

CHAPTER THREE

A VISIT FROM BOOMER

Not far from the railroad depot was Willits Elementary School. In front of the schoolhouse, mounted on a tower by four poles, was a large brass bell. An oval-faced girl solemnly pulled on a rope beneath the bell, ringing it loudly. Class was in session.

Inside was a room filled with students, all of them staring intently at their math books. Standing at the blackboard was their teacher, Mr. Grove, a tweedy looking man with wire-rimmed glasses and a green bow tie.

Next to the teacher, wearing a dunce cap and doing penance, was a frowning red-headed boy.

Mr. Grove pointed a finger in the direction of a student in the first row. "Tommy, if you have thirty apples and give Sally five, and Bill six, how many apples will you have left?" he asked.

Tommy, a blond-haired freckled boy, pondered this for a time but could not arrive at a solution.

The teacher scribbled several numbers on the blackboard. "Okay," he said, "forget the apples. Now, if they load thirty cars with logs at Korbelt, and McKenzie brings out five cars with his engine, and Swanson brings out six, how many cars are left for your father's engine to haul?"

Tommy scratched his head and mulled it over for a moment. "Well, sir," he said, "I don't know exactly how many cars, but it'll be every darn log that old locomotive can wiggle with." The class laughed loudly at this piece of humor.

"Settle down," said Mr. Grove. "Let's all take out our paper and pencils for a short quiz."

There were loud moans and groans from the students as their teacher began to chalk math problems on the blackboard.

Sara Parsons, a tomboyish-looking ten-year-old girl wearing striped overalls and an engineer cap, studied her math book. From far off a train whistle blew, a low mournful wail. Her eyes flew to the window.

Mr. Grove glanced over his shoulder and spotted the distracted girl. "Sara, are you still with us?" he asked. There were giggles from the other students.

"Yes, sir," replied Sara, turning her attention to the blackboard.

As Mr. Grove returned to his work, Sara heard barking from outside the classroom. Her eyes flickered back to the window and grew wide.

"It's Boomer Jack," she cried, leaping from her chair. All of her classmates jumped up and ran outside with her to greet the dog.

Mr. Grove sighed and shook his head. "Class dismissed," he mumbled to himself.

The children poured into the schoolyard and gathered around the delighted Boomer. He was playful and affectionate with all of them, but with Sara in particular. He raced around and around the young girl.

Sara laughed and tried to escape. Boomer plowed rapidly after her, licking her and giving out panting grunts. She hugged him and stared warmly into his eyes.

"Where have you been, you naughty dog?" she asked. "Have you been chasing trains again? I want you to stay here with me."

Boomer's ears moved as Sara talked to him. "You will stay this time, won't you?" she asked.

The two then had an interchange of friendly pattings and waggles. Boomer became so enthusiastic with his gleeful capering that he threatened to overturn her.

She picked up a stick and threw it for him to fetch. Boomer caught the stick but did not bring it back. Sara and her classmates chased him around the yard, laughing and shouting.

Boomer, an expert at dodging, waited with the elbows of his forelegs almost on the ground, the stick temptingly in his mouth, until several children were almost upon him. Then he bounced between them and ran to the opposite end of the schoolyard.

Sara smiled. "Here, boy," she said. "Come on." Boomer obediently brought the stick back and laid it at her feet. Will, an overall-clad classmate, ran up, breathless.

“He sho' is a good dawg,” said Will.

“He's the best dog in the whole world,” replied Sara, “and he's mine.”

“Don't he belong to Mrs. Belmont?” he asked.

“No,” she said, irritated. “He doesn't belong to her. Boomer belongs to me.”

Will shrugged it off. “Come on, boy,” he shouted. “Let's play.” Boomer chased after Will. The other children quickly joined in the fun.

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In another part of town, a horse-drawn wagon moved slowly along the street. Painted on its side, in crude letters, was City Dog Catcher.

A coarse, big-bellied man with a walrus mustache and a mouth made for a matchstick slouched behind the reigns of his wagon. This was Horace Fisk. He pulled a whiskey bottle from his pocket, unscrewed the cap and drank deeply.

Fisk was a man who hated dogs. He hated people, too. In fact, there wasn't much he did like. He had a reputation for being mean, and strung as tight as barbed wire. Folks who knew Fisk said his whole life was made up of bitterness and whiskey.

A small dog trotted down the sidewalk, headed toward him. “Darn my eyes,” said Fisk, “a stray.”

He snatched up his net, clambered off the wagon and hunkered down behind a tree. As it moved past, down came the net. The dog yelped in surprise.

Fisk bent down to inspect his frightened captive. It was wearing a collar and a license.

“You think this gives you the right to run free in my town, huh?” He removed the collar and tossed it into a nearby trash can. “Now where's your license, pooch?”

He chuckled to himself as he tossed the little dog in a cage and locked the door.

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Back at school the children lay in the grass, exhausted from their play. Boomer sat beside Sara, panting.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, stroking his head. “When we get home I'll feed you supper. I'll take good care of you, Boomer. You'll see.”

The dog gazed off into the distance. A locomotive whistle blew. His ears pricked up. In one unstoppable motion he leaped to his feet and was off, sprinting across the schoolyard at top speed.

“Come back,” cried Sara. “Please!”

Boomer exited the school yard, rounded a bend and disappeared from sight. The surprise on Sara's face faded to sadness.

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Fisk was standing beside his wagon, whiskey bottle in hand, when he spotted Mr. Belmont headed his way. He quickly stashed the bottle under a tarp.

“Hello, Fisk,” said the mayor.

“Well, if it ain't the honorable Mayor come to check up on me,” he grumbled.

“I take it you've been behaving yourself,” said Mr. Belmont, glancing over at the caged dog. “Not causing any problems, I hope.”

The dog catcher spit grotesquely into the dirt. “Just how much trouble can a fella get into catchin' floppy-eared scoundrels?”

The mayor stepped closer to the wagon and spotted the partially-hidden whiskey bottle. He picked it up and held it aloft.

“I see you're up to your old tricks again,” he said.

“Who the devil put that in there?” said Fisk, innocently.

“This is why you lost your job as deputy,” stated the mayor, shaking the bottle in his face.

“I ain't been drinkin' on the job,” he lied.

“You most certainly have. You're drunk and reeking of whiskey from every pore. You aren't even fit to be a dog catcher in this town. You, sir, are a disgrace to your profession.”

Fisk's eyes narrowed, as they always did when he heard words that he didn't recognize. “Mr. Belmont, I can explain—”

“Save your excuses for someone else.” He tossed the bottle into a nearby trash can and walked off, disgusted.

“Lousy train boss,” mumbled the dog catcher. “You're the reason I lost my job.” He stepped over to the trash can and retrieved his liquor.

At that moment Boomer trotted briskly up the street, a dog on a mission. Fisk's mouth creased into a mirthless smile. “Why, looka that,” he said, snatching up his net and taking cover. “Another stray.”

Boomer moved closer, almost within range now.

“I'll be,” said Fisk. “It's old lady Belmont's dog.” He scowled and gripped the net tighter. “Not fit to be a dog catcher, huh? I'll show him.”

As Boomer loped past he brought down the net. But the nimble dog sidestepped it and rushed off. Fisk lost his balance and fell to the ground with a loud grunt.

“I'll get you, mutt,” he shouted. “You just wait and see. No dog gets away from Horace Fisk.”