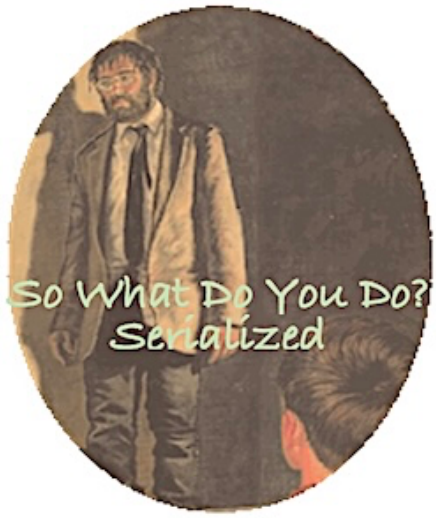

Chapter 7

Colleen was sitting on the library steps when I showed up. I ran straight past her into the library. Mr. Adams wasn't in the fiction section, and I hadn't seen him panhandling outside the bookstore.

"OK, so he must be in the park," I said to Colleen. "But that's not a great place to go at this time of day."

Colleen started down the steps. "I'm going to find Mr. Adams with or without you, Chucky. Are you in or out?"

"OK, OK, OK," I said, and followed her.

I had to admit Colleen seemed to know what she was doing. I mean, she wore her old jeans and a beat-up ski jacket. Her brown hair was tucked up in a stocking cap with *Palisades Tahoe* printed across the front. At least she didn't look like a rich kid. Like an idiot, I wore my 49ers jacket again.

We walked down the block and into the park. The sky was flat gray. It would be dark in about an hour.

"You know, Colleen," I said, "I don't know what Mr. Adams will think about two people coming to his shack. You probably won't recognize him. Who

knows what he'll be like today? Do your shoes have thick soles? I saw drug needles in the grass. You know, with AIDS and everything..."

"I'm not stupid, Chucky," she said, and charged ahead.

As we walked up the cement path, a policeman came up to us on his mountain bike. In his blue shorts and bike helmet, he looked totally different from the tough cops you see riding around in police cars.

The policeman squeezed his brakes in front of us. "Everything all right, kids?" he asked.

"Sure," said Colleen. "We're just taking a shortcut through the park."

"Where do you kids live?"

"On the hill," I said. "We go to Pleasant Hill Middle School. We're not runaways or anything."

The policeman smiled. "Well, watch yourselves. We've had a number of robberies in this area recently." And he pedaled away.

We left the path and entered the bushy area. As we approached the cardboard shack, I heard opera music again. This time, Mr. Adams' deep voice was singing along with the cassette.

"Remember that song?" I said to Colleen.

"La Donna è mobile," she said.

"Huh?"

"An aria from *Rigoletto*."

I squinted at her. I had no idea what she was talking about.

Colleen gave me one of her "stupid" looks. "That's an opera, Chucky."

I peeked through a crack in the cardboard walls. Mr. Adams was kneeling on the dirt floor. He held one hand on his chest and the other one out as though he were singing to a big audience.

"Maybe we better forget this whole thing," I said. "I told you he was cuckoo, Colleen."

But Colleen had already pushed aside the sheet door. She sat in the doorway. I kicked the dirt and kept an eye on Mr. Adams through the crack.

When the song was over, he lowered his arms and the tape clicked off.

Colleen clapped her hands. "Beautiful," she said softly.

Mr. Adams jolted and spun toward her. He showed his yellow teeth. "Get. Get," he snapped.

Without thinking I jumped into the doorway.

"Hey, Mr. Adams. Hey, I'm back," I said. "This is Colleen. Remember Colleen Martin?"

"I remember when you played the piano and sang those arias in third grade," said Colleen. She sure was acting cool, not scared at all.

"Get. Get," Mr. Adams repeated, much louder. "His eyes were open wide. At least he appeared sober this time.

I reached into my jacket pocket. I held out a twenty-dollar bill that I had been saving to buy a new skateboard. "Look, Mr. Adams. I brought some more money."

When he reached out to snatch the bill, I pulled it away. "We've come to take you to dinner," I said. "We'll go to the café on the corner. Great hamburgers and everything. We'll pay. You think better after you've eaten. That's what you used to tell us in the afternoon at school."

Colleen looked at me with surprise.

Mr. Adams said nothing--not yes or no or anything. But he grabbed his tweed coat off the ground and stomped out the door.