



Serialized Chapter 20

The school bell woke me again the next morning. I knew the time without even looking at the clock. My hip ached. My neck was stiff. Two nights sleeping on the floor left me sore and cranky. I longed to dive under my comforter back in my own soft bed.

Next to me Mr. Adams was still asleep, curled into a ball.

"So when's the last time he slept in a soft bed," I said to myself.

I stood and stretched. Outside the window I spotted Ray already at work. He was painting over graffiti near the second -grade classroom. Rich kid fun, I bet he was thinking.

Colleen appeared on the playground, riding her bike. She looked good in overalls, with her hair down. She waved to Ray and pedaled toward Room Seven.

Forgetting I still had on my pajamas, I opened the door. My bare feet were cold when they touched the tiles.

"Morning, Chucky," she said. "Nice jammies. Eggs and bacon OK for breakfast?"

I raised my arms and stretched again. "Over easy for me. I always did hate that morning bell and now I hate it more than ever. I'll go into the boy's room and change."

Colleen grabbed a paper bag off the back of her bike and headed for the door. "How was the night?" she ask. "How was Mr. Adams?"

"More nightmares I think," I said. "He kept moving and moaning. Before that a policeman came."

That stopped Colleen in the doorway. "A policeman? Here?"

"I thought we were dead, but it turned out OK. His name was Alan Vega-- Officer Vega and he knew Mr. Adams. He had him as a teacher long before we did. He's going to help us."

"Really," was all she said to that.

Mr. Adams rolled over in the reading corner and let out a low moan.

Colleen walked to the sink and began cracking eggs. "But we still need a plan," she said. "The Third-Grade Motel closes down in a week, and we still don't know where Mr. Adams will go."

"I know. I know," I said, picking up my backpack and heading out the door. She was right. In less than a week Room 7 would be crawling with eight-year-olds.

After breakfast Mr. Adams worked at the computer while Colleen read in the reading corner. I spent the morning in the computer lab surfing the Internet. Then I shot baskets in the gym and messed around with the switches, wires and batteries in the fifth grade classroom. I never realized how much fun a school could be when teachers weren't around.

In the afternoon I rode my bike home for a shower and clean clothes. As

soon as I entered the kitchen I checked the answering machine for messages.

Beep! Beeeep!

"Charlie? We've missed you the last few days Sorry. It's been hectic at work." It was my mom. "Listen, your dad and I will be home early tonight. We promise. Tanya's at Suzanne's and I'll pick her up around four. Let's have a good family meal tonight. OK? It's been a while. Check the fridge if you need anything to eat before I get home. We love you. Bye."

Beep! Beeeep!

I opened the refrigerator and found some left over meatloaf. Man was I hungry. While the meatloaf was heating up in the microwave the phone rang.

I answered it. "Hello, Fuller house. Charlie Fuller speaking."

A deep man's voice said, "Charlie. Good. I just called the school and Ray said you were at home."

"Yes, I'm here," I said.

"Charlie, my name's Jack Keller. I'm a friend of your dad's. We met once at a basketball game."

"Oh, yeah. Hi," I said, gripping the phone hard. I sure did know Jack Keller. He was a big-shot lawyer in the city. You read about him a lot in the newspaper. My dad told me that he helps poor people with legal stuff, giving them free advice. But why would he call me? Maybe I broke some law or something.

"Charlie, listen," he said. "I received a call today from a police officer-- Officer Alan Vega and he explained what you have been doing these past few days."

"But I didn't break any laws," I said. "At least I don't think I broke any laws. I mean, I hope I didn't break any laws."

"Listen, Charlie," said Mr. Keller. "It seems that you, Officer Vega, and I

have something important in common. We all belong to the same club-- The Mr. Adams Fan Club. Did you know I was in one of Mr. Adams' first classes at Pleasant Hill Elementary School. "

"Oh, I see," I said.

"Oic," said Jack Keller, and he laughed. "You see, Charlie, the year I had Mr. Adams my parents were going through a rough divorce. Mr. Adams was the one person who would listen to me. We stayed in contact for years after that. In fact, Joe Adams helped me get into law school. But then we lost contact. I assumed he was living in Europe."

"He's been living in City Park in a cardboard shack," I said.

"Alan Vega explained the whole story to me, Charlie. I heard you and Colleen Martin have done some remarkable things for our former teacher."

I pulled the hot meatloaf out of the microwave. "He needed help. That's all."

"But listen, Charlie," said Jack Keller. "Officer Vega and I have discussed a plan. I want to roll it past you and hear what you think."

"Sure. OK."

"Charlie, there are dozens of parents and former students in this town who feel the same way we do about Mr. Adams. I'd like to contact them and take up a donation--money to rent an apartment, to buy food and supplies. On Saturday--and I've asked Ray Wilson already--we'll all meet in the school gym. Past students, young and old, can then show how much we appreciate him."

The plan sounded good. And I knew from my dad that Jack Keller was the type of person who could make things happen. "Great Mr. Keller," I said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I've just talked to Colleen at school," he said. "She's going to arrange for decorations and refreshments. I want you to do what you've been doing--look

after Mr. Adams and keep him company. We'll keep this a surprise. Charlie, we all owe a lot to that man. Saturday is the day we can give something back to him."

As I hung up I heard the garage door open. My mom and Tanya were home. That's when something horrible dawned on me. How was I ever going to explain all this to my parents?

Dad came home shortly after that. He cooked spicy hot chili for dinner. While we ate I said little. Tanya talked about how all her friends had gone to Hawaii or someplace for spring break and she never went anywhere. Mom talked about a house she'd sold that day.

Then my dad lowered his spoon and looked at me. "So, Charlie," he said. I never liked it when he began a sentence with, "So, Charlie."

"So, Charlie. What have you been up to for the past few days?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing much."

Dad blew on his chili. "Really?" he said. "I got a call this afternoon from Jack Keller. "Remember him?"

I nearly choked on a kidney bean. But I looked at my dad and mom and they were both smiling. They both knew, and everything was OK.

"You should have told us about Mr. Adams," Mom said. "We would have liked to help out."

"We owe Mr. Adams a lot," said Dad.

"But I've heard you talk about the homeless people," I said. "You always said the government should take care of them.."

"But Mr. Adams is different," said Dad. "We know him."

"You mean we know a homeless person?" said Tania.

"Mr. Adams isn't really a homeless person," said Mom. "He just doesn't have a place to live."

After dinner I lay on my bed. I stared at the sketches on my bedroom wall--Otto lying on his bench; Grace, the bag lady; Lonny, the man who constantly sweeps the Fourth Street sidewalks; and Tom, the Vietnam veteran with no legs, who races up and down the park path in his wheel chair. Man, before I met him I didn't even know what Vietnam veterans were. I wanted to tell my parents about all the homeless people I met in the park. I wanted to tell them that every homeless person had stories and people who once cared for them. I wanted to tell my parents this. But I didn't.