

## Chapter Five

One Saturday my father gathered up the neighborhood bullies for what he called the Brighten Avenue Track Events and offered a quarter to any one who could outrun Bootsie. Of course, nobody could. So that left Bootsie holding a fistful of quarters. Anyway the next day Bootsie and I were on our way to Tull's Drugstore to buy Cokes and candy with the winnings when Butchie showed up. It was obvious from the look on his face that he was up to no good. He followed us all the way to Tull's and waited until we were inside to make his move. Bootsie was chewing on a Three Musketeer when Butchie stepped in front of her, eyeball to eyeball, and said: "Let's see what a big shot you are when your father ain't around." I could see the muscles in Bootsie's face go tense, but she didn't bat an eyelash. "Get lost," she said, and took another chew. Well, I guess that was too much for Butchie because he hauled off and punched Bootsie in the side. First, the Three Musketeer flew out of her hand and she tried like crazy to catch it. She almost had it, too, but her arm hit the gumball machine. The next thing we knew about a million gumballs and all sorts of shiny prizes were pouring out all over the floor. Mr. Tull stood right there and never said a word. Butchie raised his fist again, but this time Bootsie was ready for him. She backed up a degree or two, and with one quick move, landed a right to his eye. Butchie let out a loud moan, then cupped his face in his hands, and ran out the door, cursing. That's when Mr. Tull looked at the floor and said, "No good to me now. You girls help yourselves to as much as you want." Well, Bootsie and I worked like demons, scooping up whistles and balls and rings with rubies and

diamonds in them. When every prize was safely in our pockets, we went for the gum. When we were done we had to walk like we had two wooden legs and no knees to keep from losing everything. And it didn't help to hear Mr. Tull laughing. But we finally made it home without losing a single gumball.

“Let's sell some gum to Sarah an' Jean Ann,” Bootsie said, so we did. Of course, we didn't tell them any of the particulars about how we had acquired our loot so everything went real smooth. Sarah and Jean Ann paid fifty-eight cents for fifty-five gumballs. Bootsie explained the extra three cents covered handling expense. After the sale, Bootsie got an old shoebox and wrote WAMPUM on top and put the money inside. Then she put the rest of her track winnings in and said, “This is both ours, okay?” I gave my word.

Anyway, the next day Bootsie and I were riding bikes and we saw Butchie down by the creek, fishing. He was wearing the biggest shiner I ever saw. Later that same day my father saw it for himself and paid Bootsie an extra dollar.

“You earned this,” he said, counting out quarters in her hand. “Boy, am I proud.”

When my father left, I asked Bootsie, “Why does he want you to be a boy?”

I saw Bootsie's eyes catch my question. But she sure took a long time to answer. I was starting to walk away when I heard her voice coming up behind me. “I don't know,” she said. “Just does, that's all.”