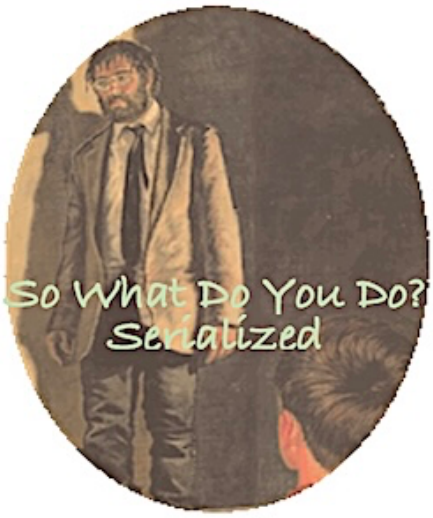

Chapter 13

A week passed before we entered the park again. The sky was solid gray--one big cloud. A light drizzle was coming down, and Colleen held an umbrella over both of us.

There was only one other person in the park--a man taking shelter in a phone booth. Something about him made me nervous. I mean, he kept looking at us, then down the path, then back at us.

As we passed the phone booth, the man came out and started following us.

"Let's pick it up," I said to Colleen.

We walked faster, and so did he. When we ran, he ran too. Only a few yards from Mr. Adams' shack, he overtook us and blocked our way.

I saw he wasn't a man at all. He was only a teenager, not much older than Colleen and me. His face was thin and pale. His eyes were wide, and he sniffed a lot. He wore only a nylon windbreaker with the hood wrapped around his head, but still beads of sweat poured down his face.

This guy was on something. I wondered if Colleen noticed that too.

The teenager jammed a finger into my chest. "Hey, rich kid, I've seen you in this park." His voice trembled. "You bring stuff for that crazy, drunk man. Now give *me* something."

I was shaking like crazy. I took my wallet out of my pocket and handed it to him. I knew I had about seven dollars in there.

But before I could give him anything, Colleen stepped forward. What was she doing? I had read that if you are being mugged, you should give the mugger your money without a word. Don't argue. Don't try to talk to him. Don't move suddenly. Just give him your money. You can always get more of that, but you have only one life.

But Colleen began talking.

"You shouldn't be taking drugs. You should get help. Go to a treatment center, why don't you?"

Not now, Colleen, I was thinking. Please not now. Save the social worker stuff for another time.

The teenager sniffed and sniffed. Sniffed and sweated. "Shut your trap," he said.

Colleen waved her umbrella. "We are not giving you a thing. Now please get out of our way."

At this point the whole thing was beginning to seem more funny than frightening. I mean, Colleen was taller and bigger than the teenager. She could have knocked him right out of the way with one swipe of her umbrella.

But what happened next came so fast, it seemed unreal--like a TV show or a video or something. I still remember every detail. The teenager reached into his windbreaker. I saw a flash of silver, then saw the look of horror on Colleen's face when he held a knife against her gut.

"What do you say now, smart rich girl?" he said. "Now give me your cash."

I stood there paralyzed. My brain was whirling, but my body wouldn't move.

Why didn't Colleen do something? Why didn't she reach for her change purse? She had her belly sucked in so the blade wouldn't pierce her. Rain splattered on her twisted face.

"Please don't. Please don't. Please don't," she kept saying. I'll never forget that.

The teenager squinted. You could tell he didn't care if he hurt Colleen or not. All he wanted was more drug money.

Where the next voice came from I couldn't tell at first.

"Let her go," it said.

I felt a rough coat brush my arm. A hand touched my shoulder. Mr. Adams stood next to me.

"Let her go," he repeated.

He wasn't talking like a crazy man. He talked like a teacher.

"Stay out of this, Professor," said the boy with the knife.

"This girl has nothing for you," Mr. Adams said. "She's a friend of mine. Let her go."

Everything stood still for about ten seconds until a whistle blew. All four of us looked across the park. A bike policeman was pedaling toward us. His bike wheels made fans of splashes as they crossed the lawn.

The teenager said every swear word you could imagine, then took off running. The policeman raced after him.

Colleen fell to her knees and burst out crying.

Mr. Adams stooped by her side and touched her hair. "Are you all right, Colleen?" he said. "He's gone. The danger's over."

I stood there, unable to move, watching the policeman put handcuffs on that mugger. Everything had happened so fast.