



Chapter 21

Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday passed quickly. Each morning I brought blueberry muffins and orange juice for breakfast. After that, Colleen helped Mr. Adams on the computer, and I helped Ray with chores. At noon, he would take off on his bike and bring back burritos, hamburgers, or sub sandwiches. That was my pay for helping him, he told me.

Around five, Officer Vega would drive his squad car into the parking lot. We talked with him for a while before going home. He checked on Mr. Adams during the night.

On Thursday, Ray removed the bandages on Mr. Adams' head, and on Friday morning, I saw him heading out of the school grounds without crutches.

He waved to me. "I'm going for a walk, Chas. I haven't been around this neighborhood in years."

"It hasn't changed much," I called back. "There're a few new houses at the end of the road, but that's all."

I was helping Ray unpack new chairs for the fifth-grade classroom. He had one of those super-sharp knives that slice through cardboard cartons with one swipe.

"Jack Keller called me last night," I told him. "He said over one hundred people should be at the gym tomorrow. He's collected tons of money, and my mom found him an apartment. A furniture store donated furniture and a computer store donated a computer so Mr. Adams can continue to write."

Ray sliced through the top of a carton. "Sounds good, kid. Sounds very good."

"This will be the last night Mr. Adams will be living in the Third-Grade Motel," I said. "Tomorrow, Mr. Adams will be like the Mr. Adams I used to know."

Ray stood and stared at me. "Listen, kid. Don't expect too much. Joe has had it rough these past years. Things take time to heal."

"Sure, Ray," I said. "Sure." But I really didn't understand.

I showed up at school early the next morning. I wanted to take Mr. Adams for a walk around the reservoir while Colleen and her sister decorated the gym.

Ray was in Room 7 when I got there. He wore his leather motorcycle outfit. He was twirling his key ring around his finger. "He's gone, kid," he said to me. "Joe took off sometime last night."

"What? What are you talking about, Ray?"

He locked the classroom door. "Let's get moving, kid."

I followed him across the playground. "Where to, Ray? Where are we going?"

"I've already called Alan Vega. He'll have the police department on the lookout for him. But I can't just sit here and wait. We're going to find your teacher. "

"But how, Ray?" I said. "I only have my bike."

Ray opened the door of his janitor's room. "We'll take my cycle. There's an extra helmet in here."

He grabbed two black helmets out of the room and threw one into my gut. Together we jogged to the skinny place in the parking lot. His black motorcycle looked as shiny and new as the last time I rode on it three years before.

Ray pointed to the back of the long seat. "Get on, kid," he said. "I think we'll search Fourth Street first."

I pulled on the helmet and swung my leg over the seat behind Ray. His fingers gripped the handlebars, and his leather boots kicked the starter. A chalkboard rag hung from the back pocket of his jeans.

"Hang on," he called back to me. Down bent his wrists, and the motor roared. The bike lurched, and I slid backward. Ray squeezed the brakes at the edge of the parking lot, and I slid forward, my helmet crashing into his.

"You OK?" Ray shouted back.

"I'm all right." My voice sounded muffled inside the helmet.

The motorcycle peeled out of the parking lot. We tore down the road. When Ray shifted gears, I wrapped my arms around his waist. How could I help it? We were flying. My neighborhood passed by in one big blur. The wind whistled through my helmet. Bugs popped against my plastic visor. The bike took a sharp curve and zipped down the hill. My stomach hadn't felt that sick since I rode on Space Mountain at Disneyland.

I can't remember taking a breath until we stopped at the first red light.

"You still with me, kid?" Ray called back.

"I think so, Ray."

Just my luck. My mom's blue minivan pulled up in the lane next to us. I couldn't believe it. Tanya stared at me from the back seat. I shook my fist at her, and she replied by squishing her nose against the window glass. Good thing Mom was busy talking on the car phone. She would have killed me if she had saw me on that motorcycle.

Green light.

Ray shot around the corner and raced down Fourth Street. He stopped at the park entrance.

"You search in there," Ray said. "I'll check the side streets."

I slid off the bike and ran to the clearing, with my helmet tucked under my arm. Everything was cleaned up. No cardboard, dishes, books, or tapes--not a trace that Mr. Adams' shack had ever been there.

Next, I thought of Otto. I checked his bench, but it was empty. So where would a professional panhandler be at eight o'clock in the morning? Then it came to me. At the subway entrance, hitting on Saturday shoppers. He'd often talked about how profitable that was.

I ran to the subway station east of the park. Sure enough, there stood Otto. He held out an Oakland A's baseball hat to each passerby.

"Spare change, please?...Thank you very much...Morning, madam. Any change to spare?...Have a good day anyway...Spare change for a meal, sir?...That's OK. Maybe next time...Morning. Spare change?...Thank you, brother?"

"Hey, Otto!" I shouted.

"What's happening, young brother?" he said, without skipping a beat in his begging.

"Mr. Adams is missing," I said. "He was staying at our school. Now he's gone. We have to find him."

"I haven't seen the Professor around the park in days. City workers came and carted all his stuff away...Spare change?...Thank you kindly."

"Maybe he headed up north the way you do," I said. "How would he do that, Otto?"

"Some folks hitch along the freeway...Spare change, sir?...Others go to a truck stop and ask for a ride...Thank you very much...I prefer the rails. Best to find an open boxcar down at the railyards to stay the night and wait for the train to roll north in the morning."

"Thanks, Otto," I said, and took off to find Ray.

"Hey, young brother," he called after me. "When I get off work here, I'll start looking for him myself."

After checking the café and library, I flagged down Ray as he came cruising down Fourth Street.

"This guy Otto says Mr. Adams could be in the railroad yards," I said.

He made a sharp U-turn and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "Get on, kid," he said. "Let's check this out."

We drove down University Avenue to the west side of town. My dad calls it the seedy side. He only drives to this part of the city to buy cheap tires, and used car parts, and stuff.

We passed a bunch of junkyards and about a dozen auto repair shops. We passed mountains of tires and piles of lumber. I even saw a parking lot filled with refrigerators, bathtubs, and toilets. Who buys all that junk?

Thump! Thump!

Ray's motorcycle crossed some railroad tracks. We came to the end of the road. Here was the place where the railroad tracks from the north and south

met the tracks from the east. About a million empty boxcars stood on parallel tracks in front of us.

"Looks hopeless," I said into my helmet. "What's the chance of ever finding Mr. Adams in this place?"