



## Serialized Chapter 15

All winter Colleen and I visited the park. Although the nights were cold and the grass was often wet, there seemed to be more homeless people than ever sleeping there.

One Wednesday a white truck with

### VOLUNTEER FOOD BANK

painted on its side was parked on the cement path. Men and women--maybe fifty of them--lined up at a window on the side of the truck to get hot soup and bread.

"I didn't know they had a bank for food," I said to Colleen.

She gave me one of her looks and walked straight toward the truck. "And you know what I'm going to do?" she said. "I'm going to volunteer to serve the food. "

And she did. The next Wednesday Colleen stood in the truck dishing out stew.

Then she came up with this great idea. She told it to me on the way home one evening. "I'm going ask restaurants on Fourth Street if they would donate their left over food--stuff they would throw out anyway at the end of the day. That way we can start serving different kinds of food at the Food Bank."

After that I saw her serving chow mein and rice from the Chinese restaurant one week and veggies from the natural-foods restaurant the next week. The following week she even served salmon with white sauce from a fancy restaurant.

Spring came and the daffodils we planted had bloomed around the shack. I painted some patterns and designs on the cardboard walls so that the place looked like a fairy-tale cottage or something.

Whenever Mr. Adams was out panhandling we'd sweep the floor and leave fresh supplies of soap and towels and stuff for him. Sometimes I left a five-dollar bill inside a book.

Of course, we still had school homework to do, so whenever we visited the park we'd take our books and papers. I hated sixth grade math the most, but now I had an expert to help me. Just like in third grade Mr. Adams would use objects such as bottle caps and acorns to explain square roots and percentages to me. He also checked our reports and stories. You could tell he still enjoyed helping kids learn.

One day we spotted Mr. Adams sitting on Otto's bench. He was writing in a green vinyl notebook.

Colleen sat down next to him and said, "You've started to write again."

"There's still a lot of chalk dust in this old brain of mine," Mr. Adams said. "But I'm giving it a try."

"As you always told us, write what you know," I said.

"And there's plenty in this park to write about," Colleen added.

"I've been taking many notes," said Mr. Adams. "And Otto has generously lent me the use of his bench while he is out."

I sat down on the other side. "I saw Otto yesterday. I was in the van with my mom. Otto was doing that thing where a guy tries to wash your windshield while you're stuck at a red light. My mom rolled up her window when he came toward us with a squeegee and spray bottle. It felt weird sitting there while he worked. I mean, his face was right in front of me, and I had to pretend I didn't know him. I was worried that Otto would think I was stuck up or something, but he winked at me and I knew he understood."

"Did your mom tip him?" asked Colleen.

"You know my mom. She started shouting at him even though he did a good wash job on the windshield. When the light turned green, she gave me her begging Yellowstone bear lecture."

"I wonder if Otto is getting ready to head north for the spring," said Colleen.

"He's saving his money," said Mr. Adams, writing in his notebook. "He'll be sticking around here a while. He has plans."

That was the first day of spring break. Things were going well. Mr. Adams was healthier and writing again. Now I had a whole week to goof off.

On Sunday night I was watching a baseball game on TV when Colleen called.

"Charlie! Listen, Charlie! I'm at the phone in the park." She practically screamed into the phone. I heard police sirens in the background.

"What? You're crazy!" I said. "What are you doing in the park this late?"

"Charlie, I need your help. It's my sister's boyfriend and his gang. They were drinking beer at my house. I heard them talking. They said they were

going to the park tonight to bash trolls."

"Trolls?" I asked.

"People who might sleep under a bridge--homeless people!"

"What? Why?" I said. "Why would they do that?"

By this time Colleen was more sobbing than talking into the phone.

"They're...they're just snobs," she said. "They said if the police weren't going to clean the lazy bums out of City Park, they would. That's what they called them--lazy bums. It's...it's bad, Charlie. Real bad. The police are here. It's like a riot. I have to find Mr. Adams."

I heard another police siren, then...click. Colleen hung up.

This was insane. How could it be happening? I snatched my 49ers jacket from the closet and flew out the door.

I bombed down the hill on my bike. When I got near the bottom, a black Jeep passed me coming the other way. That's them, I thought, the high school troll bashers heading home.

The park was like a war zone when I got there. About a million flashing blue lights of police cars lined the cement path. People crowded the sidewalk along Fourth Street. I spotted two ambulances and a van from a TV station.

I locked my bike to a parking meter and pushed through the crowd. Yellow police tape blocked the park entrance. By now I knew a secret way to get in that Otto used. I ran along the sidewalk until I found the clump of bushes that marked the spot. I ducked around the bushes and slithered through the tunnel someone had dug under the park fence.

Moonlight showed me the way to the clearing. The place looked as if a bomb had exploded. Mr. Adams' shack was gone. Shreds of cardboard plastered the ground. Books lay everywhere and ribbons of cassette tape dangled from the rhododendron bushes.

Man, I was angry. I stomped on a box of Girl Scout cookies and kicked at the sleeping bag. Underneath it I spotted something green--Mr. Adams' notebook. That was important. I stuck it under my coat quickly, worried that the police might think I was a looter or something.

I heard a stick snap and spun around. Someone stood in the shadows. I made out an army jacket and headphones. It was Otto.

He stepped into the moonlight. "Your rich neighbors came, young brother," he said. "They tore up the place. The Professor didn't even fight back. He just stood with his hands over his face and let those fellows push him around."

"Was Colleen here?" I asked.

"Young sister showed up in the middle of the fight. She was screaming and leaping at those fellows like a wildcat. When the police came you couldn't tell who was fighting who. Your rich neighbors took off running. The police began rounding up the homeless people instead. It's always that way."

"Where'd they go, Colleen and Mr. Adams?" I asked. "What happened to them?"

Otto kicked at a paperback book in the grass. "They ran toward your hill. The Professor was limping badly."

My mind was spinning. The hill? Why would they head toward our neighborhood? Where would they go? To Colleen's house? Not with her parents. To the police station? Colleen would never let Mr. Adams end up there. So where?

I looked at my feet. In the moonlight I saw the trampled daffodil blossoms. That's when I knew.

"The school, Otto," I said. "Colleen and Mr. Adams have run to our old elementary school."

