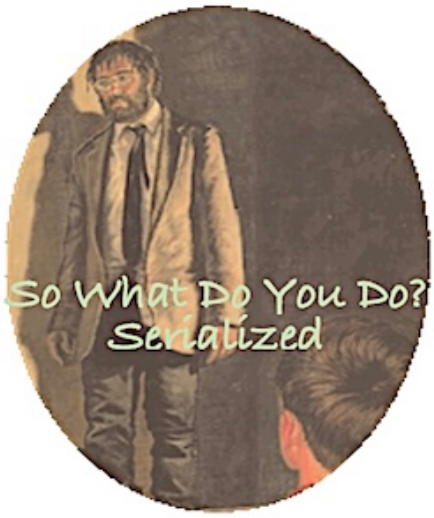

Chapter 5

This was stupid. No one ever goes to Fourth Street after dark. Especially not kids my age. Every week, I read a column in the newspaper called the "Crime Blotter". It tells every crime that was reported to the police during the week. You read about people doing the craziest things in that column. You read about all the assaults and robberies that take place on that very street I was now walking down.

Once I read this article that told how to act when you're in a dangerous part of the city. *Being Street Smart*, that's what they called it. It said not to make eye contact with anyone. Just keep walking as though you know what you're doing. If someone talks to you, ignore them. If a crazy person blocks you on the sidewalk or something, cross the street to the other side.

Before walking any farther, I zipped up my jacket and switched my wallet from my back pocket to the front. Why did I have on my gold 49ers jacket? I read that street gangs will mug a kid just to get a football jacket like mine.

Everything on Fourth Street looked different at night. Metal doors that folded down like movie screens covered the store windows. Only the video shop

was open. Newspaper and beer bottles filled the gutters. Funny how I noticed the graffiti more under the street lights. It covered trash cans, signs, lamp posts, and benches. Who puts it all there? What's the point?

Loads of street people sat along the sidewalk. Some had boomboxes blaring. Some had dogs. Some played guitars and drums. There were lots of crazy hairstyles and pierced noses, eyebrows, and even lips. Some people were swigging beer out of bottles wrapped in paper bags. Some were already asleep in sleeping bags right on the bare pavement. One guy in a tie-dyed shirt was juggling bananas, and he was pretty good at it. I saw an old woman sitting in a wheelchair and a man punching a parking meter. Another guy had a shopping cart parked next to him that must have contained everything he owned in the world.

"Spare change?"

"Spare change?"

"Change, partner?"

"Spare some change?"

"Got any change to spare, young fella?"

"Help a guy out, dude?"

"Got a quarter for some coffee?"

"I could use a meal, buddy. Thank you anyway."

"Spare change?"

"Won't you be my friend?" I heard from a dark doorway. It was the man with the talking doll tied around his neck.

I kept walking with my head down and my hands in my pockets. A police car cruised slowly down the street. That policeman probably thought I was a runaway or something.

But where was Mr. Adams? I looked in every doorway and on every bench. He wasn't in front of the bookstore or on the library steps.

At the corner, a black man stood on top of a fire hydrant shouting about Jesus. As I checked out the bus shelter, I heard him quote a super-long passage from the Bible. Pretty amazing. He had memorized the whole thing. And I have a hard time remembering some stupid Emily Dickinson poem for English class.

I ran across the street to a café. "Have you seen a tall man with a beard?" I asked the waitress. "He always wears a tweed coat. He's one of those men who lives on the streets, but not really. I mean, he used to be my teacher."

The lady smiled at me. She wore blue jeans and a white T-shirt and was very pretty. "Many homeless people spend the night in the park," she said. "Your teacher could be in there."

She was right. Tons of street people sleep in City Park. Mr. Adams could be there, too. But I hated to think what the *Crime Blotter* said about all the robberies and drug busts and fights that go on in there after dark.

I left the café and walked down a block to the park entrance. I waited for the police car to cruise by before I went in.

Just my luck. Every streetlight that was supposed to light up the cement path was busted. But in the light of the half-moon on the damp grass, I could see the homeless people camped out there. They lay on newspapers and old mattresses. Blue flames snapping out of Sterno cans lit faces. I looked hard, but didn't see a tweed coat.

At the far end of the park grew a lot of rhododendron bushes and eucalyptus trees. During the day, I had seen cardboard shacks and campfire pits in there. *Cardboard City*, people called it. If I wanted to find Mr. Adams, I had to go in there.

This was not street smart. My heart pumped blood like crazy as I passed the first clump of rhododendrons. I expected a mugger to pounce out at me at any second.

"OK, Mom. OK, Dad. OK, Tanya even," I said. "If I don't come home tonight, you can read where I've been in next week's *Crime Blotter*."

Splashes of firelight marked the spots where homeless people camped. I ran into a sheet of plastic someone had strung from one tree to another. I stumbled over a wooden box and crashed into a stuffed chair with its guts hanging out.

I entered a small clearing. In the moonlight, I spotted a small shack about the size of my mom's minivan. Someone had built the shack out of large cardboard cartons like the ones refrigerators come in. A black plastic sheet served as a roof. Candlelight shot through cracks where duct tape held the cardboard walls together.

From inside the cardboard shack came the sound of music—a man singing opera stuff. Funny, but I remembered that song. In third grade, Mr. Adams used to play it on his cassette deck.

I pulled aside the white sheet that covered the low doorway and dropped to my knees to look in. Three candles lit the room. The place smelled of booze and throw-up. In the corner, a battered cassette player still belted out the opera song, and crooked stacks of books leaned against the walls.

He was there too, Mr. Adams, curled up on a bed of newspapers. Asleep? No. Passed out. Two empty whiskey bottles stood by his head.

My stomach got sick from the smell. I just wanted to get out of there. I slapped the OFF button on the cassette player and blew out the candles. I don't know why, but all the way home, I hated my old teacher.