



Chapter 17

*R*IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!

The bell woke me up with a jerk. For a second, I couldn't remember where I was. The bookshelf, the bulletin board, the small desks, the small chairs--that's right, I slept last night in my third-grade classroom. Eight-thirty, and the school day had begun.

I rubbed my eyes with my knuckles. My T-shirt was wrinkled, and my armpits smelled bad.

Mr. Adams lay next to me, the wool blanket pulled over his head. He had twisted around a lot last night, kicking me a few times. Bad dreams, I figured.

I sat up and sniffed. So what was that smell? Something was burning . I looked toward the sink and saw Colleen standing behind the electric burners. She held a spatula.

"Hey," I said. "Hey, what's going on? What are you doing?"

"Morning, Chucky. Welcome to the Third-Grade Motel--peaceful, quiet, breakfast included."

I yawned. "The whole thing last night...the park and everything...it seems like a nightmare."

"Breakfast will be served in fifteen minutes, Chucky. I'm using my family's secret pancake recipe."

"Now that could be a nightmare," I said.

I leaned over and gently shook Mr. Adams. "Hey, Mr. Adams. Wake up."

His head popped out from under the blanket. He sat up and looked around in a panic. "I'm not...I'm not. No, I couldn't be," he said. He touched his ankle and winced. "Am I where I think I am?"

"We're back in our old third-grade classroom, Mr. Adams," I said.

"Colleen brought you here. I spent the whole night with you."

Mr. Adams stared at me, then at Colleen. "Well, good morning, children. I see everyone is present today. Let's begin with reading. Please take out your reading books and turn to page thirty-seven."

For a second, I thought Mr. Adams was acting crazy again, but when he smiled, I knew he was joking.

The roar of Ray's motorcycle drowned out Mr. Adams' next words. Seconds later we heard the jingle of keys and the classroom door opened. Ray stood in the doorway, hands on his hips. He must have spotted the open window and had come to check things out.

I flew to my feet and stepped toward the door. "Hey, Ray. It's me, Charlie Fuller."

Ray shook his head. "What the...? Well, kid, you're in for it now. What was worth breaking in here for? The stinking computer? A few calculators?" He reached for the phone in his back pocket.

"No, wait, Ray," I said. "I'm not stealing anything. Mr. Adams needs help. He's here. Look." I waved toward the reading corner

"What the...?" Ray repeated. He rushed over and stooped by Mr. Adams' side. "Joe Adams? Is it really you? How in the world..."

My teacher grinned and patted his head. "Brew some coffee, Ray," he said. "Put on some rock-and-roll music, good buddy."

Ray looked Mr. Adams up and down. "Hey, Joe, you're a sight. Been having a rough time of it I see."

"He's been living in the park, Ray," I said. "Some high school boys trashed his place last night."

Ray snorted through his nose. "Rich-kid fun."

"I'll be all right," said Mr. Adams. "No real harm done."

Ray touched Mr. Adams' ankle. "No broken bones, I think, but it must be painful. I'll get it fixed up right away. Be back in a sec."

Ray left the room and came back with blue ice, an ace bandage, and the aluminum crutches they keep in the nurse's room. "Let me clean up that cut on your head first, Joe," he said.

From the sink, Colleen waved her spatula. "Breakfast will be served soon. You're all invited."

Ray hadn't noticed her before. "Colleen Martin," he said, shaking his head. "What has been going on in here?"

"We'll explain the whole thing over breakfast, Ray," said Mr. Adams.

While Ray cleaned Mr. Adams' cuts and bandaged his ankle, I helped Colleen put the breakfast out. We made three whole stacks of them. We ate off paper plates, sitting around the reading table. Colleen had brought real maple syrup and orange juice and everything. But the four of us probably looked pretty silly sitting in those small plastic chairs.

A large white X now marked the side of Mr. Adams' head. Ray had also neatly wrapped his ankle with an elastic bandage. Funny, but it didn't seem

too long ago that I sat with Mr. Adams at the same table, sweating over long vowel sounds.

Ray tucked a paper towel under his chin for a napkin. "So, Joe," he said. "I've missed you. I miss our chats. I miss seeing you on the playground with the kids and hearing you singing in the classroom. Things haven't been the same around here since you left."

Mr. Adams poured syrup over his pancakes. "Can't believe I'm back at this place, Ray. Some of my best memories came from this very room."

"Mr. Adams built this real neat shack out of cardboard," I said. "We helped him fix it up."

Ray nodded at Mr. Adams. "Well, we won't be shooting hoops together in the gym again for a while," he said. "Meantime, you'll stay right here in these glorious accommodations for the rest of the vacation. Looks as if you have two friends who will take good care of you."

"The cardboard shack is gone anyway, Mr. Adams," I said, with my mouth full. "I was there. They destroyed everything."

"So the Third-Grade Motel will now be your home," said Colleen.

I reached over and tapped the bell on the teacher's desk. Ding! Ding! "Just call for room service whenever you need something."

Mr. Adams patted his bandages. "But I must get back to the park," he said. "There's something I need to find. It's probably gone by now, but I have to look."

"Not much was left in the park, Mr. Adams," said Colleen. "All the tapes and books were ruined."

He shook his head. "No, there is something else. All my work."

Then I remembered. I ran to my 49ers jacket in the reading corner and yanked out the green notebook. "Here, Mr. Adams," I said, placing it in front of him. "I found it last night in the park."

Mr. Adams stroked his whiskers. "Chas, this is terrific. How did you ever know?"

"I knew it was your writing," I said. "I know how important your writing is to you."

Ray put down his fork. "So, Joe, you never gave up on your dream of being a writer."

"Oh, I gave up on it many times," said Mr. Adams. "But these two friends have helped me find it again. They reminded me about things I taught them in this very classroom."

Colleen turned to the back of the room. "So why can't you begin writing your book right now, right here?" she said. "There's a computer and paper and everything you need."

Mr. Adams looked around the room. "Friends, food, warmth, and a computer," he said. "What else could I ask for?"

Then Colleen did something awful. She stood up and kissed me on the cheek with her syrupy lips.