

## Chapter Four – The Box at Lionel Bixby’s Heel

High above them, the curved warehouse ceiling was filled with glowing lights. The floor was filled with kinds of floats—a sleek jet plane, a waterfall, and a skinny giraffe as tall as a two-story house. Ladders, scaffolding, and over a hundred volunteers who were busy decorating surrounded the floats. When Richard breathed in through his nose, he smelled cinnamon, pine, fresh hay, and of course, roses.

When he saw the wide hat of Lionel Bixby through the other floats, he touched Maddie’s arm and pointed.

“There it is!”

Maddie yawned.

“This a-way,” Gramps said.

When they reached the sign-in table, they met a woman with glasses, a clipboard, and short, purple hair. A plastic badge pinned to her sweater read: *Grand Parade Volunteer Coordinator*.

When the woman saw them, she frowned.

“No more volunteers,” she said flatly. “The judging is about to start.”

“Oh, that’s OK,” Gramps said. “We’re just here to look. My daughter Hannah is the coordinator for one of the floats.”

The woman with purple hair checked one of the clipboards.

“Which float?” she asked.

“The best one,” Richard said proudly.

“He’s right,” Gramps added. “Pretty soon, our float will be the with the *Spirit* award.”

“I mean who *sponsored* it.” The woman replied.

“The city of Los Topos.”

The women glared.

“I know that one. That’s the float with the oil driller on it. Poor choice if you ask me.”

Richard looked puzzled.

“Excuse me?” Gramps said, sounding irritated. “Lionel Bixby founded our town. What on earth are you talking about?”

“Oil drilling ruined the habitat,” the woman said, mumbling as she made name badges for them. “Dozens of animal species died out because of drilling and fossil fuels. That’s hardly something to celebrate with an award.”

Gramps took the badges without saying anything.

“Judging starts in twenty minutes,” the woman said.

As they walked away, Richard saw the Gramps was annoyed.

Was it something the woman with the purple hair had said? He wondered why she was so upset at Lionel Bixby. Cars, planes, and most machines needed fossil fuels, the kind that came from oil deposits like the one Lionel Bixby discovered. Why was that a bad thing? Would having him on the float really hurt their chances?

“Richard come here,” Gramps said. With a groan, he knelt down and put a hand on Richard’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about what that woman said.”

“But is she right?” Richard asked. “Is Lionel Bixby a bad choice to be on the float?”

“Not at all,” Gramps said. “If we get all hot and bothered over one thing *someone* doesn’t like... all that does is ruin the fun for everyone else.”

While Gramps spoke with some of the volunteers, Richard circled the float. It was tall, colorful, and much grander than he imagined! The grassy hill was as high and steep as a small pyramid.

He opened his notebook. He turned back to the notes he'd taken about the float's design. *Four wheels. Grassy hill. Oranges and cherries. Oil Derrick...* one by one he wrote them in a list.

But where was Lionel Bixby?

Richard backed away from the float and looked up.

Yep, *there he was!*

The founder of Los Topos stood tall and proud.

He had a wide brown hat, a broad smile, and one of his arms was raised high, ready to wave at the passing crowds.

Richard put down his notebook and looked closer at Lionel Bixby's blue jeans. They were covered in blue flower petals. Near the back of one leg, the decorations weren't quite finished, and he saw that the leg was a bundle of wire with a steel pole running down the center. When he looked down to where Lionel Bixby's boots met the float's grassy floor, he saw that the steel pole connected to the *chassis*, the structure that held the wheels, the brakes, and the motor that drove the float forward. Somewhere inside the chassis, Richard knew that a hidden driver sat with a steering wheel and drive the float.

When he reached the heel of Lionel Bixby's undecorated boot, Richard stopped. Hidden behind some of the long thrushes that gave the boot its brown color, he felt something firm and solid. He pulled the thrushes away and found a sturdy black box with a brass keyhole. Feeling around, he found three sides. A fourth side was hidden, buried beneath the green carpet of the grassy hill.

*What was this?*

He didn't remember a hidden box being in the design. But some floats had surprise features. Maybe the box would open with a gust of confetti, or maybe a flock of doves would fly over the crowd. Maybe it was a secret trick that would help the float win an award!

Richard thought of the legend—every year, *it was said that the Mayor and his gopher rode along in the Parade*. If the box was really the door to a tunnel, could this be a spot where a gopher hid?

Of course, no gopher could *build* a box like that.

Knowing that his Grampa would love to see this and investigate, Richard turned—and he bumped right into someone tall and sturdy.

“Don't touch that,” a strange voice grumbled.

Richard backed away, and when he looked up, he saw a giant.

A man with tattoos on his arms, a thick, graying beard, and a black tee-shirt towered over him. The man's hands looked rough and callused, and they were streaked with oil. Richard caught a faint smell of gasoline and cigarettes.

“I...”

But before he could finish, the man leaned forward and pulled the thrushes back over the box. When the man turned his face toward him, Richard shivered. A purple-black scar ran from the man's eye to the corner of his mouth.

“You weren't supposed to find this,” the man said.

When Richard stepped back, the man stepped forward.

The colored scar on the man's face reminded him of a slippery, dark eel.

“Where are your parents?” the man murmured, giving Richard a mean, scowling look.

“I'm...with my Gramps,” Richard said. “We worked on this float—”

“Why don't you go find him?” the man interrupted.

Richard turned and hurried away.

His notebook was tight in his arms.

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