



Chapter 23

What next? I didn't want to return to school and run into Colleen. She'd ask a bunch of stupid questions. I didn't want to go home and face my parents either—at least, not yet. Let Ray explain everything to Jack Keller. Let Jack Keller call the people coming tonight. Let him cancel the ceremony. My job was to bring Mr. Adams to the gym tonight, and I blew that. So what could I do?

The motorcycle stopped at a red light.

I tapped Ray on the shoulder. "Drop me off at the library, will you, Ray?"

"Whatever you want, kid," he said. "I must go and attend to some business."

For the next hour, I sat in the fiction section of the library. I flipped through *Don Quixote*, the fat book I saw Mr. Adams reading the time I followed him there. Funny, it was about a crazy man who pretended he was a knight. This pretend knight rode around the countryside on his horse doing good deeds for people. Weird.

After that I walked to the park. Maybe Otto would be on his bench by now. He would be a good person to talk to.

Inside the park, some sort of protest was going on. People with signs were marching up and down the cement path. The signs read:

KEEP THE PARK FOR THE PEOPLE
GRASS NOT TENNIS COURTS
HELP THE HOMELESS

I guess the city wanted to build tennis courts here, and the protesters didn't want them to. I like tennis and everything, but I couldn't imagine them paving over a large section of the grass. Where would the homeless people go?

Otto's bench was empty, so I wandered down Fourth Street. I hung around the bookstore and record shop. When the clock outside the bagel place said six o'clock, I figured it was safe to walk home. My parents would know about Mr. Adams by now, so they wouldn't pump me full of questions.

I walked slowly up the hill. I entered my house through the kitchen and went straight to the refrigerator. Tanya was standing there in a blue skirt and white tights.

"I thought you were with that homeless man," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"None of your business."

"Mom!" she shouted. "Charlie's home. Why is Charlie home?"

My mother walked into the kitchen while hooking a silver earring onto her ear. Her hair was up, and she wore a long black dress.

"Charlie?" she said. "Why aren't you with Mr. Adams? And look at you...your clothes are a mess. Hurry now and get changed. The ceremony starts in a half an hour."

I looked toward the telephone. "But didn't anybody call? Jack Keller or anybody?"

"No one called, Charlie," said Mom. "Now go, or we'll be late... and we certainly don't want to be late for our own son's ceremony."

No use explaining things now. I shot into the bathroom and took a quick shower.

So what's going to happen tonight? I asked myself as I changed into my blue shirt and best jeans. What will Colleen say when I show up without Mr. Adams? What will Jack Keller do? Would they make me get up on the stage and make a speech...something like, *Sorry, folks, but our teacher Mr. Adams isn't coming tonight. He's decided to stay homeless, a loser, and a drunk. So I guess all that stuff he taught us, stuff about never giving up, and you're a loser only if you think you're a loser, and having self-confidence was a lie, because Mr. Adams didn't believe it himself. I last saw him in a boxcar headed north.*

Mom, Dad, and Tanya were waiting by the door when I came out of my bedroom. It was a warm, clear night, so we decided to walk to school.

"Well, let's get the shoe on the road," I said, heading out the door. "That's what Mr. Adams always said. Let's get the shoe on the road."

The parking lot was full when my family got there. Tanya ran over to peek into her second-grade classroom, to see what it looked like after dark. Dad straightened his bow tie, and Mom squeezed my shoulder as we followed a line of people into the gym.

Jack Keller stood inside the gym door, greeting everyone with a handshake. He was a man maybe forty, with a round face and a fringe of black hair. His black turtleneck stretched over a large gut.

Jack Keller's skinny wife stood next to him, handing out HELLO, MY NAME IS _____ name tags.

Jack Keller pumped my hand with a sweaty palm. "Well, there's our young hero," he said. "As soon as Joe Adams gets here we'll start the presentations."

Mrs. Keller handed me a name tag. "You know, Charlie," she said, "there are lots of people in this gym who are anxious to meet you."

"Oh, great," I said, slapping my name tag over my shirt pocket. I forgot to write my name on it.

Colleen and her sister had worked all day putting up corny decorations around the gym. Above the stage hung a long paper banner printed on a computer:

WELCOME MR. ADAMS * * * WE APPRECIATE YOU

On the wall they had taped enlarged pictures of Mr. Adams' past third-grade classes. Bunches of balloons dangled from the basketball hoops, and opera music played over the intercom.

I wandered around the gym reading the names off people's chests. Of course I knew the sixth graders. They stood up by the stage trying to look cool and everything.

I guess I was some sort of celebrity around the place. People kept coming up to shake my hand.

"You're Charles Fuller, aren't you?" said an older lady. "You are the boy who helped Mr. Adams in the park, aren't you? You're quite a young man, aren't you?"

One short man even put his arm around my shoulders. "Good job, Charles. We need more young people like you in this community."

Give me a break, I thought.

I spotted Colleen behind the lunch counter selling refreshments--Rice Krispies Treats and Girl Scout cookies. Colleen's sister and...get this...her sister's boyfriend stood next to her. They were selling T-shirts that said:

ADAM'S APPLE FAN CLUB.

Colleen's eyes caught mine. I saw her mouth the words "Where is he?"

I pretended to shoot a basketball toward the backboard above her and made a sharp U-turn. How I wanted to ditch that place. How I wanted to run down to the park, find Otto, and take off north. I would become Charles Fuller, Professional Panhandler.

Ray strolled into the gym. His girlfriend held his elbow. He wore this white linen sports coat, and his hair was slicked back. He saw me and winked. I walked the other way to the stage.

"Hey, big hero, where's Adams?" a kid in my class called out.

"Let's get this show rolling, Chuck," said another sixth-grader.

I shot another invisible basket and headed back toward the door. At center court, I felt another slap on my back. I turned and saw Alan Vega standing there, grinning big ear to big ear. Out of uniform, he looked totally different. "Good job, Charlie," he said, slapping my back again. "This is quite a turnout to honor Mr. Adams. This is very exciting."

"I think it's time to talk to Jack Keller," I said to him. "Excuse me."

My heart beat like mad as I searched above the crowd for Jack Keller's bald head. All at once, people surged toward the back door. What was going on? One person clapped, then another, and another. More and more people joined in until the entire gym filled with applause.

"What's up?" I asked a woman next to me. "What's happening?"

"He's here, Charlie," she answered.

I froze. "Who's here?"

"Our guest of honor."

"You mean Mr. Adams? He's *here*? He can't be here."

"Oh, Charlie," said the woman. "Stop your joking."

I held my arms forward and pushed my way toward the front of the gym. In the doorway stood Mr. Adams—he was really there! People were crowding around him, slapping him on the back and everything.

And you should have seen him. His beard was gone, and his hair was short. He wore a new blue blazer, chino pants, and a white shirt that looked as if it had just come out of its wrapper. His large Adam's apple stuck out over a red silk tie. It was hard to believe that this was the same man I'd seen in the boxcar that morning.