



Chapter 19

I stood there frozen like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. All I could see was white, white, white. I was too scared even to squint.

The policeman spoke through the open window. "What are you doing in there? Open the door now. Come on, let me in."

The policeman's light followed me as I walked to the door and turned the knob.

"It's not what you think," I said. "It's not what you think, officer. I belong here."

The policeman stood in the doorway, shining his flashlight around the room. He was tall and thin, and his policeman's hat made his big ears stick out. His club, his gun, and his handcuffs hung on his hips.

"This doesn't look good," he said. "This does not look good at all. Breaking and entering is a crime. Where're the lights?"

I patted the wall until I found the three switches. The fluorescent lights flickered on, giving the room that stiff classroom glow.

"But I'm supposed to be here," I said. "I'm taking care of my teacher."

The policeman turned off his flashlight and pushed it into the holder on his belt. I stared at the handcuffs on one side of his belt and his gun on the other. "Your teacher?" he said. "Your teacher?"

I pointed to the reading corner. "Over there. That's my teacher. Mr. Adams is asleep."

The policeman raised his black eyebrows. "Mr. Adams? Mr. Adams, the teacher? He left this school."

"But he's over there," I said. "Really. There he is. He has a beard now and a lot of gray in his hair."

The policeman walked to the reading corner and stooped over Mr. Adams. He shook him--too hard, I thought.

"Hey," he said. "What are you doing in here, buddy?"

Mr. Adams awoke and turned his head, blinking at the light.

The policeman smiled and took off his hat. "Mr. Adams?" he said. "Mr. Adams...I can't believe this! It's me, Alan...Alan Vega...I was in this classroom in third grade...Mr. Adams, you're back in Room 7...our old classroom...It's great to see you again."

Weird. This guy, who was acting like a tough policeman a second before, was now acting like a little kid.

Mr. Adams sat up. He held out a hand, and the policeman pumped up and down. I'm not sure Mr. Adams remembered him, but he said anyway, "How are you, Alan? What have you been up to these past years?"

"I'm on the police force now, Mr. Adams," said the man. "As if you couldn't tell--been out of the academy about a year. I'm called Officer Vega now."

"Good for you, Alan," said Mr. Adams. "Good for you, Officer Vega. Well done."

Officer Vega dropped to his knees. "Do you still play the piano, Mr. Adams? I've always wanted to play the piano like you. I'll never forget the way your Adam's apple bobbed up and down when you sang. You always laughed when we called you Mr. Adam's Apple. Do you still sing?"

"Sometimes, Alan. Sometimes."

Officer Vega looked around the room. "But what are you doing here, Mr. Adams?" he said. "I heard you left this school. They said you went off to write children's books. Are you back teaching now? I can't imagine you not being a teacher. You were the best. Hey, what happened to your head?"

"There's a lot of explaining to do, Alan," said Mr. Adams. "Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure, Mr. Adams. Let me call in to the station, and I'll be right back."

Mr. Adams got up and sat at the teacher's desk. I sat at the desk with the CF whittled on it. For the next twenty minutes, we told Officer Vega about the shack in the park, the kids in the Jeep, and our escape to the school.

When we were through, he let out a low whistle. "I've worked the park area," he said. "It's a rough place at night. "

"Are you going to arrest us, officer?" I asked. "Are you going to throw us out of here?"

The policeman looked at Mr. Adams, then at me. "Arrest Mr. Adams? It looks like this classroom is the best place for our teacher right now, and it's the place where he belongs anyway. Meanwhile, keep the door locked and lie low. I'll stop by tomorrow to see how things are going."

I walked with him out to his patrol car. "Hard to believe you had Mr. Adams in third grade," I said. "I mean, you seem so...so..."

"Old," he said. He put his hat back on, making his ears stick out again. "Mr. Adams' teaching career covered a whole generation--twenty years or so."

The air was chilly. Standing in the middle of the playground, we both looked up. There were lots of stars and the big comma of a moon.

"I never looked up until Mr. Adams taught my class about what was going on up there—planets, stars, galaxies, and everything," I said.

Officer Vega nodded. "I've been looking up a lot ever since he taught me the same thing. Now get some sleep, Charlie. And don't worry. Tomorrow's a new day. Tomorrow we'll find a way to help our teacher."

I returned to the room, making sure the door was locked. Mr. Adams already lay in the reading corner with the wool blanket over his head. I flipped off the light. The room was cold, so I pulled my pajamas on quickly. The moon brought in enough light to brush my teeth at the sink. I threw my sleeping bag on the rug next to Mr. Adams and climbed inside.

"Good night, Mr. Adams," I called out.

But he was already asleep.