

## **The Taking Of Peckhams – by Rob Steele**

### **The Beginning**

If anyone asked him to recall it, it was a lovely summer's day in 1968. Summers in this town were usually mild but rainy, but today was different. Just a dotting of clouds in the sky and a sun that shone in a rather subdued manner. Bright enough to see everything, of course, but for some reason it didn't seem to get in anyone's eyes or become in any other way a blinding irritant.

Just a lovely June day. That made walking this beat even more bearable. The neighborhood, despite the loveliness of the weather, was losing its charm. It used to be a relatively happy place – the kind of thing that television programs used to show America as “not-so long ago.” That was before ‘they’ showed up. No one was really sure who ‘they’ were. There were considered a ‘gang’ but they weren't the same as the gangs you see in West Side Story.

Not a great reference, but that's all officer Reggie Kay had. The town had always been quiet, unless it was a holiday. Being a police officer, walking a beat, really just meant having a nice stroll everyday and talking to the people who ran the shops.

It wasn't like that anymore.

It had started with Mikey at the Deli. He just disappeared one day. And the Sports Guy, no one seemed to know his name, but he left about a week later. Others followed. Soon there were more abandoned shops than there were occupied ones.

This ‘gang’ was allegedly extorting money and labor from the shops. Many had to close because they ran out of money, or labor, or both. The stroll had become, not laborious as such, but not as fun – lonelier. The highlight of the day had become the release of the kids from school. The kids still came here, even if their parents didn't. All because of one store: Peckham's Candies.

Hugh Peckham ran the candy store on the corner of 5th and Davis. It was prime real estate, which is why this ‘gang’ had been on him to sell. They didn't even try to get money from him. They just wanted the location. It was in the middle of everything and the idea place for someone like them to run an operation like what they were doing. The ‘gang’ had plans, they'd told their victims.

Unfortunately, since none of the police were there at the time, and no one really knew names, there was nothing for the police to go on. Sure, there were nicknames, but you can't exactly look up ‘Knees’, ‘Skittles’, and ‘Jumbo’ in the phone book. What kind of a name was ‘Skittles’ anyway?

But it was that time of day. Officer Kay heard the school bus engine echoing through the canyon of buildings and reverberated off the windows of the cars parked along the curb. How many would jump off the bus today? Yesterday it had been almost twenty. That number seemed to grow as it got closer to summer vacation time. But today, something was different. Usually you could hear the kids happily yelling from the bus. But not today. Officer Kay saw the bus come, and go, without stopping. Why stop? There were no kids on board.

He checked his watch. He'd timed his route to be here at this time. The only police business he'd usually get would be the occasional child who shoplifted at the candy store. Hugh Peckham never pressed charges – just gave a lecture when the miscreant had been apprehended. Reggie Kay didn't mind that at all since it cut down on his paperwork, and was a pleasant reminder of his track and field days. He wasn't as lean as he was then, but he could still run.

But if no kids got off the bus, then there would be no need to chase and one today, would there? Standing on the corner, he watched the bus continue on its merry way down Davis. Why was it even running if there were no kids? And where were the kids that lived here? Not that there were many left. He looked up at the plethora of empty apartments and sighed. “Definitely going downhill,” he muttered to no one in particular. “If this keeps up, then...”

**BANG!**

The sound came from behind him. The door to Peckham's Candy Store had been flung open and Tommy Marcos ran out with a handful of licorice and gum-balls. He only briefly glanced at Officer Kay before running down 5th. Reggie knew if he made it to the alley ways on 5th, he might actually get away so he took off in pursuit.

Tommy Marcos had been a thorn in the neighborhood's side for some time. But usually he didn't take this much of a stash. Just a gum-ball here from Peckham's, or a book from Mayfairs, a pack of baseball cards from Woolworths – not that *those* stores were here anymore. This was different for him.

Reggie saw him cross the street and head for one of the alleyways so he cut the angle down and almost caught him at the entrance to the alley. Just missed him, but got enough that half the stash was dropped. Three more steps and the rest fell by the wayside as Tommy jumped on a trash bin and used that to propel him up to the ladder of the nearby fire escape.

*Tommy's up to something*, Reggie thought as he follow up the ladder. Only a three story building but Reggie knew, it was a dead end once they got to the top. *But Tommy knows that, too. Where is he going?*

It didn't take long to reach the top. Reggie wondered idly if Hugh Peckham would press charges this time. Tommy didn't seem to put up much of a fight. Actually he just leaned against the parapet overlooking 5th, waiting with his back turned to Officer Kay – his hands crossed behind his back. Officer Kay approached cautiously. *Now I KNOW he's up to something – but what?*

As Officer Kay applied the handcuffs to the youth, he glanced over the side of the building. There were some people leaving Peckham's and getting into the cars parked along the street. Nothing terribly unusual about that, really, except two cars worth of grown men leaving a candy store at once. Something about seemed a little off. He faintly heard a whimpering sound, a sobbing from near the cars.

Officer Kay stole a glance at the child he had in custody, *was this a distraction?* The answer came soon enough as the Peckham's Candy Store exploded.