

Chapter XXXIV

The journey towards Salina revealed a vivid transformation from rolling prairie to lush farmland. After finding Samson behind the paneled wall in Carlene's trailer, the storm that had consumed Fish over Tuttle Creek Lake faded away. Despite the warm spring sunshine illuminating the world outside, my thoughts were consumed by concern for Poppa.

Will Junior and I occupied the front of the bus, watching for his father's patrol car while Fish and Bobbi engaged in their own distractions. Bobbi, absorbed in painting her nails, cursed the bumps on the road, while Fish appeared deep in thought, likely contemplating Poppa just as I was. Officer Meeks's haunting words about the need for Poppa's family lingered in my mind, amplifying my fears.

Samson found comfort curled up with Lill in front, where she diligently scrubbed away the remnants of ink from his hands. Each stroke seemed to distill the chaos that filled my head into a singular focus—being strong for Poppa. Time ticked agonizingly slowly as we traveled the final stretch of interstate before Bill Meeks guided the bus toward the hospital, my heart racing at the sight of the stark white "H" sign indicating our destination.

Arriving at Salina, we encountered a city still grappling with the aftermath of Rocket's havoc; traffic crawled as repairs were underway. With every signal light out, Bill navigated expertly through the chaos, utilizing his siren when necessary. As we approached the hospital, the sky darkened ominously, yet the cloud merely loomed overhead without releasing any rain.

Upon arrival, we were met by families—Pastor Meeks and Miss Rosemary appeared torn between relief and frustration, while Rocket and Momma looked weary and distraught. The emotional reunion unfolded as Momma rushed to embrace us, her worry manifesting in tight, protective hugs. Rocket attempted to brush off his concerns with bravado, but I sensed the weight he carried for all of us, particularly for Poppa.

Grandpa Bomba, visibly emotional, held onto one of Grandma Dollop's jars, and I felt an overwhelming urge to assure him we were together again as a family. As the initial wave of joy subsided, Momma addressed the unspoken concern about Poppa, her smile fading momentarily before she reassured us of our presence being needed.

In the waiting room, emotions surged; the family dynamics were palpable as tears flowed and prayers were offered. The moment was bittersweet; friendships were strained by circumstance, and as the visit came to a close, I exchanged goodbyes with Bobbi and Will, hoping our paths would cross again.

As the bus prepared to depart, I felt a mixture of relief and sorrow. Although I had finally arrived in Salina, I carried the weight of an impending farewell deep within me, yearning for everything to be right once more .