



Chapter 18

"I'll clean up," said Ray, after we ate the last pancake.

Colleen looked toward the clock above the blackboard. "Nine o'clock," she said. "Story-writing time."

"Writing stories was the worst part of elementary school," I said. "The school finally got computers when Colleen and I were in fifth grade. Then at least the teacher stopped pestering me about my handwriting."

"I haven't worked with computers much," said Mr. Adams. "But I think I have two teachers who will show me everything I need to know."

"Absolutely," said Colleen.

While Ray cleared off the table, Colleen and I helped Mr. Adams to the back of the classroom where the computer sat on a cart. I flipped the switch in the back. *Ping!* A blue glow lit the screen. I opened the hard drive and clicked on a word processor icon.

"Ready for business," I said.

Mr. Adams opened his notebook. He wiggled his fingers, then rested them on the keyboard. "Well, now," he said. "Where *do* I begin?" He sat there staring at the blinking cursor. We waited, but he kept on staring.

Colleen spoke in a deep teacher's voice. "The best way to begin a story is to draw a picture of what you want to write about. Then write, 'This is a rainbow' or 'This is my soccer game' or 'This is my little brother throwing up.'"

Mr. Adams laughed. It was what he had told us to do in third grade. "Beginning a story isn't easy, is it?" he said.

"Come on, Mr. Adams. Let's stop daydreaming and start writing," I said in my deepest voice. "Remember that? I'd sit for a whole hour with only my name and date on the paper. You were always on my case about daydreaming."

"You were the greatest daydreamer of all time, Chas. Now you two teachers scat. Leave this student to do some thinking on his own."

Our small chairs scraped across the tiles as we stood. Colleen dove into the reading corner. I took some paper off the art table and started sketching a pair of tennis shoes I found in the closet.

At ten o'clock, the bell rang again.

I put down my pencil and headed for the door. "Recess time!" I shouted. "I'm going out to the playground."

Outside the door, I found my bike. For about half an hour I rode it up and down the walkways between buildings. As I passed the gym, I hit the brakes. Ray was inside mopping the floor.

"Hey, Ray," I called from the doorway.

Ray parked his mop in a bucket of soap suds. "Stay right where you are, kid. Don't come walking on this floor with your dirty sneakers. What can I do for you?"

I got off my bike and leaned it against the door. "I was just wondering. I was wondering about Mr. Adams. What's going to happen when his ankle gets better? Where will he go? Where will he write? I mean, he still doesn't have a place to live, and school starts up again next Monday."

"That's something I've been thinking about myself, kid," said Ray, squeezing out his mop. "And so far I don't have an answer. Now, will you answer me this? What sort of teenagers are we raising in this town? What sort of teenagers would go into a park and beat up homeless people?"

I fiddled with the door bar, pressing on it and then letting it spring back. "I don't know, Ray. Some of them probably even had Mr. Adams for a teacher, and knew how great he was."

Ray snorted in disgust and swished his mop across the wooden floor. "Irony, isn't it, kid? I saw it year after year in this school. They always gave Joe Adams the worst students, and he would straighten them out, get them fired up about school and learning."

Clang! went the door bar.

"So what do you do, Ray?" I said.

Ray leaned on his mop handle. "You think I don't remember you at this school, don't you, kid? But I do. I remember you as far back as kindergarten. I remember you as this brown-haired little kid who moped around on the playground all alone, too scared to try anything. All you needed was to make it to third grade and let Joe Adams help build up your confidence. Now, kid, maybe that's what Joe Adams needs at this moment. A friend to help him restore *his* confidence."

"Yeah, but what can I do?"

"Well," he said, nodding toward the third-grade classroom, "seems to me like you've been doing it."

I spent the rest of the morning helping Ray do his chores around the school. We washed the first-grade blackboards and shampooed the carpet in the teacher's room. I even got to drive the lawn mower around the baseball field a few times while Ray talked on his telephone. After that, we climbed onto the school roof to clean out the gutters. Funny what you find in school gutters-- tennis balls, toy cars, paper airplanes, even.

Around noon, I saw Mr. Adams hobbling up and down the walkways on the aluminum crutches. He must have used the gym showers. His hair was washed, and his hands were clean.

Clump, hop, clump, hop, clump, hop, clump, hop.

Back and forth he went on the crutches, an odd version of pacing.

"Hey, Mr. Adams," I called out, "you're looking good there."

"I'll race you around the playground, Chas," he said. "Just like old times."

That afternoon, I biked home to take a shower and change. I stuffed my sleeping bag, toothbrush, and pajamas in my backpack. I left another message on the answering machine, then tore out the door.

When I got back to the classroom, I had a great idea for dinner. Colleen was still reading. Ray and Mr. Adams were sitting on the teacher's desk talking. I went straight to the telephone and dialed a number I knew by heart.

"Hello, Pleasant Hill Pizza?" I said loud enough for everyone in the room to hear me. "I'd like to order two large pizzas...Ray, are you staying for dinner?"

"Sure, kid," he said.

"Make that three large pizzas," I said into the phone. "Everything on them. Deliver them to Pleasant Hill Elementary School...That's right, to the school...Room 7."

I heard laughter behind me.

"So it's pizza night at the Third-Grade Motel," said Colleen.

"And I have time to take off on my bike to rent some videos," said Ray.

"We'll wheel in the big screen from the library. Science fiction OK?"

"Pizza and sci-fi movies," said Mr. Adams. "What could be better?"

I wondered what the pizza guy was thinking when he pulled into the school parking lot. He found Room 7 and knocked.

"Come in," the four of us said at once. We were lying on the floor laughing at a stupid space monster in Ray's video.

I ran to the door with two twenty-dollar-bills in my hand. The pizza guy stood in the doorway, staring at the pots and pans by the sink. He looked at the bedding in the reading corner.

"Does someone live here?" he asked.

"Didn't you know all teachers live in their classrooms during vacation?" I said.

The pizza guy gave us a look that meant he couldn't tell if we were kidding or not. I paid him and added a good tip.

It was a great evening. After the video, Ray did some card tricks. He made cards appear from everywhere—from behind the movie screen, from behind the teacher's chair, even from behind my ear.

After that, Mr. Adams went to the art table and grabbed three bars of modeling clay. He rolled each one into a ball.

"Remember how I entertained my classes on dull afternoons," he said. And he juggled the clay balls—high, low, around his back, and under his arm. He was really good. I hadn't had so much fun in a long time.

By the time we finished, it was dark outside. Ray and Colleen left, and I turned off the lights. Mr. Adams crawled under the wool blanket in the reading corner, but I wanted to watch TV for a while.

Moments later, two headlights appeared on the playground. In the moonlight, I could see a car, black and white. I dove for the TV button, and the room turned dark. The two white circles of light glided past the slide and stopped, pointing at Room 7. Next, a smaller single beam—a flashlight—wobbled across the asphalt toward me. It stopped outside the window and shone into the room, darting from ceiling to floor until it found my eyes.

"Police. Who's in there?"