

Chapter One

"You want to do *what*?" eighteen-year-old Wil Carter asked his grandfather.

Gramps Wilf clicked his tongue. "I know you aren't deaf, my boy. I *said* you and me are going for a road trip for a week or so in the summer."

Wil shook his head, picturing being crammed in his puny hatchback with his ninety-five-year-old grandfather. For "a week or so." Sounded like the start of a really bad cheesy movie: "The Adventures of Young Dude and Grumpy Old Man." Wil thought of more than a fistful of things he'd rather do than drive hundreds of miles with a grouchy old geezer. But he knew there was no use in putting up a fight. He'd end up doing exactly what he always did: what he was told.

All Wil wanted to do over his summer holiday was work over at the corner drugstore and hang out with his buddies. After all, it was going to be his last summer in Winnipeg before he headed out east to go to university. But, no; Gramps had set his plan in motion, yet again, without him even knowing.

"Gramps," Wil said, releasing a sharp breath. "You know that I work at the pharmacy every summer. How am I supposed to earn up my tuition if I'm chauffeuring you around the country? Besides, Mr. Bassey isn't going to give me that much time off. He's short-staffed and —"

"Already taken care of," Gramps interrupted, shuffling over to his favorite recliner, backing up to it, and then plopping himself down. "Jim said he could spare ya for the time we're gone by getting the other gals to take their holidays later. Done."

Wil allowed his jaw to fall slack. "Uh, Gramps? Did it ever dawn on you that, maybe, I'd like to... oh, I don't know... have some fun this summer, being that I have to go to university in the fall?"

Gramps flipped the footrest of his recliner up, scootched his body back, then folded his hands across his belly. He tilted his head down, staring into Wil's pale blue eyes over the rims of his Buddy Holly-styled frames. "What? You got a girlfriend?"

"Well, no."

"Big plans aside from workin'?"

Wil put his hands on his hips then looked up at the ceiling. "No."

"Doin' anything special on your days off aside from slackin' off with those freaky friends of yours at the beach, starin' at those girls you only wish could be your girlfriends?"

Wil looked back down at his grandfather. "Ouch, Gramps. And, yeah. Hello? I said I wanted to have some fun."

Gramps grabbed the remote from the armrest. "Mmm-hmm. Well, 'fun' should be spent doin' things you're interested in and good at."

"Well I'm interested in sitting on the beach, and I'm good at looking at girls. C'mon, Gramps. It's summer. And it's the last one I have in high school. Some of my friends are moving away to go to school and—"

The old man leaned forward and pointed the remote at Wil, who took that as a cue to shut it. "Let's get something straight, son. You're still living under my roof. I know you're a man now and want to be makin' all your own choices, but there's still plenty of things you need to learn about life before you'll make it on your own. And I'm gonna teach you those things this summer. I got some important things I need to show ya. I said we're goin' on a road trip, and that's exactly what we're doing. Now either sit on down and watch the news with me or find something more useful to do."

With that, Gramps pressed the remote with his thumb and Wil heard the TV blaring behind him. The two men glared at each other for a few seconds, then Wil dramatically flopped himself into the green-and-white-checkered barrel chair beside his grandfather's recliner. He put his elbow on the armrest then leaned his cheek onto his fist.

"Can you at least tell me where we'll be going?"

"No."

"What? Why not? If you're going to kidnap me, I should at least know where I'm going. Especially since I have to be the chauffeur."

"We're just gonna make a few stops between here and the other side of Saskatchewan. You'll find out soon enough. And by the way, if I'm kidnapping ya, then you don't need to know exactly where you're goin', now do ya? Since you're the driver, you just gotta go where I say."

From the corner of his eye, Wil saw his grandfather's mouth tug up into a little smirk. Then Gramps cranked the volume loud enough for any passerby outside to hear the news right along with them. Another subtle sign that their conversation was done, at least from Gramps' perspective.

Wil squinted at the TV, heat radiating from the nape of his neck. *Great*, he thought. *A week or more of my summer vacation wasted with His Royal Crankiness.*

He wondered what his grandfather could possibly have left to teach him. Or if he really wanted to know.

Later that night, Wil lay sprawled out on his bed waiting for sleep to come. The dry heat of the house suffocated him, so he shoved his covers to the bottom of the mattress. Gramps kept the heat on all year long due to his ever-increasingly bad circulation, not that he'd acknowledge it. And since Wil's room was on the second floor, all the heat seemed to rise up and get trapped in his room. He pretty much sweated out the summer months.

He folded his hands behind his head, hoping for a cool breeze to come through his wide-open window. Gramps would have had a moose if he'd known he paid for heat that was just flowing out the window. *But, seriously. Put a sweater or blanket on, old man!*

Wil breathed in deeply, allowing the air to slowly escape through his nose. *Oh well.* At least there was some relief from the 1890s-style steel fan blowing across his body from his desk. He closed his eyes.

The fan made a metal clank every few seconds. The occasional car zoomed down the avenue behind the house. The old pipes whistled and popped. Every so often, Gramps' snores rumbled from the main floor.

He shouldn't have been such a jerk to his grandfather earlier. Experience taught Wil the harder he tried resisting his Gramps' orders, the more stubborn the old fart got in making sure they were carried out. Then, suddenly, a dude finds himself foolishly traveling across the Trans-Canada Highway for part of his precious summer vacation. And since the entire "vacation" would be between Winnipeg and the Alberta-Saskatchewan border, the view would be nothing more than: flat, flat, flat... oh, a cow... flat, flat, flat... oh, a bale of hay. Then being stuck in his small car with Gramps barking orders at him like a drill sergeant with hemorrhoids was enough to drive the most even-tempered guy batty.

Especially when considering the fact that Gramps wasn't a decrepit old man, but a feisty old dude full of fire and thunder. The man had more energy than guys Wil's age. And with his attitude being he's old enough to do and say whatever he feels like, he got himself into more trouble than a toddler in a china shop. But Gramps said he had some things Wil needed to see, and when Gramps Wilf gave an order, you flipping well stepped in line or got a "whopping." Or at least a verbal one.

Wil rolled over on his side and sighed. He opened his eyes, barely making out the picture on his nightstand. He reached out for the old wooden frame, hovering his fingers over the foggy figures, then grabbed it and pulled it closer to his face.

Wil had been only five when his parents died. He barely remembered them. He recalled coming home from kindergarten the day his parents were supposed to have been back from their vacation, and his Aunt Jaquie being there instead of them.

"You have to come back with me to Gramps' house, Wil," she had said. "I packed a bag for you. Go get whatever else you need for bedtime."

He had pouted. "But I was over there for a long time. Today was when they were supposed to come back. They promised they'd be here."

There'd been no real explanation for what had happened. Aunt Jaquie had just said something about a terrible accident and that Wil had to stay with Gramps until things were...sorted out. That had been thirteen years ago.

Wil's mom had been an only child, but his dad, Gramps' son, had been the oldest of five kids. He had other aunts and uncles that he could have stayed with, but he'd heard they'd all decided Gramps was the best person to raise him. Guess they had been afraid

he'd have turned down a wrong path from having had a "bad start." They had figured he needed someone who'd be firmer with him—to keep him on the straight and narrow. He guessed it had been the best decision under the circumstances.

Gramps was the only parent Wil had ever known. He guessed the old man loved him, or he'd never have taken him in. But Gramps sure never made things easy on him. And there had never been an overwhelming show of emotion or loving tenderness between the two of them. Wil figured it had to do with him being a boy, and Gramps wanting to make sure his grandson grew up strong, not needing anybody else to depend on.

Just like him.

As Wil had gotten older, his parents' faces seemed to fade... just like looking at their picture in the dim light. And it hurt. He still heard his mother singing his favorite lullaby. He felt the sting of a baseball in the new leather glove his dad had bought him when they'd practiced catch in Gramps' front yard. But their faces felt a little less vivid with each passing year.

Maybe the trip would do Wil some good. Gramps might want to teach him a few things, but maybe he could learn more about his parents too.

And himself.

He replaced the picture on the nightstand and rolled over on his stomach, drying his cheeks on his pillowcase. He'd play the smart-butt to his buddies about the dreaded trip. "Yeah, gotta take the old man on a stupid week-long field trip. Blah, blah, blah."

Secretly, he'd use the time as a way to find answers of his own.

The fan blew cool air up across his back, fluffing his hair around like his mom used to do for a second, then traveled back down his legs. After a few more flips and flops, he was lulled into a restless sleep.