all quite unselfishly just to help them and not to make yourself look good. My father used to say that charity really isn’t charity if you take credit for it. When you do that, it is merely self-promotion – wanting others to see what a great guy you are.

I'm proud of you, Kidd, and there is one good thing about it, you know."

"What's that?"

"For years to come when the new generations of children look at the park sign and ask why Kid is spelled with two d's, the older youngsters will be able to tell the story of one very unselfish young man who came into their sad little town and helped them turn it into a very happy place to live. Hopefully, year after year, that will keep inspiring the kids of Lakeville to join the Builders of the world."

**CHAPTER SIXTEEN**  
**Heading for Montana:**  
**Pecos and the Runaway**

It was nearly two o'clock as they came upon the outskirts of Pierre. Kidd had been feeding them snacks all morning so neither was hungry enough to stop for a meal. Gramps was amused to think that when Kidd snacked, he continued to grow taller, but when Gramps snacked, he just grew wider.

Before going to the bank to pick up their money they stopped at an office supply store and bought a small, fireproof safe. If they were going to need to carry large amounts of money with them they needed a secure place to keep it.

While Gramps took care of the banking, Kidd looked around the big building. Back in the bus, they first installed the safe under the desk beside the computer. They both memorized the combination and took turns practicing opening it. Then Gramps opened the brief case he had carried to and from the bank. In it were more one hundred dollar bills than Kidd new existed! They carefully stacked them into the safe and closed and locked the door.

“Even though we both know the combination, we should probably have it written down somewhere in case of some unforeseen situation,” Gramps said.

Kidd immediately had an idea (of course!).

“The combination looks like a date – 12-21-99, like December twenty-first, 1999. You could add that like the date under your name on the portrait you painted of Grandma – the one hanging over the couch.”

“Once again, your incredible grey matter has come through for us, Kidd. And, who better to guard our secret than Grandma.”

Fifteen minutes later the numbers were in place and Walooma was again rolling in the general direction of Montana, which had been their goal since the beginning of their grand adventure. By five thirty they were ready to stop for the night. They had continued to travel highway 14 – a strange way to go north to Montana when 14 tended to wind south first.

They had been driving through the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands, crossed interstate 90, and soon came upon a roadside park just south of Cactus Flat. There were no water or electrical hook-ups but Walooma had been designed for just such locations. The park literature said overnight parking was permitted in one section so they found a spot nestled into a grove of trees. It was slightly higher than the surrounding area, which Kidd thought would provide more breeze for the yet to be tested windmill, generating system.

A half hour later the windmill had been hoisted straight up from where it traveled flat against the roof and secured into place. Kidd had been right. There was just enough breeze to turn the blades and keep a steady flow of electricity charging the bank of batteries in the storage area underneath the floor.

It was a steak and baked potato dinner with green beans, French bread, and apricot cobbler for desert. With the dishes done and put away by seven, there was still time for a walk around the beautiful area. There were no other overnight visitors so they had the place to themselves. The area was

mostly just what its name implied – a vast expanse of grasslands as far as you could see. The narrow, upper end of the White River flowed through the park. It seemed as though it would be a peaceful place to rest.

Walking along the river they spotted an open campfire ahead. According to the signs, such fires were prohibited in the park. They walked toward it. A boy – perhaps fourteen – was cooking a fish skewered like a hot dog on a long stick.

“Good evening,” Gramps said, apparently startling the boy whose total concentration seemed to be focused on the meal browning in the flames.

“Oh. Hi. Didn’t see you come up. Only one little fish I’m afraid or I’d offer you supper.”

“We just ate,” Kidd said getting the young fisherman off the hook (so to speak!). “Didn’t know you were allowed to have a fire here in the park.”

The boy looked around but not at Kidd.

“The Ranger says it’s okay if I keep it here on the dirt close to the water.”

Neither Kidd nor Gramps bought the story but they did not press. He had clearly taken some pretty good safety precautions.

“So, is your family around here somewhere?” Gramps asked, looking up and down the river bank.

“No. I’m just camping by myself.” Then as an afterthought he added, “I just turned eighteen and you could say I’m celebrating.”

If the lad was eighteen, Gramps was twelve. Something was certainly not as it should be.

“That’s a mighty small fish for a guy your size,” Gramps said. “How about coming back to our . . .” he wasn’t sure how to describe Walooma to a stranger so decided on . . . “RV.”

Kidd chimed in.

“We can rustle up some bacon and eggs for you and

get to know each other. I'm Kidd by the way and everybody calls my Pop here, Gramps."

The boy didn't offer a name but did look over the tiny fish on his stick.

"I could do that, I guess. Thanks. Better put the fire out."

Kidd helped splash water on it from the river which was only a few feet away. They stirred it up with the stick and then splashed it once more. The boy, whoever he was, did seem to know some things about campfire safety.

With that done, Gramps pointed in the direction of Walooma and they began walking.

"So," Kidd began, "Do you have a name or do we just call you The Fisherkid?"

It brought the first real smile to the boy's face and he looked directly at Kidd.

"I'm Neal with an ea not an ei. What kind of a name is Kidd?"

"Long story," Kidd said, never having been faced with that question before. "Here's the short version. Pop adopted me. I've always lived with him and Grandma – and on my birth certificate it listed my last name as Kidd – K-I-D-D. Somehow that stuck as my nickname, I guess you'd say."

"Grandma?" the boy asked.

"She died a few months back. It's just Pop and me now. We're sort of just traveling around the country for a while."

Neal nodded.

"My dad lives in Sioux Falls. I'm sort of making my way over there to see him."

"You have a vehicle of some kind, then?" Gramps asked

"No. Just hitching. Just kicking back this summer, you know."

So far Gramps doubted that anything the boy had said was the truth. He decided not to push for more until later. They arrived at Walooma.

“Wow! Great place!” Neal said, looking around the outside and noting the windmill.

“Come on inside,” Kidd said. “It’s small but it’s cozy.”

Neal was clearly impressed. He looked at the picture over the couch.

“Grandma?” he asked going over and touching it gently and with great care.

“Yup. Pop painted it,” Kidd explained.

Neal turned toward Gramps.

“You’re really good. I paint a little myself but nothing that good. Mostly landscapes and naked girls. Mom hates that.”

Kidd couldn’t resist the opening.

“She doesn’t like your landscapes?”

He broke into laughter and was immediately joined by a head-shaking Neal.

Gramps chuckled to himself and also shook his head thinking, “No matter where they come from, adolescent boys all seem to share a single interest.”

“Give Neal the grand tour and I’ll tend to the eggs and bacon. Scrambled or scrambled?” Gramps asked.

“Scrambled will be fine.”

Neal smiled at Gramps. He didn’t seem be used to humor in a home but clearly liked it. Gramps went about his business in the rear. The boys went back to the front room. Kidd sat on the couch and Neal took a seat on the floor against the wall saying:

“My clothes are filthy. I don’t want to get your furniture dirty.”

Kidd didn’t argue the point but thought it was time for a heart to heart.

“I’m going to be honest with you. I don’t believe for a minute that you’re eighteen or that you’re just on some kick-back summer trek across South Dakota. If you’re in trouble of some kind let us help you, Neal – if that’s your name.”

Neal looked at Kidd but didn’t speak for a long moment. He sighed. He turned his head and stared out the front window. He nodded and looked like he might cry, though he didn’t. Eventually he spoke.

“Your dad seems like an okay kind of guy.”

“He’s the best. I’m a very lucky boy that way.”

“You’re adopted, huh?”

“Yup. Lived with Pop since I was just a few days old.”

“I can tell that you two get along pretty good.”

“Yup.”

Kidd was giving the boy time to trust and time get around to his real story.

“I don’t have money to pay for the food.”

“Did we ask you to pay?”

Neal shrugged his shoulders.

“No.”

“Gramps and I like to share what we have. It gives us both a real kick.”

More silence.

“I’ll be fourteen in ten days.”

“I figured you were about that,” Kidd said without further comment.

“I sort of ran away from home a couple of weeks ago.”

“I figured it was something like that, too. Not sure how you sort of run away, though.”

“Neal looked up at him and offered the hint of a smile.”

“You’re a good kid, Kidd.”

There was more silence.

“So, do you have actual parents somewhere or were you hatched?”

It produced another smile but no answer. Gramps arrived with a tray piled high with eggs, bacon, toasted French bread, and apricot cobbler.

Neal's eyes widened as he accepted the tray. He looked up at Gramps who hadn't inquired why he was on the floor.

"Thanks, Sir."

"You're welcome and it's Gramps. Sir makes me feel old."

The boy began eating. Plainly, he hadn't had a good meal in some time. Gramps looked at Kidd, a question on his face.

"Seems Neal here was pulling our leg about a couple of things back there on the river."

Neal looked up at Kidd and stared into his eyes.

"Pop will have to know," Kidd said.

After a brief, thoughtful hesitation, Neal nodded and went back to eating.

"Seems he's about to turn fourteen and has been AWOL from home for a couple of weeks. I like him. I'd suggest that after he finishes eating, we introduce him to a bar of soap, run him through the shower, and find some clean duds for him. That may be a problem. He's taller than I am and he and I could both wear your stuff at the same time."

"He's taller but not much bigger around the waist. Probably could make it into a pair of your cut-offs and one of those oversized sweatshirts you insist on wearing."

"So, we can keep him then?" Kidd asked as a joke.

"For the time being if he'll have us, I guess."

Neal had managed to scarf down everything but the dessert while the other two were talking.

"I shouldn't impose on you. I'm trouble. Always been trouble. Where ever I go, bad stuff happens. Don't want to make any trouble for you."

“A shower. A pair of pants. A shirt. A good night’s sleep here on the sofa – it makes into a bed. What trouble could possibly come from any of that?”

Neal finished the cobbler and milk.

“I told Kidd I couldn’t pay.”

“Well then, we’ll just have to send you a bill.”

Neal looked puzzled and glanced at Kidd.

“It’s a joke,” Kidd explained. “If you’re going to be around Pop you have to be prepared for jokes.”

“We enjoy sharing what we have,” Gramps said.

“That’s what Kidd said. I don’t get it. People always hate me immediately. I’ve known you two how long, a half hour at the most, and you’re the best friends I’ve ever had. What does that tell you about me? I better just say thanks and go.”

“You asked a question,” Gramps said. “What your story tells me is that you have undoubtedly been a very lonely boy for a long time and that makes us sad.”

Kidd nodded his agreement as Gramps continued.

“Life should be better than that and I’m sure there are ways to fix things.”

Neal sat the tray on the floor beside him and took out his wallet, handing it up to Gramps, who had taken a seat in the recliner next to him.

“Go ahead and look it over. It tells all my secrets.”

Gramps put on his glasses and began looking through the contents, describing them as he went. A school ID card from Pecos, Montana. Patrick Neal Baker. Eighth grade. Mother Mary Jackson. No father listed. An address and phone number. Then it looks like a house key, a lucky coin of some kind, and a condom. Here’s a folded paper. Looks like a handwritten note.”

Gramps read it silently, folded it up and replaced everything in the wallet. He handed it back to Neal.

“That note was dated several months ago.”

“Ya. I’m basically just a no good, chicken livered, lump. Intended to have killed myself long ago. I get all ready to do it and then I get scared and backed out. I can’t even do that right.”

Tears began streaming down his face. Gramps looked across at Kidd. Neither one had an immediate suggestion. Eventually Gramps spoke.

“Crying is a good thing. It lets all the stored-up sorrow kind of flow away. It helps relax you. And in your case, it helps wash the filthiest face I’ve ever seen on a boy.”

Neal looked up at Gramps and then over at Kidd.

“A joke, right?” he said, directing the comment to Kidd.

Kidd nodded, and smiled a reassuring simile, still at a loss for words.

“I think I’ll take you up on that shower and clean clothes. I’ll change back into my grubbies in the morning when I get ready to leave.”

Finally, something Kidd could do to be helpful. The two youngsters disappeared into the rear. Gramps allowed the boy his privacy and just sat to think. What do you do with a depressed, fourteen-year-old, suicidal, trouble-making, runaway?

“For starters, you just love him,” Gramps said out loud as he looked up at Grandma’s picture. “If anybody I’ve ever known needed a good dose of loving, it’s Neal and he just happened onto two guys that have lots of love waiting to be offered. I guess we’ll just play this one day by day – no, make that minute by minute.”

After the shower stopped running, Gramps heard actual giggles coming from the back. He smiled and waited. Soon the two re-entered the living room.

“Well, it wasn’t easy but we finally found a pair of my baggy tennis shorts with an elastic waistband that fit him pretty

well.”

Kidd twirled his finger indicating for Neal to turn around. He pulled up the T-shirt they had found for him and he spun around as if pretending to model the shorts.

“It’s one of your T-shirts. Neal’s shoulders are way broader than mine. May I call your attention to his blond hair, blue eyes and semi-white skin, none of which I was sure enough of to have bet on earlier.”

“And a full stomach,” Neal added. “I don’t know what to say to you guys.”

“Well, it’s almost bed time, and here in Walooma that means it’s time for a bowl of ice cream,” Gramps said.

“Walooma?”

“I’ll explain in the morning,” Kidd said. “Let me go get the cold, creamy, goodies. You two older fellas can stay here and talk about sex.”

He giggled himself into the back.

Neal turned red as he took a seat on the couch.

“Really?” he asked, cautiously.

“No. Of course not. Well, not unless you want to. That’s just the Imp coming out in Kidd.”

Gramps chuckled and shook his head.

Neal nodded and relaxed unable to think of so much as one word to say. Fortunately, Gramps seldom had that problem.

“Brothers or sisters?”

“An older sister, sixteen, and two younger sisters – twelve and eight. They’re all pains. You have any other kids?”

“No. Just Kidd. He’s been a full-time job.”

“He seems really nice. I’m sure you’re proud of him.”

“He is a fine human being. You’re right. I’m very proud of him.”

“Nobody’s ever been proud of me, I guess. Like I said

I'm just trouble."

He was clearly waiting for some response from Gramps. It was like a trial and Gramps understood that.

"Trouble is often accidental, you know. Many times, it just happens. Sometimes it's because of poor judgment or allowing oneself to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lots of times I think it happens when somebody fails to take his responsibilities to others seriously enough."

The conversation would go no further that night but Neal understood that Gramps really did understand his situation. Kidd arrived juggling three bowls of Neapolitan ice cream. They ate and made small talk. Neal told them about the park. He had a favorite spot he'd show them in the morning. Gramps decided it would be best if the two boys shared the bunks and that he try out the couch. It had to do with privacy but it also had to do with security. Gramps didn't want Neal running away from a second home.

Dishes done. Boys in bed. Lights out. The two youngsters talked late into the night. Gramps couldn't hear the words but was pleased they were talking. For his age, Kidd was pretty wise. For his age, that's just what Neal needed.

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

### **Heading for Montana: The reluctant return home**

Gramps was up and dressed long before the boys awoke. They had talked into the early hours of the morning. He quietly made coffee and poured a large mug to take outside with him. He sat at a wooden picnic table and watched the sunrise, listened to the birds greet the day, and smiled at a pair of ground squirrels playing chase.

By the time Kidd stumbled off the bus - still wiping his eyes with his fists - Gramps knew what they had to do.

“Did you get any sleep at all?” Gramps asked with a smile.

“We talked a long time. Ya. Some. He’s still asleep. We got to get him back home and work things out.”

“I agree that we have to get him home. Does it sound like things can be worked out?”

“There’s no father in the home – he left right after the last child was born and best I can figure, that was Neal’s second stepfather. His mom works as a secretary for a little trucking company. They are dirt poor. Part of why Neal left was so she wouldn’t have to spend any money on him. Mainly though he just hated his home and his little town - Pecos. He thinks his mother likes the girls and hates him. He gets into lots of trouble at school and around the town. That’s the only

time he seems to get much attention from his mom. Of course, it isn't good attention but I suppose any kind would be better than none at all."

"What kinds of trouble?" Gramps asked.

"Dumb stuff and I told him so. He steals from stores or kids lockers but always does such a bad job that he gets caught. He picks fights with older guys and always gets beaten to a pulp. He doesn't turn in his homework though he says he always does it. He cusses out teachers. He breaks windows. He bullies smaller kids. Just all really dumb stuff."

"Sounds like he's pretty angry but not sure about what," Gramps said.

"And right now, he's taking it out on himself – wanting to kill himself."

"Is he serious about that, do you think?"

"What I think is that he really wanted somebody back in Pecos to see how bad his life was and to step in and show him how to make it better. Since no one would do that, he's just had to give up on everybody including himself. He's terrified of living. His life just keeps proving to him that nobody really cares about him. The school sends him to detention or suspends him or flunks him. Big deal! None of that shows that anybody gives a hoot about him and his awful life."

"The Judge put him on probation. How can Judges be so dumb? He needs help not punishment. It's him punishing himself that gets him into all the trouble in the first place."

Gramps pulled Kidd close and kissed him on his temple.

"How did you become so wise so early, son?"

It really didn't call for an answer but Kidd supplied one.

"By watching and learning from a very wise mother and father, I imagine. Neal hasn't had that. In fact, it sounds like there hasn't been a wise person in his life anywhere."

"One thing we must remember," Gramps continued,

“We only have Neal’s side of the story. I think it’s time we get the other one. Let’s get Walooma ready to hit the road. We’ll stop somewhere and have a real breakfast then head for Pecos - I thought Pecos was in Texas, by the way.”

Watooka was soon ready to travel.

“I’ll get the atlas and try to find Pecos,” Kidd said as they entered the bus.

Neal was sitting on the edge of the lower bunk, apparently changing back into his own clothes.

“Hey. Don’t you like our company?” Gramps asked wanting to put an end to the process.

“I gotta move on alone. I can’t get you guys into trouble because of me.”

Gramps decided it was time to let the boy know someone was going to take charge of his life and relieve him of that clearly overwhelming responsibility for the time being.

“Neal, my boy. Listen up. First, you are going to get back into the clothes Kidd found for you. Second, you are going to let your mother know you are safe and on your way home – phone, email, carrier pigeon, whatever. Third, you’re going to have breakfast with us at the first decent looking restaurant we come across on the way to Pecos. Fourth, you’re going to talk with us about what’s been going on, how you feel about the people in your life and you’re going to make a list of all the great things there are about yourself. Fifth, you are going to work out a plan to make your life absolutely wonderful beginning tomorrow. Do you understand what I’ve just said?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Yes, who?”

Neal looked puzzled. Always before when that situation had come up he was supposed to answer ‘Yes, Sir’ but clearly that wouldn’t work. Finally, he tried something else.

“Yes, Gramps?”

“Good. It seems we have an understanding, then.”

“You left out number six, Sir . . . er . . . Gramps,” Neal said, somewhat hesitantly.

Gramps looked puzzled and waited, somewhat amused on the inside.

“I’ll stop thinking about needing to kill myself.”

Gramps went back into his forceful voice and serious face.

“And six, you will stop thinking about needing to kill yourself. Now, do you understand what I’ve just said?”

“Yes, Gramps. I understand what you’ve said but I don’t have a clue how I’m going to ever do it all.”

“Start with the easiest one,” Kidd suggested. Stop sitting there in your birthday suit and get back into your new clothes.”

Neal smiled as if suddenly somewhat embarrassed, and was soon descent.

“See, number one is already marked off the list,” Kidd said. “Now on to number two, notify your mom. She have email?”

“At work. She’ll be there about now, I guess. What time is it anyway?”

“Going on nine,” Gramps answered.

“She gets there at eight. Get me onto your mail service.”

Kidd poked a few buttons, typed a few words and soon Neal had a blank screen, already for his message. He typed in her email address.

“What shall I put on the subject line?”

“How about, ‘Neal says Hi and I’m on my way home’.”

It was soon in place. Neal’s message was short and to the point.

“I’m okay. I met some really wonderful people and they

are bringing me home. I want to work things out. Your son, Neal.”

He hit the send button and sighed the sigh of all sighs.

“Number two, off the list. That leaves just four to go,” Kidd said.

Within a half hour the three of them were occupying a booth in a small roadside café somewhere between Scenic and Farmingdale. Neal, still feeling he was imposing on his new friend’s generosity, ordered only orange juice and toast. Kidd would have none of that. He looked at the waitress and rolled his eyes.

“The boy doesn’t know his own mind. We will both have the number five with double sausage and toast.”

She looked at Gramps as if for permission.

“Make that three and don’t spare the cholesterol,” he said with a convincing nod.

Kidd poked playfully at Neal’s mid-section and they giggled like a pair of seven year olds. Breakfast arrived and they ate until stuffed.

“Can I ask what happened to your eye?” Neal asked.

“Another long story but the short version is, five guys, who later became my good friends, beat me silly the first time we met.”

Neal winced and gently felt the skin around Kidd’s eye.

“I’d ask why but you’d just say, ‘I’ll explain later,’ so I’ll save you the effort. You did say you’d tell me about the name of the bus this morning and it now is this morning.”

While Gramps paid the bill and purchased a paper and a few candy bars for later on, Kidd gave Neal “the short version” of the Walooma story.

On board, again, they looked into the atlas and with a red marker Gramps traced the route they’d take.

“Kidd’s the navigator. Once we hit the road it’s his job to keep us on track.”

“So, number three is taken care of and it’s not even eleven yet, Neal said beginning to get with the program.”

“Thanks for breakfast, Gramps . . . and Kidd, I guess. It seems like you two share in most everything.”

“We do.” Kidd said. “I still let him think he’s the parent when it comes to the big stuff, but, ya, we share most things. It’s pretty nice and I was just kidding. There’s no doubt who the parent is. That makes my life pretty easy.”

“Now, number four,” Neal said, lying back on the couch, clearly taking Gramps’ earlier ultimatum seriously. He began talking about himself and his family and his dreams and disappointments. He talked about growing up and liking girls – more detailed than Gramps really wanted to hear - and how he had been drawing things for as long as he could remember.

“I just seem to think better when I have a pencil in my hand. My teachers never seem to get that. ‘Stop doodling!’ ‘Put that pencil down!’ ‘Pay attention!’”

Kidd left and was soon back with one of Gramps’ sketch pads and several pencils.

“Thanks. I’ll draw something you’ll really like, Kidd,” Neal said, a bit of the imp coming through his own tone.

He continued to talk and draw as they drove. Soon it was three o’clock. Kidd went to check the email. Neal had a message from his mother.

“Be careful and get home safely. We all love you, you know. Mom”

“I can’t remember ever hearing her say she loved me before.”

His face filled with tears. Kidd offered a box of tissues. Neal gently refused and looked at Gramps.

“A wise man once told me it was good to cry. It looks like I’m about to give it a try.”

Soon there wasn’t a dry eye among the three of them.

Gramps nudged them on toward something else.

“Well, it’s going on three. Do we look for a place to eat or break out the candy bars?”

“How about we look for a place to eat and we breakout the candy bars?” Kidd suggested.

“One or the other, guys. Let’s have a decision.”

Kidd whispered to Neal.

“See, I told you there’s no doubt who the parent is. What do you say? Food?”

“Ya. FOOD. I’m afraid I haven’t had much to eat the past two weeks.”

Food it was at a large truck stop where they also filled up with gas and put water into the storage tank. Gramps left the water up to the boys who, in completing the job, managed to get each other soaking wet.

“You need some proper going home clothes anyway,” Gramps said to Neal.

They found new jeans, a blue T-shirt, and new shoes and sox in a shop adjacent to the truck stop.

“I know,” Neal said, looking at Gramps. “You’ll send me a bill.”

He hugged his new, old friend. It was better than words. He was obviously not a well-practiced hugger but clearly liked the contact. He’d change into his new things later, just before they got to Pecos.

Back on the road the discussion continued, guided now and then by a pointed question from Gramps or Kidd. Finding the right questions to answer is usually the most important part of solving any problem.

“So, rather than being a pain in the rear end for your mother and sisters in order to get their attention, what could you do to earn their respect instead?”

“How would it feel to know your Mom was proud of you because you worked hard to become a good student instead

of disappointing her about it?”

“Rather than making your mom use her hard-earned money to pay your fines and court costs, how could you help contribute to the family finances?”

“If a sad and angry family is so terrible to live in, what things can you do to help it become a happy, relaxed place that you and they can all enjoy?”

“You say you hate most everybody. Is it really everybody or mostly just Neal?”

“I wonder what wonderful things will begin happening when you get to the place you can love Neal?”

As nightfall neared they pulled into the Medicine Bow National Forrest between Cheyenne and Laramie and were soon hooked up to water and electricity in a beautiful natural setting.

“Grandsons?” the Ranger asked Gramps, as he paid for the night’s stay.

“Two of the finest young men you’d ever want to spend a vacation with,” he replied, evading the question but stating the truth as he felt it.

The two boys could have easily been mistaken for brothers – wavy hair, blue eyes, tall slender physiques, and both had wonderful smiles, although Neal seemed to just be discovering his.

Standing just outside the open door, Gramps threw two candy bars onto the living room floor and then left to take a quick walk around the campsite. It had been a long day behind the wheel and he needed to work out the kinks.

When he returned, he found the two boys wrestling on the floor.

“What’s going on?” he asked calmly, not sure if he should be concerned.

They stopped long enough for Kidd to explain from his position flat on his back with Neal clearly in control on top.

“Thought we’d try an alternative to crying for a change. It seems to be working. Haven’t seen one tear through all this pain he’s been putting to me.”

The struggle then resumed amid a strange mixture of giggles and groans. Gramps took out a candy bar and made himself comfortable in the recliner from where he could look through the front windows at the gorgeous, mid-summer, Wyoming, sunset. He wondered what lay ahead in Pecos. He also wondered what lay behind in Comfort, Green Prairie and Lakeville. More than any of that he wondered where Nevins was and what he was up to. He wondered if it was really fair to have put Neal in possible danger from the man who had vowed to take his son at any cost. You do the best you can at the moment. That’s all he could ask of himself.

He turned the rocker toward the exhausted, laughing, boys who, by that time, were both flat on their backs, panting through their smiles.

“You Titans are in my bedroom and I’m ready to hit the sack. With an early start in the morning we can be in Pecos by mid-afternoon tomorrow. I’m sure it won’t be an easy time for you, Neal, but you are doing the right thing. Now skedaddle, the two of you. Sleep well.”

He stood up. Kidd got to his feet and gave his pop a big hug and kissed him on the cheek.

“Love you, Pop.”

Gramps returned the loving overture in kind.

Neal lingered for a moment after Kidd went into the back. Gramps opened his arms and the boy accepted the hug, which he was hoping might be there for him.

“We’re glad you are letting us get to know you, son,” Gramps said. “If you need anything during the night you know where I’ll be.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

There was more he wanted to say but the words

wouldn't come. He released himself and nodded, then turned and left the room.

Soon in bed, Gramps listened again to the muffled voices from the other room. He and Grandma had often wished Kidd had a brother. At least for a few nights, it seemed as though he did. Gramps was soon asleep.

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Heading for Montana The Accident!**

Gramps roused the boys out of bed at a little before five a.m. It would be a long day and, not knowing what they were getting into, Gramps wanted to arrive well before nightfall. It had been his experience that problems suddenly loomed bigger and more difficult once darkness set in. It is why he and Kidd had always solved any problems between them during the light of day.

By five-thirty they were baconed and egged and ready to leave. Walooma roared to life and they pulled onto the road headed northwest toward Wyoming. It was a morning filled with talking - mostly Neal - and planning. When questions were asked, Kidd and Gramps replied.

By eleven they began looking for a place to stop, stretch their legs and make lunch. On the map, Kidd located a small park just off the highway to the east. As they pulled in, it looked like the ideal spot. There was a small canyon to explore, trees to climb, and no one else around. Gramps started lunch and the boys went exploring.

“Be back by noon,” Gramps called after them. “We really don’t have a lot of time to spend here.”

Kidd nodded that he understood and checked his

watch. Noon came and went but Neal and Kidd had not shown up. 12:15 came and went. This was not like Kidd. Gramps became concerned and went outside although he had no idea in which direction they had gone. He called for Kidd, realizing it probably served no purpose because if they had been close enough to hear they would have made it back.

Presently Kidd came running up the trail from the canyon.

“Pop. We got a major problem!” he said, puffing to a stop, bent over, hands on his knees.

“Neal slipped into a crevice in the rock and got his feet caught. He can’t budge and he’s in there so tight he can’t manage to get out of his shoes. He’s down about ten feet - too far to reach with my hand. There is a huge, flat slab of rock behind him that seems to teeter back and forth. It pivots some way about half way up its height. The weight of his body against the top of it keeps the bottom pressed tight against his foot.”

“How is Neal holding up?”

“Not very well really. It’s why I’m so late. He begged me not to leave him. Finally, I just had to leave. He was screaming.”

“Okay. Well, we will need rope for sure. I assume we can’t get Walooma close to where he is.”

“No. It’s a narrow trail,” Kidd confirmed. “I do have an idea to run by you, though. We’ll need shovels - our two survival spades will have to do.”

Within minutes they were at the scene in the canyon. Neal had quieted down.

“Hey! Neal! I’m back with Gramps. We have an idea. How you doin’?”

“I’m going to die, right here, you know,” came his subdued reply.

“Not a chance!” Gramps said, getting down on his

hands and knees so he could look into the long, narrow opening. Neal's whole body was caught between the stationary rock to his front and the pivoting slab behind him. "Are you hurt anywhere?" he asked.

"I don't think so. Maybe my feet or ankles. They are wedged in so tight I can't move them to see. The rest of me seems okay."

"Alright then. Don't go anywhere. We just need to do some figuring up here."

He turned to Kidd.

"You had an idea?"

"My thought is that we dig a trench out this way - just wide enough to slip a long pole into. With the end of the pole down by his feet we pry the rock back from up here so he can get loose. Then, he climbs up the pole."

"The plan has a good chance of working if there isn't rock right under this topsoil," Gramps said.

Kidd began digging. His enthusiasm dimmed as six inches below the surface he hit solid rock.

"Plan B I guess," Kidd said. "Any idea what Plan B might be?"

Gramps called down to Neal.

"Can you see anything below you? Is there like a floor or is it just open?"

Neal managed to move his head into position so he could take a look.

"Looks like a rock across the crack about two feet below me. The bottom of the swinging rock is just above it."

"If we drop a rope with a big loop on the end could you work it down around you so it's under your armpits?" Gramps called.

"Not sure. I can try. I can move the rock behind me a little."

"Well, here comes the loop. You take your time and try

to get it in place, Okay?"

"Okay."

The loop was lowered and Kidd managed to drape it around Neal's head and neck.

"The rest is up to you, I guess," Kidd said.

Whether Neal could make it work or not, it would occupy him for a while and keep his mind off the downside of his situation.

"What we need," Gramps said, looking around, "Is some other way to force the bottom of that slab back away from his foot without turning it so much that it presses too hard against the upper part of his body."

"How about dropping in rocks that will force the slab back?" Kidd asked.

"They would have to be just the right size. If any were too big and wedged in above where the slab pivots, we'd be worse off than we are now."

"Gravel!" Kidd said. "The ground is covered with gravel. We shovel it in and when it gets high enough its weight will force the rock slab back just a little at a time."

"I think we now have Plan B," Gramps said.

He explained to Neal what they were going to try. He made it sound like a very simple process that was bound to work and Neal seemed to feel better immediately.

"I got the rope around me like you said," he called.

"Great. We'll get this end tied to a tree up here so you won't be able to slip in any further."

"Gee thanks! I hadn't thought of that possibility!" Neal said, suddenly re-troubled by his situation.

"I'm lowering my hanky down on a stick. Keep it over your mouth and nose as we work. I imagine there will be lots of dust from the gravel. Keep your eyes closed," Gramps said.

The two began the long task of carrying gravel to the

crevice one shovelful at time and carefully releasing it in a spot where it would not touch Neal and yet be close enough to do what needed to be done. They worked for several hours.

“I think I feel it beginning to give,” Neal called at last.

“As soon as you can slip your feet out of your shoes let us know,” Gramps said.

They continued to drop gravel into the hole for some time.

“Got them free!” came the great news from below. “I could climb up the rope if you could hold it out away from the rock.”

Soon a large branch had been cut and set in place so they could ease the rope back into the middle of the opening. Minutes later Neal’s hands appeared. He grasped the branch that spanned the opening and with a little help was soon back, sitting on the surface.

The other two sat as well, exhausted but happy.

“So, how have things been up here while I was away?” Neal said, attempting what may have been the first joke of his life, as he dried his face with the now filthy handkerchief.

Kidd responded by playfully jumping on top of him. They rolled on the ground for some time - first one on top and then the other. Finally, Neal, on his back, said, “I give up. I’d rather cry,” thinking that would bring an end to the affair.

Not so. At that, Kidd – straddling him – applied his fingers to Neal’s ribs and sent his new friend into a fit of giggles and gyrations. Kidd had soon had enough as well but their tension was gone.

“Truce?” Kidd asked.

“Truce!” Neal agreed.

They high fived (if that can really be done while lying flat on your back).

“Boy. I can’t thank you guys enough, you know.” Neal said sitting up again. “It seems like you just keep helping me

out and there's nothing I can do for you."

"Hey, your job isn't to repay us. It's just to build yourself a really great life. Haven't you heard anything I've been saying to you?" Kidd said only halfway joking.

"I know. It's just hard to begin thinking like that. Just doing things because it's the right thing to do is s-o-o-o-o different from doing stuff to keep things all even with everybody or to get something you want."

"A wonderful lunch of now, long-cold, tomato soup and fried ham sandwiches awaits us back at Walooma when you think you're ready," Gramps said.

The promise of food seemed to work the magic and called for a pushing shoving footrace back to the big old bus.

They had soon finished the re-heated lunch. Gramps examined Neal's feet and ankles and pronounced them fit. By the time they got back on the road they were nearly four hours behind schedule. Kidd and Neal emailed Neal's mother to explain the delay in a way they hoped would not upset her.

As the afternoon wore on, Neal began feeling more and more pain and stiffness in his legs, back and arms. One ankle had swollen but that often happens when some part of the body has received intense pressure for such a long time. Gramps continued to think that there was nothing to be concerned about.

Neal still had something on his mind.

"Those shoes that I lost back there were the new ones you bought me, Gramps. I'm really sorry about that, you know."

Before Gramps could speak, Kidd was inspired to respond – so he did, of course!

"Try to think that those shoes represent the way you used to walk through life – taking whatever you wanted, hurting anybody who got in your way, and thinking only about yourself. Those shoes are buried forever back there under a

ton of gravel. Just let those old ways of walking all over other people stay buried with them.”

Gramps caught a glimpse of Neal through the rear-view mirror. He saw the boy nodding – slowly and deliberately – thoughtfully. There was no need for Gramps to add a thing.

The next several minutes passed in silence, and then . . .

“Pecos, twelve miles,” Kidd said reading the road sign.

“I’m really scared,” Neal said taking deep breaths. “How are we going to do this?”

Gramps spoke.

“Well, I thought we would meet your family and answer any questions your mother has about the past few days. Then Kidd and I will leave you and your family alone to begin working things out. You know what has to be done. You know they’ll be pretty skeptical – you’ll have to prove yourself and the genuineness of your intentions at every turn during the next few weeks and months. There is no way Kidd and I can do that for you.”

“I suppose you’re right. I will miss you two so much. I wish you’d stay around for a while at least.”

“It’s probably best that you get right on with building your new life,” Gramps explained. “You have lots of folks on your list to talk with. That part time job you’re going to find will take up most of your free hours. You are going to be a very busy guy.”

Neal sighed and nodded.

“It just doesn’t seem fair to finally have two best friends and have to give them up so soon.”

“Thinking in terms of what’s fair and what isn’t fair, will never get you far,” Kidd said. “It will make you mad, maybe. It will keep you upset, maybe, but it can’t help you deal with how things really are - it won’t change anything. Gramps and I just never consider ‘fair’. We say, ‘Okay this is how it is, now what

do we need to do?”

“Sounds easier than I think it’s going to be,” Neal said.

“Once you’ve trained yourself to think that way, life gets much easier. Just keep plugging away at it.”

“Does that shower of yours work while this thing is moving?” Neal asked. “I got filthy down in that hole.”

“Don’t know why it wouldn’t. You haven’t left yourself much time, though,” Gramps said.

“There’s a little roadside park just before you reach Pecos. You can stop there if you need to until I get finished. I’ll hurry.”

He left. Kidd spoke.

“He’s a really nice guy. It’s hard to believe he’s done all the bad things he says he has. Do you think he can pull this new Neal thing off in such a small town where he has such a bad reputation?”

“He’ll need some support. Make sure he has your email address. I’m sure you will be able to help a lot over the next few weeks.”

“I’d already thought of that. I wonder where we’ll be in two weeks.

“My guess would be Montana. Looks like the state line is right ahead.”

“We made it! We really made it,” Kidd said pumping his arms in the air.

He turned to look up at Grandma.

“I think she’s smiling more than usual,” he said, knowing full well the picture hadn’t changed one bit.

They pulled into the park at the outskirts of Pecos. It was on a rise and they could look down into the small town. It looked like most of the other small towns they had come across. A school with a football field behind it, a business district, two churches, a park, and narrow streets laid out so as to mimic a checker board. It sat in a lush green bowl with

gentle rolling hills rising away from it all directions.

“It’s the people, isn’t it?” Kidd said at last.

“The people?” Gramps asked not understanding.

“All the little towns look pretty much alike and yet each one is really very different. It’s not their streets or houses or buildings that make them different. It’s the people.”

“I see. Yes, it’s the people alright. It’s always the people.”

Neal reappeared from the back. He had cleaned up his old shoes, combed his hair and looked great in his new jeans and tight blue T-shirt.

“See the school?” He asked, pointing through the windshield toward the town.

“My house it cattycornered from it to the northeast – two story – yellow.”

“Ready?” Gramps asked, starting the motor.

“I guess I have to be. Sure. Let’s get on with it. I’m going to cry. I never cry. They’ll think I’m some damaged clone you two conjured up. Come to think of it I suppose I am – well, not damaged – you know what I meant.”

Five minutes later, in the Montana twilight, Walooma pulled to a stop in front of Neal’s house ready to deliver the changed but not damaged clone.

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

### **Heading for Montana: The Clone is Home**

Gramps turned off the motor and set the brakes as Neal spoke.

“I’m going to say goodbye to you two in here right now before we go meet my family. I can’t remember ever hugging any of them and I’m afraid it might make them feel bad to see me doing that with strangers. I sure hope I’ll be able to hug Mom.”

Gramps stood and opened his arms.

“I told you I’d cry.” Neal said, completing the embrace and holding it for a long, long time. Words weren’t necessary and he knew that. He released and looked Gramps in the face. He nodded silently and patted his old friend’s shoulder.

Turning around he found Kidd waiting with open arms. Kidd, of course, had things to say! He pulled Neal close.

“We love you, man. We’re proud of you. We know you have what it takes. Keep us up to date on things. We’ll always be here for you. Never more than an ‘e’ away.”

Neal nodded, his head still close against Kidd’s. Again, he moved back and looked Kidd in the face. Gramps furnished a hanky and Neal dried his eyes. Kidd handed him a sack which contained his old clothes.

“That picture I drew for you, Kidd - that second day - it’s

on your bunk for later.”

Kidd nodded that he understood.

“You go let them know you’re home,” Gramps said. “When you’re ready for us just give us the sign.”

Neal’s feet had hardly touched the ground before his mother came hurrying down the sidewalk to greet him. It was just the kind of warm, long, easy hug it should have been. Neal was surprised how natural it felt. He wanted to hold it forever. His sisters soon gathered around and Neal saw that each of them also received a hug and a kiss. The youngest stood back and looked him over as if to ask, “Who is this guy in my brother’s skin?”

Neal motioned for Gramps and Kidd to join them. Introductions were made. They stood there in the lawn talking for another twenty minutes. When it came right down to it, there wasn’t much to report. They had met, talked, wrestled, gone through the accident and rescue, and there they were. The truly important events were not things you could see or touch or relate. That part of the story would have to unfold as time went on. It would need to be demonstrated and observed. It would make Neal feel wonderful and his mother and sisters thankful and proud.

“You must be hungry,” his mother said at last, sounding like every mother who had ever welcomed a son home. “Can you two join us?”

“No, but thank you. We need to be on our way,” Gramps said.

Neal’s mother moved Gramps aside.

“You’re a parent so you understand that I can’t thank you enough for whatever it was you did for my son.”

“Yes, I do understand but Neal did most of it himself. For some reason, he’s just kept this wonderful person buried inside all these years.”

“Do you have any advice for me? Neal’s a boy in a

family of females. I didn't have any brothers and my dad died before my first birthday. I've never really been prepared for this?"

"Since you asked, I have three things for you to consider. Gently and consistently make sure Neal always understands that YOU are the parent and that, when you can, you will protect him from making dumb decisions and help him correct those he does make. Let him know that you expect him to be a good and helpful human being. When you see him behaving in that way, let him know how wonderful it is. And perhaps a fourth, if I may. Encourage him to talk while you just listen - don't criticize or even comment during those times. He needs the chance to hear himself think out loud and when he does, he'll be able to separate the good from the inappropriate if you don't make him defend what he says. Mostly he's just trying out possibilities. That's a big part of what adolescence is all about. The surest way to force him into accepting the wrong alternatives is to attack them."

She nodded and patted Gramps on the arm, then turned toward Kidd and kissed him on the cheek.

Taken by surprise Kidd went for the joke.

"Think your oldest daughter might want to express her appreciation in that same manner?"

Neal's sister was beautiful with long black hair and shiny brown eyes. Kidd had been watching her (and drooling!) ever since she had come into view. Hearing his humorous proposal, she somewhat comically, slowly, slinked close to him, ran her fingers through his hair, took his face in her hands, and administered the longest, deepest, most memorable kiss young Kidd had ever experienced – or had ever dreamed of experiencing, for that matter. (So that's how the tongue contributes to a kiss, huh?)

The others clapped and laughed. She stepped back, her hands still on his cheeks.

“My! My! For a little twerp you kiss really good!”

Presently, Kidd began breathing again, but his mind remained as blank as a newly washed chalkboard.

Neal just had to offer his commentary.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever known the ‘little twerp’ to be speechless.”

By then, Kidd had recovered. He spoke as if his tongue were frozen.

“I’d talk, but I believe she swallowed my tongue. Perhaps once more like that and I might recover it.”

It made for a good laugh but not for the proposed second kiss.

A few handshakes later, Gramps and Kidd boarded Walooma and were soon on their way. Neal stood alone in the road and watched his friends disappear into the darkness. He had been right. He would cry.

\* \* \*

Inside his house, Neal sat at the kitchen table and talked while his mother prepared something for him to eat. He couldn’t remember having ever done that before. It felt pretty good. He had a lot to say to his mother. He knew he was rambling but she seemed okay with that. She had taken Gramps’ advice and just listened, a tear, now and then making its way down her quickly turned, ever smiling cheek.

“I’ve grown up and changed a lot the past two weeks. They’ve been the worst days of my life and yet they’ve also probably been the best days of my life if you can understand that. I’ve never been so lonely and scared and discouraged. I’ve never felt so worthless and unlovable – so empty and hopeless – as when I was out there in the World all alone.

“Gramps used the word powerless to describe the way I felt and he was exactly right. All my life I’ve felt powerless – like there was no way I could make things go right for myself. Kidd started talking to me. Me and Kidd probably talked more

the past couple of days than I've talked with all the other kids I've ever known all put together. He's like some Einstein when it comes to life.

"Anyway, about six hours ago, when I was sure I was going to die, I realized how much I loved you and how much I wanted to come back and really become a part of the family – not a thorn in your butts but a helpful part of this family.

"Now, thanks to Gramps and Kidd, I not only have my life back, but I have a pretty good idea about how I need to be living it. I'm not powerless anymore because I'm taking charge of how I want to be – helpful, caring, loving.

"Maybe Kidd explained it best: Positive power - true power - creates, builds, includes, protects and improves things for everybody. Negative power - false power - destroys, hurts, pushes people apart and makes life suck for most everybody.

"What I used to think was my power, was really just the mindless ability to hurt people. Any ignorant dunce can do that. It never earned me respect or love or gave me good feelings deep down inside. People were afraid of me and they disliked me so most of them didn't bother me, but they never really included me either. I only had the power to intimidate - to scare and upset. When other kids acted like my friends it wasn't because they liked me - it was because they were afraid not to act that way. I sort of bought their companionship by agreeing not to beat them up or steal their stuff or ruin things that were precious to them. It was all false – unreal.

"The past three days allowed me to discover one of life's most important lessons. Life isn't worth much when you live among a group of sad and disagreeable people. Life is really great when you live with happy, helpful people. Now I realize that I have the power to help make life wonderful for my family and my neighborhood and even, maybe, little Pecos.

"I didn't really see it before but I've spent most of my life

making your lives unhappy by keeping you upset and angry. All I ever wanted was more attention but actually the more I did those things the worse you felt and the worse life got around here for all of us. I'm sorry for all that. I know that sorry can't change anything in the past. It can't take away all the hurt I've caused. But, from now on that is all over – and that is a promise.

“Kidd and Gramps would say that in the past I chose the life mission they call the Destroyer. I'm going to change that now. I'm going to learn how to be a Builder. A Builder knows that helping others become happy and safe and feel good about themselves builds a family - a World - that is comfortable and safe and helpful for everybody. A Builder understands that he shares the responsibility for making a family a happy, comfortable place to live and grow and that when a person tries to hurt others he only really makes things get worse for everybody including himself.

“I have just one last selfish thing to ask and I know it won't make any sense to you, but I really need this to happen. I need to burn all my old shoes. I'll take the cheapest pair in town to replace them with and never, ever complain.

“If that is what my son needs, that's what we'll do,” his mother said. “You get the shoes. I'll get the kerosene. We'll meet in the alley.”

If Kidd and Gramps had looked back toward Pecos they would have seen a narrow billow of black smoke rising high against the full moon of the bright night sky. Neal's life had hit bottom at a small campfire, beside a river, in the presence of two strangers. Somehow, it seemed right that he begin building his new life in the presence of another fire, one that proclaimed the new Neal, while surrounded by his loving family.

\* \* \*

Back onboard Walooma, the first hour slipped away in

silence, both of them lost in their own private thoughts. The picture which was awaiting Kidd on his bunk was not the gorgeous nude girl he had expected but instead was a portrait of Gramps and Kidd with their heads leaning together. Kidd nodded his approval as he took it forward to show Gramps. It was still on the sketch pad.

“I think Neal caught things just like they are between us,” Kidd said holding it up. “We’ll have to find a frame. It belongs here on the wall next to Grandma.”

“I agree. And the picture underneath that one probably belongs on the wall next to your bunk.” Gramps laughed. (He had peeked, earlier!)

“What picture?” Kidd said lifting the page to search.

“Oh my, my, my, my, my, my!” He and the pad disappeared into the rear.

Gramps smiled and returned his attention to the road. It was the first time he and Walooma had headed down a highway together at night. It was nice. It felt good. He would drive until he became tired. At that point they would stop, find a new little town, and begin the next chapter in Kidd’s Grand Adventure.

The End (for now!)