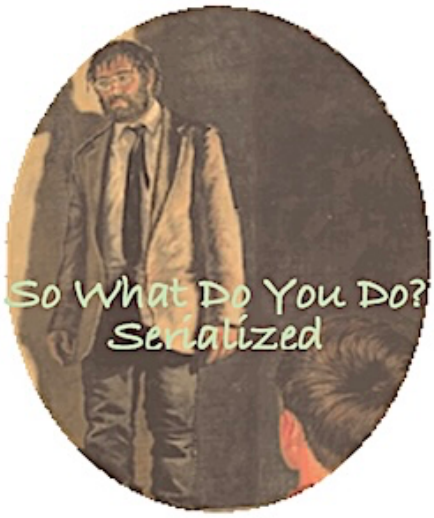

Chapter 16

I pedaled up the hill to Pleasant Hill Elementary School in record time. A ghostly glow of moonlight covered the playground as I raced past the slide, swings, and tetherball poles. I hit the brakes hard by the third-grade classroom.

A window was open. Colleen knew about the broken latch. No matter how hard it was to believe, I knew she was in there with Mr. Adams.

Careful not to step on the daffodils under the window, I climbed into the room. I stepped onto a bookshelf, then onto the floor. Moonbeams made a checkered pattern across the classroom floor. Police cruise by the school at night, checking for vandals, so I left the lights off.

I listened. The sound of hard breathing came from a dark corner.

"Colleen? You there? It's me. Are you there?"

"Charlie? Charlie?"

"You OK? I can't see a thing," I said. "Is Mr. Adams with you?"

"Yes, he's here. He's asleep," Colleen answered. "He's hurt."

As I stood there, I remembered the earthquake sack. In California, every classroom has these survival kits. The bag contains all the food and first-aid stuff you might need in case there's a big earthquake, and your class must stay at school for a long time.

I felt my way to the coat closet in the back of the classroom and pulled the large denim sack off the shelf. Inside, I found a flashlight. I turned it on and guided the beam toward the corner where Colleen sat.

She was leaning against a bookshelf. Her face was flushed and puffy. Her jacket was ripped, and mud covered her shoes and jeans.

I walked over to her. "It's OK, Colleen. It's OK. Everything's going to be OK."

That's what people always say in an emergency, but everything in that reading corner was definitely not OK. Mr. Adams lay on a shag rug next to Colleen. His head rested on her leg. Dried blood spotted his hair. One pant leg was rolled up, exposing a dark purple ankle.

Colleen began to cry. "It...it was horrible, Charlie. There were five of them, my sister's boyfriend included. When I got there, they were kicking down the cardboard shack and throwing things everywhere. I tried to stop them. I tried. I really did."

"They probably didn't know it belonged to Mr. Adams," I said.

Colleen shook her head. "What does that matter? They attacked Mr. Adams just because he was homeless. He was a helpless human being, and they pushed him and kicked him."

I forgot I had the earthquake sack in my hands. I shone the flashlight into it, pulled out a wool blanket, and covered Mr. Adams with it. "How did you get him here?" I asked Colleen.

"When we got out of the park, I flagged down a taxi. I didn't know where else to go. He fell asleep as soon as he lay down."

"Man, Colleen, we need a plan," I said. "He should go to a hospital or something. That ankle looks bad."

Colleen's face bunched up as she wept again. "I told him that, but he wouldn't go. He said he didn't have the money for a hospital. I couldn't believe you needed money just to go to the hospital."

I fumbled through the earthquake bag some more. I found a bunch of Ziploc bags filled with dried fruit, granola bars, and stuff. I also found a first-aid kit, batteries, a dozen silver thermal blankets, matches, a rope, gloves, candles, and a portable radio.

"We have everything we need to stay right here for a long time," I said.

Colleen looked at me through teary eyes. "Stop joking, Charlie. This is serious. We're in a school. Remember?"

"And it's spring break. Remember? They won't be using this classroom for another week. By then, Mr. Adams should be better. It's warm and dry here. This rug is probably the softest thing Mr. Adams has slept on in a long time. There are pillows and everything."

I shone the flashlight around the classroom. In the back was a sink, electric burners for cooking, a table, and some chairs. Pots, pans, and dishes filled one of the shelves.

"You have to admit, Colleen, this classroom is the perfect place to hide out until Mr. Adams gets better."

"But...but I can't stay here, Charlie. I have to get home. My parents will ground me if I stay out much later."

I knelt by her side. "That's OK too. I'll stay here tonight with Mr. Adams. Look, there's even a phone in this room. I'll call on the room phone and leave a

message. Easy. I'll say I'm at a friend's. My parents are both working later than usual this week. I think I've talked to them more by way of the answering machine than in person the last few days."

Mr. Adams let out a moan. I tucked the blanket around his shoulders.

"Tomorrow we can talk to Ray," I said. "He was Mr. Adams' friend, and he also knows a lot about first aid. Remember how he helped kids on the playground with cuts and bruises and stuff? He'll know what to do."

Colleen raised her head and wiped her eyes. "That's good, Charlie. He might even let Mr. Adams use the showers in the gym to clean up. But are you sure you will be all right here? I must go home now. Tomorrow I'll bring some breakfast."

"I'll be OK," I said. "In third grade, I took lots of naps, in this very corner. It was always very comfortable."

Colleen brushed a curl of hair out of Mr. Adams' eyes. She stood and walked toward the open window. "Sweet dreams, Charlie," she called back. "Sleep tight. Don't let the bookworms bite."

Then I was alone, or at least I felt alone. I checked Mr. Adams' head for more bleeding, but the wound was pretty dry. Let him sleep. That was the best thing. Tomorrow I could think better. I mean, what were we going to do with our teacher? What would happen to him when he got better? I bet even Colleen, the social worker, couldn't answer that one.

I called my house and left a message on the machine. Then I pulled a thermal blanket out of the earthquake kit and wrapped it around my shoulders. I lay back with my head on a pillow and shone the flashlight at the ceiling. The water stain—it was still there. And the pencil stuck in the corner of a light--still there too.

"And all those holes in the ceiling tiles," I said softly. "Mr. Adams? Do you remember how I once started counting all those holes? I'd lie here counting into the tens of thousands. Do you remember that?"

Mr. Adams was snoring softly by my side.

"Things will be OK, Mr. Adams," I said. "They'll be OK. One, two, three, four, five, six..."