

The High Cheese

Lane Walker

LOCAL LEGENDS

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The High Cheese by Lane Walker

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*This book is written
for all the big dreamers—
for the ones who always swung on two strikes
and held their heads high
even when they struck out.*

LOCAL LEGENDS

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The High Cheese

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- 1 -

Prologue

This is it; the big game will be decided in the bottom of the ninth inning.

This entire baseball game was like a fairy tale or something out of a storybook. Before the game, my Bunz Town Badgers had an almost zero-percent chance of ever beating the Omaha Outlaws. In fact, the undefeated Outlaws, a powerhouse in Nebraska, were ranked nationally.

My Badger team was...well, in no simple terms, awful.

But not today...

For a 12-year-old boy, nothing was better than summer vacation. I didn't have to worry about

school, and I was able to play my favorite sport—baseball.

In fact, I was obsessed with baseball. The sport was all I thought about and watched. Someday I wanted to play in the big leagues. Baseball was so much more than just a game for me. I started playing when I was six years old and instantly fell in love with the sport. When I was seven years old, I had my first game-winning hit. From there my passion for the game just grew and grew.

People in Los Angeles knew I was an elite baseball player. I was big for my age, already standing 6'1" and weighing around 170 pounds. I always played first base. My travel ball coach always told me how much he loved having such a big target with long arms on first base. From then on, playing first base became a part of who I was.

Most of those great memories were tied to Los Angeles. In California, I play year-round baseball, enjoying the mild temperatures. I played for the Southgate Sharks.

The Sharks were structured and organized, had

THE HIGH CHEESE

a big cooperate sponsor and the best coaching staff in all of L.A. The team, a baseball powerhouse, was highly regarded throughout all of California. We traveled on a team bus, enjoyed the best gear, and won nearly all our games.

Our head coach, Coach Abke, had been nominated and then inducted into the Little League Baseball Hall of Fame. To even be considered he had to play in a chartered local Little League, as well as become a recognized role model as an adult. Coach is known and recognized across the country as a baseball genius.

The best part about Coach Abke was his emphasis on ethics and effort before winning. Parents loved his attention to character and the priority he placed on core values. No wonder he was an inductee into the Hall of Fame!

Make no mistake, Coach Abke was a winner, and he ran a winning program. During his 30-year career, he had a .890 winning percentage.

But I was no longer in California; I was standing in a farm field turned baseball diamond in

rural Nebraska. I wasn't playing for the Southgate Sharks; I was now playing first base for the Bunz Town Badgers.

I was playing on a team in the small Nebraska town of Bennington—far away from the big buildings and bright lights of L.A.

The transition from Los Angeles, California, to Bennington, Nebraska, had been difficult.

Even so, winning this game might have more meaning than any other win in which I have played a part. In no way could we possibly win this game. *Or can we?*

The undefeated Omaha Outlaws reminded me a lot of my Sharks team in L.A. With the careful grooming of their coaches, their elite team members were skilled at playing their various positions. Several of their team members could have easily played on the Sharks in L.A.

On the other hand, the Badgers didn't have a single kid who could have made my Sharks team.

The first game between the Outlaws and the Badgers, the Outlaws took the game 15-0 in a

three-inning mercy. That defeat had taken place two months ago, and much had changed about the Badgers.

Even before the first pitch was thrown, I knew this game would be different. I just didn't know if we had enough talent and skill to keep the game close.

To my surprise, we did.

On that day in July, the Bunz Town Badgers played an almost perfect game against the Outlaws—almost perfect...

Playing a perfect game was the only way that we could have even kept the game close. Even though we were playing the best baseball this team had ever played, I just knew it still wouldn't be enough.

We *needed* a miracle.

In the bottom of the ninth inning, we held a slim 3-2 lead. The Outlaws had the bases loaded with two outs.

Coach Cannon called time and approached the mound.

Does Kent have enough in his tank to finish the

game? Can he pitch and get one more guy out, ensuring the win?

Kent's exhaustion was obvious. He had just walked the last two batters to load the bases. He had worked so hard as he pitched the game of his life.

Coach motioned for one of our guys to take the mound for the last out.

There's no way this guy can win the game for us!

The chances of the Badgers' pulling off the greatest upset in Little League baseball history was all but gone. Everyone else was just as stunned by Coach's choice as I was. The huge crowd fell silent.

The pitcher took a couple of warm-up pitches; the umpire signaled for the batter to take the box.

-2-

“Billy Kramer, take first base,” yelled Coach Abke.

At that exact moment, I knew I had made the team. I was officially a Southgate Shark!

I had worked so hard to be ready for the Southgate Sharks baseball tryouts. The previous two years, I had played in a recreational league. Last year, the coaches had voted me MVP, and I had completely fallen in love with the game of baseball. After that season, my mom was approached by several travel baseball coaches, encouraging me to try out for their team.

The only team I wanted to play for was the Sharks. At my school, the Sharks were the only

team the kids talked about wanting to play for. After all, the Southgate Sharks was one of the premiere baseball teams in all of L.A.

Play for that team is exactly what I had been doing for the past four years. I played baseball nine months out of the year—from April through November. Our team traveled all over the country, playing in Texas, Michigan and even in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, at the Cal Ripken Experience. Some kids might have gotten sick of playing that much baseball, but not me, I loved it!

My dad is a baseball fanatic too. He had grown up playing second base and loved his Los Angeles Dodgers. However, because of my dad's job, my mom was the one who usually took me to my games and attended them all.

His super-cool job is working as a marine biologist at the Southern California Marine Institute. For the past three years from June through August, he leaves to study the migratory and reproductive patterns of the great white sharks at Guadalupe Island in Mexico.

THE HIGH CHEESE

The island of Guadalupe is volcanic and has towering cliffs and caves. Dad takes thousands of pictures and texts me the best ones to keep me updated on his adventures. My favorites are during the morning hours when the cliffs glow a magnificent orange. The water around the island has a high density of fish, sea turtles, California sea lions, elephant seals and lobster.

The orange caves of Guadalupe are safe havens for the sea lions and elephant seals. The high density of these lions and seals provides ample feeding opportunities for the great white sharks.

I love sharks too; my hair tingles every time my dad sends me a photo of a giant white shark. The great white shark is the largest of all the toothed sharks. They can grow up to 21 feet and weigh over 5,000 pounds.

Dad loves his time at Guadalupe Island, but I know he misses seeing me play baseball during those summer months. While I wish he was there, I know he is doing what he loves and always comes home in August with some amazing stories.

So, for obvious reasons, my mom is my main cheerleader at my baseball games. She willingly drives me all over to play the game that I love.

I should have paid closer attention the last week of school to Mom. She was much quieter—almost sad, but I was so busy with baseball practice and the end of sixth grade that I missed several indicators that would have told me something was wrong. With the excitement at the end of the school year on everyone's mind, I was looking forward to the warm California sun, a summer full of sunflower seeds and the RBIs awaiting me.

I had been totally oblivious to the late-night calls, and I thought the stress my mom was under was because Dad would soon be leaving for his summer expedition to Guadalupe Island. But then, something seemed to be very different about Mom as she prepared for his leaving this time.

Knowing that I would be very upset with her news, Mom had waited until the last day of school to tell me. When she picked me up from school, I could tell she wanted to talk to me about some-

THE HIGH CHEESE

thing very important. Little did I know how my life was about to be altered. I finally understood why Mom had been so quiet and almost sad.

That May my world was turned upside down, and everything changed.

- 3 -

“Billy, we need to talk. I have some sad news I need to tell you,” she said.

I braced myself against the back seat of the passenger side of the car.

“It’s Grandma Sally; she’s not doing well.”

My thoughts went to my grandma who lived in Bennington, Nebraska. Even though she lived thousands of miles away, we enjoy a close relationship with her. We spent every Thanksgiving in Bennington and flew Grandma to L.A. a couple of times each year. Grandma Sally was witty and one of the funniest people I know. My grandpa had died several years earlier, so Grandma lives alone in the same house in which Mom had grown up.

“*Not doing well?* What does that mean?” I asked concerned.

“Her doctors think Grandma is starting to show signs of dementia,” Mom said.

“Dementia? Is that like cancer or something?” I asked.

“No, honey, it’s not cancer. Dementia is a disease that causes people to forget or get confused. Sometimes they have trouble speaking and taking care of themselves,” explained Mom.

Grandma Sally literally is the opposite of all those things. She remembers every little detail and has no problem being independent.

“Taking care of someone with dementia can be very hard and stressful. Sometimes doctors recommend more direct care—like living in a special home designed for people with dementia,” she continued.

“What? They are thinking about making Grandma leave her house? They can’t!” I declared.

“They need to do what is best for her. This is not easy on anyone, Billy—especially Grandma Sally.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. One moment everything had been perfect: I was excited about summer and celebrating the end of another school year. In the next moment, I was overcome with emotion. Mom sensed my distress, and the rest of our ride home was in silence. I fought back the tears. I hadn't ever thought about anything happening to my grandma. In my eyes, she was unstoppable.

"It sounds like Grandma needs us," I finally said as we pulled in our driveway.

"I am really glad to hear you say that, Billy," Mom said.

Then she added, "That is the other part that I wanted to talk to you about. We are going to spend the summer in Bennington with Grandma. The doctors said in August we will all decide where Grandma will live."

Spend the summer in Bennington? Is she really serious?

"Mom, what about baseball? What about the Sharks?" I asked frantically.

THE HIGH CHEESE

Within those precious few minutes, my entire life changed. All the baseball weekends with friends, the summer nights playing under the lights and the thought of another city championship vanished.

Summer is my time!

The next two months were what I looked forward to more than anything else on earth. I loved my grandma and wanted to be there for her as she had always been there for us, but I didn't know how I could miss a complete summer of baseball. I was sure my Shark teammates and coaches would be disappointed, but I knew they would be able to move on and find another first baseman.

What am I supposed to do?

My world was falling apart.

Mom could tell how disappointed and sad I was. I was trying to deal with two big hurts—the news about grandma and the thought of a summer without baseball.

Mom turned off the car, and the two of us sat there in silence. She was on the verge of crying,

and I was trying my best not to make her sadness any worse. On the inside, I was completely devastated.

After a couple minutes, Mom took a deep breath and said, “Billy, I am sure they have baseball in Bennington.”

-4-

There was no way Nebraska baseball could even be mentioned in the same breath as baseball in California. The weather on the West Coast allows baseball players to workout, practice and play baseball year-round. Some of the best and biggest stars in professional baseball grew up playing baseball in California. The only fact I knew about Nebraska is the state has cornfields—lots of cornfields.

I thought about asking Mom if I could just live with Coach Abke for the summer so I could still play for the Sharks. But the thought of not being with my mom for that long was too much. I didn't want to spend two months away from her, plus I knew she would need my help with Grandma Sally.

The matter of our move was already settled; the next week we would be flying to Nebraska.

My next conversation would be a difficult one. I had to call Coach Abke to tell him that his first baseman wouldn't be there for the summer season.

Thankfully, Mom had already given Coach a heads up, and he reassured me that I was doing right. "Stay sharp, Billy, and you will have a spot on the Sharks in the fall when you return." That promise made me feel better about having to leave, but I still wondered how much I would miss with the Sharks by not playing all summer.

Dad helped us load up the car. He was going to drop us off at the airport on his way to catch a plane for his Mexico expedition.

He planned to fly to Nebraska in July to visit. His shark expedition was leaving tomorrow, and we wouldn't have much contact with him for the next three weeks. Cellular signal is sparse around the remote island, so Dad planned on checking in when the team returned to the mainland to refuel and get more supplies.

THE HIGH CHEESE

By now, I was getting used to Dad's summer schedule. He dropped us off at Los Angeles International Airport. Our flight was leaving at 9:00 a.m., and with the time change and flight time, we would arrive in Nebraska around 2:00 p.m.

During the flight, many questions were running through my mind. Most of them centered around baseball. I figured I would join a local team in Bennington to stay fresh like Coach had told me. I knew I would already be a week late. I didn't like not starting the season with a new team and hoped the coach in Bennington would give me a chance to play first base.

What if they already had their own first basemen? Would he be a better player than me? Even though I was good at baseball, I always had a low confidence. Being so much bigger than everyone else my age didn't help me feel good. Everyone always talked about how they wished they were my size, but I figured they only said that because they weren't my size.

Being so tall and a little overweight for my age

was something I thought about often. Although I never really talked about it to anyone, my physique was often on my mind.

The flight was long, and for the most part, painless. I listened to music and read. Sitting in the window seat, my mom rested, leaning against the window. I tried resting, nodded off and started dreaming a dream I have had before.

I was up to bat with the game on the line. For some reason in my dream, I couldn't swing my bat. I stood there frozen and watched three straight strikes right down the middle. Our team lost. After the third strike, I stood watching the other team celebrate while I remained standing in the batter's box with my bat ready.

"Billy, are you okay?" I heard Mom ask as she grabbed my arm, waking me. Startled, I woke up to see several people on the plane staring at me.

Note to self: no more sleeping on the plane. I never wanted to experience that nightmare again.

Several hours later, the plane touched down in Omaha, Nebraska. As soon as we disembarked, we

grabbed our luggage and started to head toward the main gate. As we got closer and closer, I heard a familiar voice.

“Billy Boy! Billy Boy, over here! It’s Grammy!” called Grandma Sally in a high-pitched, excited voice. I turned to see my 73-year-old grandmother holding a sign she had made with a huge picture of me on it.

I smiled and jogged over as she gave me a big bear hug.

“Hello, Billy Boy! I am so glad you had time to come visit your old grandma!”

As soon as I heard Grandma say that, I knew Mom hadn’t told her how long we planned to stay. Maybe the best-case scenario would be staying only a week or two, and I could return to the Sharks.

As we walked out of the airport, Grandma was in a good mood. We laughed as she joked about this guy and his dog who had been waiting in the terminal.

She is fine. Mom must have been overexaggerating, I thought. Maybe the doctors didn’t really know

Grandma, and she was being silly the day she was in their office.

One thing was certain, Grandma was fine and exactly the way I remembered her at Thanksgiving. She was still full of life and happy.

Maybe this will be a short trip.

When we reached the parking lot, we walked down the rows. The parking lot was filled with all kinds of vehicles. We started walking down Row 7 and then turned to walk down Row 8 and then Row 9. Grandma just kept walking and walking down each row. After a couple of minutes, I noticed we were back in Row 7.

“Mom, do you know where you parked?” my mom finally asked.

Turning around, Grandma looked different; she appeared to be embarrassed and confused.

“I just can’t seem to remember,” she said softly.

-5-

Her inability to find the car was the first sign we had that something was different with Grandma. On the 20-minute ride home from the Omaha Airport, Grandma seemed fine again. One time she called me *Brett*, my cousin's name. I just smiled and did what Grandma asked.

The whole experience felt strange. Grandma was still herself, but something was different. After that, for the rest of the night Grandma was alert and fine. After dinner, I went to my room and put away the rest of my clothes.

Maybe our stay will be longer than just one week.

Grandma lived right outside of Bennington on a gravel road. Several other houses were spread

out along the dirt road, but the area was somewhat isolated.

Grandma owned a couple of acres with a large pond at the back of the property. Fishing in her pond was one of my favorite pastimes to do when we were visiting.

That night I was tired from the flight and the traveling. I had no problem falling asleep in the old farmhouse. The next morning, I woke from a deep sleep to an odd sound. I was nervous so I stayed as still as I could.

I heard it again.

Then I realized I was hearing a rooster. His crowing was loud, piercing, and distinctive. I walked over to the window to look out and saw a coop full of 15 chickens or so with a loud, proud rooster crowing as he strutted on the top of the nesting house.

Wiping my eyes, I walked downstairs to the smell of breakfast. Bacon, eggs and pancakes filled the table. Grandma was so excited; she had gotten up early to cook us a homemade breakfast.

“Billy, I see you met, or should I say *heard*, Victor,” Grandma said.

“If Victor is the annoying chicken that woke me up, then yes, I heard Victor,” I groaned.

“He’s not so bad. Victor always makes sure I don’t sleep the day away,” said Grandma.

I looked at the clock above the stove; it was precisely 7:00 a.m. “Grandma, does he do that every day?” I asked.

“No, honey, he only does that on the days that end in -y,” she said with a smile.

Got it. In other words, yes, he does that every day. Sleeping in was something I always looked forward to during the summer. Sleeping in was the second thing I needed to take off my summer list.

After breakfast, I went out and started fishing in the pond. It was so peaceful in the morning, and there were plenty of fish. I had caught a couple when I heard some noise filtering through the woods. I put down the pole and walked closer. When I got to the edge of the pond, I could hear two very distinct voices coming from about 100

yards away. I knew they had to be one of Grandma's neighbors, so I crept closer to hear the conversation.

Suddenly I heard a familiar sound—a baseball hitting a glove. I would never mistake that sound!

I peeked through the bushes to see a father and his son playing catch. The boy was about my age but much smaller. He had a decent arm but was kind of wild with his throws.

I stood still, watching the interaction. The kid missed the ball, and it rolled into the woods. As the boy took off running, I stood frozen. I didn't know what to do and thought he would see me if I took off.

But standing still didn't help either. The boy grabbed the ball and caught a glimpse of me through the bushes.

“Dad! Dad! Come here! Someone is watching us!”

Then I knew it was time to run. I was neither a fast nor a graceful runner, but I took off as fast as I could. The growth of underbrush kept tripping

me, and I fell several times. I cleared the woods and kept running all the way around the pond and into Grandma's house.

I stood in the kitchen, huffing and puffing, completely out of breath. Two minutes later, I heard footsteps on the front porch, and the doorbell rang. I could hear Grandma's voice as she answered the door.

"Billy Boy, come out here," called Grandma.

I peeked around the corner to see the man and his boy standing in Grandma's kitchen.

"Billy Boy, come and meet Kent Cannon and his dad. Kent is 12 years old just like you and would be a good friend for you this week," she said.

I walked out with my head down. I was embarrassed that they had caught me watching them play catch.

"Sorry, I just heard the ball hitting the glove and wanted to see what was going on," I said.

"No reason to be sorry. Grab your glove; you can join us," said Mr. Cannon.

"Sure," I said running up the stairs to my room.

I opened the top drawer of the dresser and grabbed my mitt.

We went outside and the three of us spread out to play catch. Kent threw one to his dad, who turned and threw it back to me.

I caught the ball, and all in one stride, I rifled one toward Kent.

His eyes bulged when the ball made a loud, smacking sound as it hit his glove.

He turned and looked at his dad. "Dad, I have never seen anyone throw a baseball like that," Kent declared.

His dad walked over to me. "Are you a pitcher?"

"No, sir. I play first base," I said. I could see out of the corner of my eye that Kent was shaking his hand from the sting of my throw.

"Would you want to be play baseball with us?" he asked.

"For who?" I asked.

"I coach the Bunz Town Badgers, and we would sure love to have you on our team!"