

Chapter 1

To anyone watching, the cloud of dust on the gravel and dirt road would have announced the arrival of some vehicle. Or if someone wasn't watching but listening, the crunch of heavy tires on gravel and the squeal of brakes covered with road dust would have made known that something big had stopped. Through the haze of light dust, one could see the vintage yellow school bus with its red lights flashing and stop signs sticking out from its sides. As the dust settled, the door to the bus opened with an audible swoosh and, after a brief moment, a tow-headed thirteen year old boy wearing a yellow tee shirt, cut-off jeans and flip-flops jumped from the last step. He stumbled as he landed, as he often did, and his backpack went flying into the drainage ditch, narrowly missing the mailbox post that would have retarded its progress. Fortunately two weeks with no rain had left the drainage ditch dry and no harm came to the backpack. Recovering from his near fall, the boy turned to the bus and waved.

“Bye, Lucy,” he said to the driver. “Have a good summer.”

“You too, Chris. And be more careful.”

Lucy, the driver, was a matronly woman in her mid-fifties who drove the bus more to get out of the house than to earn money. She mothered the kids on her routes mainly because some of them, like Chris, were on the bus for almost an hour. This year Chris, whom his friends called by his nickname of “Muddy,” had been first on the bus in the morning and last off the bus in the afternoon. Lucy grabbed the handle to close the door, pausing a moment to watch Chris clamber into the ditch to retrieve his bag. Satisfied that all was well, Lucy pulled the handle closing the door and checked her rear view mirror. Seeing that no one was coming from either direction, she turned off the flashers, retracted the stop signs, turned on her left-turn indicator, shifted from neutral into first and stepped on the gas. The old bus seemed to groan expressing discomfort at the request to get moving again at its age and slowly moved away from the dirt road leading to the farmhouse set back from the road. Situated about a quarter mile from a wood copse by the road, the old house was surrounded by fields, which were already beginning to show the green of summer crops. Lucy shifted into second glancing in the right-side rearview mirror to see Chris opening the mailbox, backpack at his feet. *Kids these days*, she thought shaking her head, *wearing flip-flops to school instead of something sensible for foot support*. However, to her knowledge that was the only fault Chris Waters had and she knew him pretty well, as it was fifteen minutes to or from her next pickup on this route this year. The routes changed every year depending on who was going to school and this had been her first time on this particular route. The kids were well behaved for the most part although unduly rowdy today but with it being the last day of school, and a half-day at that, it was to be expected. She would miss them

during the summer and she made a mental note to ask for this particular route again or whatever route Chris was on.

Muddy sorted through the mail as he always did hoping that he would get something but he never did. Of course, he never wrote a letter to anyone or at least not a hard copy letter, preferring email or texting communication as most young people did. The mail was catalogs, which his mother enjoyed, a bill or two he supposed, and some advertising circulars. He stuffed the mail into his backpack, slung it over his left shoulder and was about to start his walk home when the distant squeal of brakes announced the fact that Lucy and Alcona County School bus number 14 had reached the end of Creek Waters Road. He looked and saw the bus sitting at a stop, right turn indicator flashing. Lucy would turn onto Black River Road and follow it several miles to F41 where she would turn south and follow the road into Lincoln, proceeding south on Barlow Road to the school bus garage across the street from the high school and middle school building. There she would leave it, sign out the last time until fall and then go home to ... Muddy didn't know where home was or what it was. Lucy was closed mouthed about that but pretty much open about everything else.

Muddy waved and, to his surprise, heard the distant sound of the bus's horn and saw the yellow warning lights flashing. Then the lights were shut off, the bus turned onto Black River Road and soon disappeared. Turning toward home, Muddy started his walk to the farmhouse he shared with his parents and younger sister Katie who was only five, eight years his junior. His parents never talked about why the age difference and he hadn't asked because, he felt, some things are private. Maybe someday when he was older he would. The road was gravel, well packed down with the many years of travel by

farm vehicles, but the sand and dirt still accumulated and as he shuffled along so that he wouldn't lose the flip-flops, he grinned at the warmth of the dirt that settled briefly between his toes. There was the occasional stone but those he easily shook out, hardly breaking his stride. After about a hundred feet, he turned off into the woods, stopping near the stump of an oak that had blown down several years before and been used to heat the house the following winter. Reaching behind the stump Muddy retrieved a two-gallon zip lock freezer storage bag in which he stashed his sneakers while at school. He exchanged the flip-flops for sneakers and socks and started to put the bag back behind the oak stump. Then his brain, already on summer holiday, kicked in and he put the bag with the flip-flops in his backpack. He really didn't like wearing flip-flops to school but it was the "in" thing. Not wanting to be totally ostracized, he had chosen to change before boarding the bus knowing that his mother would have objected stringently to that choice of foot apparel. He could hear her, "I don't care what other kids wear to school; no son of mine is wearing flip-flops. Now go change to sensible shoes."

"Hi, Dad," Muddy shouted entering the house as he knew that his mother was still at work and his sister in daycare. There was no answer to his shout and Muddy hurried up the stairs to his room. Removing the storage bag from his back pack, he put the flip-flops under the bed with two other pairs, folded the bag and put it in a pocket of the backpack, which he then put on the shelf of his closet. Now to get down to the business of summer vacation – first on his list was fishing at Hibbard Pond.