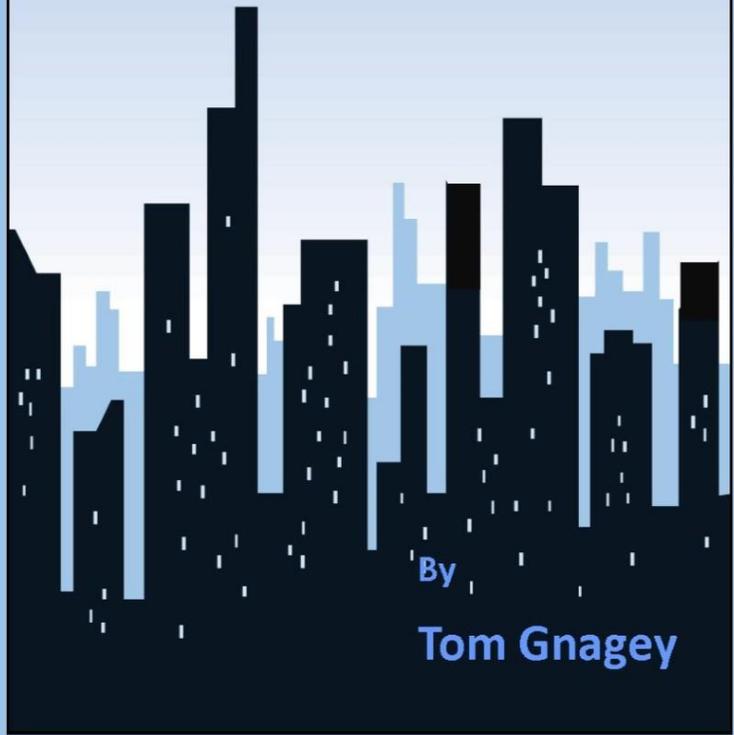


6 short mysteries featuring
Thomas Trent
Crime Scene Photographer



By

Tom Gnagey

**Thomas Trent:
Crime Scene Photographer**
His first six cases

By Tom Gnagey

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The Family of Man Press

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Thomas Trent, Meet Thomas Trent
by Tom Gnagey
Case # 1
The Thomas Trent Crime Scene Photographer
Mystery Series

My name is Thomas Trent.

I thought I'd seen it all. Fifteen years as a crime scene photographer had led me into the most bizarre, the most horrendous, and the most puzzling situations. What I just witnessed, however set a new high – or low, I suppose, depending on one's perspective.

I make a good enough living to maintain a simple but comfortable three room apartment on the Upper East Side. My third-floor front windows overlook a magnificent park just beyond the modest parking lot, a park which has been photographed and written about as the center piece of magazines and Sunday supplements for decades. The rear window from my kitchen provides a less auspicious view looking across onto the blank, flaking brick, exterior of a large, five floor, department store of some historic fame. I'm separated from it by an alley, which has no truly redeeming features. It exemplifies the generic definition of 'alley' for this city. Perhaps that is a claim to fame of sorts. It was down there in that narrow, dark, damp, urban crevice that the inexplicable occurrence took place a few minutes ago – it is now 11:40 pm on Thursday night.

Unlike those of my ilk who display the more typically less organized artistic temperament, I am a creature of habit. Each night I watch the eleven o'clock local news, mostly for

leads to photo ops that hold some potential for keeping my coffers comfortably filled. At eleven thirty I move into the kitchen, turn on the light, and do up what few dishes may need my attention. I water my three struggling African violets positioned on the rusting window shelf where they sit patiently awaiting what few rays of morning sun may sneak down to imbue their curling, fuzzy, leaves with sun's mystical life source. A young friend says it would be more humane if I 'put them down' – his words – but I can't bring myself to do that. We've been family for too many generations – through at least a dozen leaf transplants.

It was after the dishes, while attending to the plants, that it all came down. I noticed movement in the alley below. My photographer's natural reflex moved me to pick up my camera. I opened the telescopic lens to help me get a clearer look through the faint light of city night. Two men stood facing each other on the far side of the alley under the single bare bulb that failed in its struggle to light that entire, cramped, block-long, corridor. I zoomed in tightly on the scene as only such a sophisticated and expensive camera could do. Their forms and some details became clear. The one on the left appeared to be a young man – twenty to twenty-five. His was the only face I could see from my vantage point. He looked terrified and moved his hands up in front of him as if to protect himself from attack. The other seemed older.

It immediately became apparent that the older man was holding a hand gun on the other. Three orange flashes lit the alley. They were followed a split second later by the cracking off of three, crisp, staccato, shots, which reverberated from wall to wall in a seemingly endless sequence of ever quieting sounds soon dulling and fading beyond recognition.

I had been clicking off pictures and captured the scene – the frames of the event as it unfolded. Oddly, there were also white flashes – like camera flashes – coming from ground level below and to the left of my window on my side of the alley. I could not see the area due to the angle and the intervening iron fire escape that clung to the rear of my building.

The young man fell to the brick pavement. The shooter then turned and looked directly up at my window, pausing –

clearly an intentional move, unmotivated by anything up here that might have caught his attention. It was what I saw at that moment that astonished me. I focused in on the face. It was mine! It was not sort of like mine. It was not almost like mine. It was mine. I instinctively turned the camera back toward my face and clicked off several shots. The time stamp and background would verify that I was in my kitchen at the time of the shooting – maybe it would do that. That had been my spur of the moment intention, at least.

I called 911. The man put the gun in his jacket pocket and turned, walking on down the alley to my left. I described the shooting to the operator but omitted the apparent identity of the shooter. The authorities would be on the scene in minutes. Should I rush down and see if I could do anything for the victim? Somebody carelessly rushed in from the street to the right so I decided my presence was not necessary.

I moved into my living room, downloaded the pictures onto my lap top, and examined them. There were twenty-three in all. In most of them the shooter was turned so that his face could not be seen – those could not be enlarged by the crime lab to identify the person. I printed off two of them and made my way down the back stairs. I arrived on the scene just as the police pulled in, their sirens fading into the lower register before becoming quiet. I continued taking pictures. I was well known to the cops and they allowed it without question. The young man was dead – three slugs through the heart. I handed over the prints and pointed to my window describing it as the vantage point. The crime scene unit arrived. I answered their questions and then stepped back out of the way. Actually, I stepped back so I could examine the area beneath my window from where the camera flashes had originated. Nothing remarkable jumped out at me but I clicked off a number of shots. Interestingly, none of the investigators seemed interested enough in what I was doing to ask.

Alleys are filled with crap. Who knew how long the cigarette butts, the empty fifths, and the fast food containers had been there. I chronicled them in photos just the same. My trained ears caught bits of information from the conversation across the way. The weapon appeared to have been a small caliber hand gun – probably a 22. Since there

were no casings left at the scene it was most likely a revolver. Several of my pictures verified that. Death had been instantaneous. The name Gerald Paxton surfaced several times. Paxton was a wealthy banker in his mid to late fifties. He could not have been the young victim.

I didn't want to appear suspiciously interested so I made my query short and business like.

"You got an ID I can attach to my photos when I drop them off at the Daily Herald in the morning?"

The officer looked at my old friend, Lieutenant Miller, who nodded his permission.

"Gerald Paxton the third. Age 23 according to his driver's license. The face on the body is a clear match to the photo and identifying info."

"From the banker's family - Paxton?" I asked.

"Address on his license is the same as the old man's mansion on Sunset Road."

I handed the officer my card and told him I'd be happy to help in any way. I was sure that, in what would surely become a high-profile case, I'd be called to give a deposition so there was no reason to try to hide from it. I returned to my apartment.

Several months earlier a reporter and I had experienced a run-in of a sort with the senior Paxton when we arrived at the scene of an accident between his limo and a city truck. My presence had clearly irritated him and he became quite vocal about it. Don't get me wrong. My activities would never categorize me as paparazzi. I stick primarily to crime scenes. There were dozens of witnesses. The fact remained, however, if he had wanted to get back at me he would have used some means other than trying to set me up for his own son's murder. What then?

A whole litany of things seemed odd – in addition to watching myself killing a man. Why did the killer apparently time the event to occur when I would be at my kitchen window? Somebody knew my habits. Why pull it all off in the only well-lit spot in the entire alley – a spot where visual identification from the street and photographs were possible? So 'my' face would be clearly visible, I assumed. Why choose a spot directly across from my apartment – the apartment of

the man portrayed as the killer? Why would the killer turn and purposefully pause to make sure I saw his face, full on, and have the opportunity to take a number of photographs? If the Paxton kid was to be killed, the mask was clearly not to keep him from seeing and identifying his killer. What did the other camera flashes signify? The angle from where I had placed those flashes would have allowed the killer's face to be seen. Why try to implicate me in the murder – which certainly seemed to be the clear intent? The fact that I had the pictures I had taken at the moment of the killing, and clearly shot from the angle of my kitchen window, would seem to provide an iron clad alibi for me. Or would it?

I suppose they could have been taken on a timer setting from a camera on a tripod while I made my way back and forth between my apartment and the crime scene. Why would I even involve myself with photos if I were the killer? What possible connection might I have to the deceased or to the killer? How could such a connection be back tracked and determined? The more I thought the more confusing it all seemed.

I may or may not have slept any that night. In my mental wanderings through the turbulent twilight that inserts itself between sleep and wakefulness, I had decided to go ahead and submit the photos to the newspaper in order to maintain the appearance of normalcy. It was known that I photographed the crime scene. I made my living selling crime scene photographs. I would normally try to sell them. Not to do that could appear suspicious. I would sell several that did not implicate me.

I didn't have to wait long for answers. When I returned home from my early morning trip to the Daily Herald the next day, there was a large, brown, unaddressed, envelope resting against the base of the door to my apartment. I looked around – a fully inane reaction to the situation but nonetheless, I looked around. It was sealed. I took it inside.

Due to the recent events, I immediately assumed it was in some way connected to the murder. I hoped it would contain answers. With the likelihood that the sender had licked the envelope to seal it, I slit it across the top to preserve any remnants of the saliva. (Perhaps I watch too much TV!) It

contained a short note and five, 8 X 10, color photographs of the crime scene, each clearly showing the person with my face and the gun before, during, and after the victim fell to the ground. They had been taken from ground level with a hack's camera – grainy, poorly focused, but sufficient to identify the man with the gun as me. That verified my initial impression about the white flashes from beneath my kitchen window. Clearly, they had been taken by an accomplice. He was most likely an untrained photographer although not entirely without knowledge about the art.

I moved on to the note – a 5 X 5 inch slip of paper. It had been printed from a computer and had been cut from the middle of a letter size sheet so as to remove any microscopic printer set or other identifying data often hidden in the edges of the page. It read simply:

“You have recently received a large amount of money. I want a million dollars in random bills. I will give you two weeks so the transaction won't draw undue attention. Later I'll tell you where and when. You will receive the card from the camera with the original data on it. Do not be foolish and go to the authorities or they will receive copies and you will get the needle.”

It was, of course, unsigned. It had been printed on inexpensive, common label, 20# printer paper.

At the outset, the plot or whatever it was seemed to have been a well-conceived and executed operation. The basic problem was that I had not recently received a large amount of money. The five hundred bucks I'd just earned from the pictures was the best I'd done in a week. (Darn the falling crime rate!)

So, in addition to how my face got on the front of the bad guy's head, I now had to figure out how he had received the misinformation about my finances. One thing did stand out. The note was printed in a crisp, uncluttered, font with which I was unfamiliar. I had no idea how identifying it might help but I would ask my friend the computer genius down stairs. He was a fifteen-year-old boy confined to a wheel chair due to an accident several years earlier at a nearby football stadium, and fatherless due to a faraway war. It was the only clue I had – well, that and the knowledge of what had to have

been a relatively perfect face mask of my likeness worn by the killer. I went downstairs and knocked on the young man's door.

It was soon open.

“Dante. Wonder if I could rent that digital brain of yours for a while.”

“For you, the first hour is always free, Mr. T. Come in.”

I had made a copy of the note and cut out several of the words – a selection that provided a fairly representative sample of the alphabet. I had arranged the words in random order on my scanner and printed a copy. I showed that to him. That shell game had been intended to shelter him from the unsettling facts of the situation.

“I don't recognize this font. Can you help me?”

“I don't know. May take as much as – oh, I don't know – two minutes.”

“That's exactly the kind of answer I was depending on.”

The boy scanned the sheet I'd given him and was soon running it through some kind of font recognition software program. As he let it work he had several comments.

“A very clean font. Not one you often see. I'm quite sure it's not included in the typical MS word package. Not sure why not. I really like it.”

Less than a minute passed.

“Bingo! Did you keep a stop watch on that?” he asked, smiling up at me.

He was average in the looks department but his forthright approach to life, positive energy and wonderful, natural, ever-present, grin made him a favorite wherever he appeared.

He studied the finding on the screen.

“I got it. Shruti. Never heard of it myself. Let's find out about it. Good old Google.”

His fingers flew around the keyboard. It made me wish I'd pursued my high school typing class with more attention to the keys and less to the curvaceous young student teacher.

“I was right. Not included in Microsoft Word applications. It is, however, in Open Office. That's an effective, poor man's, almost clone, of MS word. What else do you need to know?”

“That should do it. Thanks, pal. I owe you.”

“Owe me enough to come watch me do the 100-yard dash on Saturday morning?”

I was taken aback and apparently showed it. He grinned again.

“Special Olympics. Been working on my upper body strength so I can propel this cart of mine as fast as the wind. It's just over at Windsor High School. My event is scheduled for 9:30. I'm going early to help out the handicapped kids. You're welcome to come early, too, if you can. We always need help.”

“I'll let you know tomorrow. I will try to be there. I'm sort of in the middle of a thing right now so I can't promise. Wouldn't want to say yes and then have to go back on my word.”

“Okay. I understand. Let me know either way. If you can't, I'll have to find a way to blackmail my little brother into helping out.”

I always felt refreshed after spending time with Dante. He truly didn't think of himself as handicapped – just 'inconvenienced' as he had once put it to me. He loved life and lived it well.

Back in my apartment I pulled out a yellow pad, sunk into my recliner, and set to jotting down things that might be helpful as I worked through the – what? – situation, I suppose.

First, who knew my late evening routine well enough to set me up so precisely?

Second, how could one come by such a perfect, full-face, mask?

Third, the whole confusing thing about the photographs – whys, hows, whos?

Nothing useful came to mind immediately. There had been several old girlfriends who certainly knew my night-time ritual. We had parted friends so I doubted that a grudge or score settling might be part of it. There were actually very few people who ever even entered my apartment. The first Monday of the month there was my cleaning lady – Maria – but she was always done and gone by noon. The bug guy on the second Tuesday of the month. He was in and out in ten minutes – always over the noon hour. There was the

maintenance crew at the apartments. I hadn't needed their assistance since my bathroom exhaust fan had gone on the blink over a year before. I had a few friends but my place was not where we gathered – restaurants, the bowling alley, an occasional movie. There was no special lady in my life at the moment.

Dante and I had a regular chess game on Wednesday evenings but he was gone by eight thirty. I might have spoken with him about my routine. He often spoke about his – meals, chores, school, TV, physical therapy, bathing, dressing. Each activity posed some obstacle for which he had devised creative solutions. And, oh yes, there was the time he spent bedeviling his brother most days. “It's my most important job,” he joked. “Gotta make him strong and alert.” Dante, of course, would not have had any intentional connection to the murder or to setting me up, but perhaps he had unknowingly passed on information.

At six thirty Saturday morning Dante was rapping on my door. I had just finished shaving. After a quick peek through the peep hole, I opened the door.

“Six thirty in the morning! Really?” I said, securing the towel around my midsection.

“I knew you wouldn't be ready so I figured I'd come up and cheer you on.”

“Come in. Five minutes,” I said. “You had breakfast?”

“If you are really asking if I could eat, yes, of course, I'm fifteen. I'll get the eggs, milk and juice out of the fridge. Scrambled OK? I can manage that from my rig.”

He didn't wait for an answer. I smiled as I heard him banging around – pots, pans, who knew what else. Although I had the urge to inquire about his clearly voiced, “Oops!” I restrained myself.

I dressed and entered the kitchen – still combing my hair. He had set the table. I keep the dishes and glasses on the counter. Handy. I suppose it is a bachelor thing.

“You make the toast, Mr. T. The toaster was unplugged and I had better things to do than work at fixing that. You can get coffee later on over at the field.”

“You are quite the . . .”

“Please don't say 'little house keeper'. My friend

Jackson says that and it annoys me, greatly.”

“I was going to say you are quite the efficient young butler.”

“Cool! I am a good cook and one of my jobs at home is vacuuming and dusting everything within four feet of the floor. My little brother resists but I usually get him well dusted before it’s all over. Mom sometimes wonders why he smells like lemon pledge. We keep it our secret. I know there’s payback coming down the road when he grows up, but until then I try to be a good big brother.”

I chose not to pursue his perception of ‘good’ in that context.

I set in the toast and took a seat at the table. Dante pulled a chair away and rolled into place. He had scrambled at least eight eggs. I took a portion that looked to be two and he happily dumped the rest onto his plate. The toast popped up and we were set.

“This may seem like an odd question, Dante, but has anybody in your life seemed particularly interested in me lately?”

“Like a gorgeous, single, middle aged, lady, you mean?”

“Well, perhaps, but that was not the direction my question was really aimed. And I’m not yet middle aged.”

Dante grinned his knowing, impish, grin.

“I guess I don’t follow you then,” he said.

“It’s a vague question, I know. I told you I was in the middle of a situation.”

“You called it a ‘thing’ and I have been wondering about it. You are usually not so evasive with me – well except in chess.”

“I’m just going to say it involves some unknown person who seems to know things about me that aren’t generally known – my personal habits and such. I’m trying to get a line on how a person might find out such things.”

“I see. I won’t pry and I will try to help. Nothing comes to mind but I’ll think on it. Should I be worried?”

“No. As I recall at fifteen a guy has all the worries he can handle without taking on anybody else’s.”

He raised his eye brows but didn’t comment. I changed

the topic.

“The 100-yard dash – all wheelchairs?”

“That's the heat I'm entered in. All guys. All teens. All hand-propelled. There are probably a dozen other categories.”

“How do you expect to do?”

“I expect to have a great time. That's what the Special Olympics are all about, remember?”

“I do. Sometimes I forget there is still that one wonderful oasis that's free from the irrational competition that characterizes so many of life's endeavors.”

“Yeah! That's one of the great gifts my injury has given me. I've become a cooperator instead of the mindless competitor I used to be.”

We finished eating. He pushed back and looked around.

“You do dishes at night, after the news, right?”

“That's right.”

I didn't pursue his comment even though it was a piece of personal information that played a central part in my current 'thing'. I did wonder about it, however – how he had come by the information and to whom he might have inadvertently passed it on. The 'how' was easy; it had undoubtedly come from me. The 'to whom' was going to be the challenge.

* * *

I clicked off pictures nonstop. All the kids proved to be willing and eager hams for my cameras.

Dante rolled to an easy victory – a win by three yards. I was curious and had to ask.

“Congratulations, old man. I do have one question.”

“Will I give you my autograph? Of course, I will.”

“Well, that, yes, but you clearly pulled up at the end. You could have won by ten yards?”

“Yeah. Well, I didn't want to humiliate anybody, you know. It's for fun. A win's a win and that really isn't the point, anyway. I think we all had a good time.”

“That was obvious!”

“Do you know Barry Prince – the reporter over there?” he asked.

He pointed to a man about my age and build.

“I know who his is. Worked with him on occasion. He works for the Daily Herald. I've done some shoots for a couple of his stories.”

“He's recently become a big supporter of the Olympics. Always around for practice and events like this one. Has a small article with a picture about us in the paper almost every day.”

“He sounds like a good guy. Glad he's using his influence to support these activities.”

Dante waved, getting his attention, then motioned to him. Barry acknowledged the gesture and approached us.

“Well, well. My favorite athlete and my favorite photographer both right here in victory circle, as it has been called.”

It could have been a lighthearted conversation starter. It could have been sarcasm. Considering that he regularly and arrogantly, I thought, boasted about having been an all-state quarterback, I figured he was actually his favorite athlete. And, since he preferred taking his own pictures, and had refused my help on several occasions when it had been suggested by his editor, I leaned toward the latter. Dante, however, accepted it as well intentioned humor. I wouldn't tamper with that.

We managed to maintain an exchange of awkward small talk for a few minutes – clearly for Dante's benefit. I gave Barry credit for that. He snapped a few shots of Dante – even one of Dante and me, and then moved on. I would have offered to send him some of my quality shots but knew he'd prefer his own – at least he'd prefer not mine. He had trouble sharing by-lines. Barry seldom even tried to disguise the fact that he saw himself as the center of the universe and assumed the rest of us willingly granted him that position. I'd never really liked him much and had no reason to think the feeling wasn't mutual.

I begged off at ten and went home. I put a packet of pictures together and would see that the Special Olympics folks received them.

At two, Dante was back at my door.

“You got the pictures ready yet? You always have pictures.”

I handed him two large envelopes, one marked for him and one for the committee. He was a reliable delivery boy – young man – whatever. It was often difficult to know at his age.

“I got one for you, too,” he said fumbling through the back pack that always clung to the rear of his chair. It had been his father's.

He removed an 8 X 10 glossy printout.

“It's one Barry took of me and you. Pretty nice, huh?”

“Yes. Very nice. This one for me to keep?”

“It is. I figure you can show it to your grandkids so they'll know how you looked before you got old and wrinkled. You really need to get started on a family, you know, or I'll have kids before you do.”

“I'll make it a point to save it for them. And, I didn't know it was a contest between us – the first to have kids. As I see it, however, my main problem is going to be how to explain the ugly kid there by my side in this picture.”

He grinned, knowing it had been offered in good humor and required no response.

Something about the picture struck me. I'd look into it later.

Later came sooner than I had anticipated.

“I gotta skedaddle,” Dante said. “Jackson and I are double dating tonight – a movie – and girls, of course. Got to go get cleaned up and put a shine on my wheels. Hope Little Bro, Jerry, hasn't hidden the Pledge again.”

He giggled himself off toward the elevator.

What a kid!

I took out the photos that had come to me in the brown envelope. It was as I had remembered. Those photos all contained a flaw – a barely detectable, narrow, arc-shaped, smudge in the lower right corner. Its significance had escaped me until I saw the new picture of Dante and me. It contained the same flaw and would have been caused by a barely noticeable scratch on the camera lens. I had a connection – at least to the camera. If it were from the Daily Herald's pool of cameras, any reporter or photographer could sign it out. In that case the suspect list became sizable. If it were from Barry's own camera, I had suddenly taken a giant step

forward. I called Dante.

“You have any other photos Barry has taken – maybe during the last two months or so?”

“Yeah. Dozens. I just toss most of them into my desk drawer. It's like overkill. I accept them to be polite. He always shoots lots of pictures when we get together.”

'Get together', I wondered to myself. I would pursue that later. I continued the conversation.

“If I come down can I take a gander at them?”

“Sure. This is about your 'thing' isn't it?”

“Well, it's about something. Can we leave it at that for the moment?”

“Of course. I'll have them ready when you get here, but hurry up. I already have my bath water running.”

I borrowed a dozen from him with the promise to return them unharmed. Joking, he asked that I leave a pint of blood as collateral. I offered him a stick of Dentine gum. He accepted the substitution and the negotiation was concluded. We had a good chuckle. I figured I'd never see the stick of gum again whether or not I returned the pictures.

I went back to my apartment. Each of Barry's pictures had the flaw.

One of my questions seemed to be answered. It was Barry's camera that was used in the alley that night. Could he have loaned it to somebody? Could somebody have 'borrowed' it without his knowledge? Hmmm. Though not a lock, it was certainly the best break I'd had.

I needed to learn more about Barry as a person. Dante seemed to know a lot about him. I made another call.

“Dante, my man. This is the nuisance from upstairs. When will you get home tonight?”

“Who made you my mother?”

“Clown! If it won't be too late I'd like to have your ear for an hour or so.”

“My date has to be home by ten. She's 14. Her parents are still pretty protective of her. I can be up at your place by 10:30. Have popcorn and soda ready.”

* * *

He sniffed the air as he entered my apartment.

“Popcorn. Good boy! Soda?”

The first fifteen minutes were consumed by the boy's monologue about the best date ever. I'd heard that from him before. Any date where kissing had occurred seemed to get that label. Eventually, I found an opening and got down to business.

"Without violating any friend to friend loyalties, can you tell me what you know about Barry as a person?"

"Sure. No biggie. We aren't what you'd call close. The past week or so is really when we've spent the most time together – after practices over at the field. He buys me hot dogs and sodas and we chat for a few minutes. Before then it was more just a 'hi and goodbye' sort of thing."

"These past weeks – what kinds of things has he talked about?"

"Well, I hadn't really given that much thought but, you, I guess. He really talked you up like you are the best photographer in the city. He said if I was interested in that area you would be the best teacher I could find. We talked some about how me and you came to know each other and what we did when we spent time together. He says he doesn't play chess but seemed open to a game of checkers sometime. That never came up again."

"Did you speak about my daily routine with him?"

"Well, let's see. He asked what you did in your spare time and I guess I told him not much. You're always out taking pictures and listening to your police scanner. I think I mentioned that you watched the eleven o'clock news to get shoot leads. And, oh yes, when he mentioned how he used to work in his father's greenhouse I mentioned your droopy violets. He thinks you over-water them by the way. Twice a week should be plenty, not every night according to him – causes root rot. I pass that on for what it's worth. He did ask one thing I thought was odd. He asked if you ever spent money on the lottery. I said I had been with you once when you bought us both a scratch card. I won five bucks and you didn't win anything. Any of this helpful?"

"It just may be me."

"You think Barry is some kind of bad guy don't you?"

"I'm gathering data that is very important to me right now. Don't be concerned."

“Yeah. Sure. You call me up here late at night and grill me about a casual acquaintance, who it now seems may have been using me in some devious manner. Why would you think I might be concerned? Sounds like you think I've sold you out or something.”

“Do you really believe I would ever think that about you?”

“Well, no. I guess I short circuited to the parent/teen thing. It's a teen's job to call out his parents on every little detail, you understand. You have to let me help, though, you know that.”

“Okay. I suppose there is no way you can be harmed if you stick to doing research on that magic computer of yours.”

“I prefer to think of it as that magic boy who does research on his computer.”

“You're undoubtedly right, there. Okay, then. Here are your first assignments, Sherlock. Jot them down on the pad here if you like. First, where would one get full head masks made around here? Probably latex or something similar. And made to exactly resemble another living person. Would have to work from photos because the actual head would not be available to use.”

“I already know a starting place,” he said surprising me. “My anthropology class visited the Natural History Museum and we got to go behind the scenes. We watched a guy who was recreating heads of famous anthropologists for an upcoming display – sort of like a wax museum, I guess. He was working on Margaret Mead – well, her head, I mean. He worked from photos – lots of them were old and cracked. He scanned them into a software program that cleaned them up and provided a set of 3-D images for him to work from. I imagine a mask could probably be made in the same way.”

“Great. I'll need name and contact information.”

“Number two. I need Barry's history – a thumbnail sketch will do to begin with. Look into his extended family.”

“Got it. Number three?”

“Barry's question about me playing the lottery interests me a lot. See if anybody by my name has won a big lottery recently.”

“Okay. This is getting intense. I love it.”

“Final question, at least for now: Is there some way you can get a sample of the font Barry typically uses?”

“I’ll work on it. He has a website where he posts his articles. I’ll start there although I doubt if his server will support an off-brand font like Shruti, if that’s what you have in mind. It will probably insert a substitute. I’ll think on how I can get a real-life sample.”

I put my hand on Dante’s shoulder and announced as if to the world:

“This lad’s bright, good looking, creative, and charming. He may, in fact, beat me in the make some kids contest. I only have, what, three years until you can get married in this state?”

He chuckled. His only comeback was the repeated raising of his eyebrows. Its meaning was mostly unclear but I assumed it was based at least partially in teen-boy hormones and the wish fulfillment fantasies they inflict. It was nearly eleven o’clock. He left.”

“Don’t forget to sleep tonight,” I called after him. “Don’t want your mother on my case.”

He acknowledged it with a briefly raised hand as I watched him continue on his way to the elevator.

* * *

I set the popcorn bowls in the sink and then took a seat in my recliner to watch the news. I fell asleep. Seventeen hour days were strictly for younger guys. I awoke in my bed at seven fifteen the next morning. I munched on stale popcorn and sipped fizz-dead soda.

Before I stepped into the shower I unlocked my front door just in case ‘Sherlock’ arrived to beat on it. That turned out to have been a good plan. When I entered the kitchen, he was at the table downing a bowl of cereal and working through the last of my three pop tarts.

“Morning!” came his cheery greeting. “F.Y.I. I prefer blueberry tarts to these strawberry ones and what’s with the generic flakes? Taste like cardboard.”

“Other than that, how has your morning gone?”

He grinned and nodded – his mouth full of my breakfast.

“Got some answers.”

He pulled out the pad I had supplied for him.

I made coffee as I listened.

"Here's the address and phone number of the guy at the museum – Ted Franklin. Spent time with some big city police department a few years back doing forensic reconstruction. Not sure what that is but I imagine it's related to what he's doing now."

"I got a big 'bingo' on the lottery thing. Another guy named Thomas Trent won huge in the Deutsche Nationale Lotterie – that's the German National Lottery for any non-linguists in the kitchen."

"I got it. How much?"

"The equivalent of twenty-nine million dollars, US."

"Where's the other Trent fellow from?"

"New Jersey. I got the address. He's dropped out of sight. I tried calling his phone and it's been disconnected."

"Not sure your calling him was such a good idea. What in the world were you planning to say?"

"I was going to pose as a telemarketer and offer him a super deal on a three months' supply of Viagra pills."

He laughed himself into convulsions. It had been funny – absurd, I suppose – and I found myself chuckling too hard to pour my coffee without spilling it.

"Moving on to anything else you may have missed sleep over," I added at last.

"Well, Barry may not be Barry."

"What?"

"Barry Prince only goes back seven years. Before that I can't find a trace of him."

"Oh, my. The name Barry Prince is only seven years old? Not at all what I anticipated."

"Me neither. He looks to be at least thirty-five. Early onset puberty, I assume."

Another prolonged chuckle that doubled him over in his chair. That time I managed little more than a nod in his direction and an anemic smile.

Changing identities signified a major deal of some kind. I suddenly grew even more uneasy about the developments surrounding my 'thing'.

"This is a far out hunch, Dante. Search the headlines

of major, area newspapers just prior to the time Barry surfaced. See if you can find anything about men his age who went missing and stayed missing. Maybe men with a shady lifestyle or associates. I'm not sure what further direction to give you."

"Wow! This is fantastic. What a way to spend my summer. That's not to say I'm happy about your 'thing', whatever it is, you understand."

"It's alright. Under other circumstances I'd be right with you on it. A caution here, Dante. Don't leave trails back to you. I doubt if there is any trouble potential here, but I'd rather you'd be careful."

"Okay. It will just add a bit of a challenge to the whole thing. I can do that. Multiple servers. False IP addresses. I love a challenge."

He turned his chair preparing to leave. At the door, he wheeled around and spoke.

"By the way. You probably shouldn't leave your door unlocked. Maybe you should just give me a key – now that we've formed the Dante and Thomas, Detective Agency."

"This is a one-time case, young man. I doubt if that grants the privilege or necessity of a key."

He left. I had things to sort out and new hypotheses to develop. There might well be a series of coincidences in play.

I called the museum and set up an appointment for a photo shoot, ostensibly in reference to the new display. Some good photos and a simplistic story outline might even get me another payday from the Herald.

Ted Franklin, Dr. Ted Franklin as it turned out, was a mousey, myopic, middle aged man with a closely cropped mane of white hair ringing the sides of his pale, mostly bald, head. What little color had graced his face initially, drained away as the Director ushered me into his studio. He became agitated and found it difficult to maintain eye contact with me. In Dante's terms, I believed I had another 'bingo'.

The Director left us alone. Franklin's first phrase pretty well confirmed the bingo.

"You're not going to hurt me are you? I figured the man was up to no good."

He backed away from me. It telegraphed his sudden

belief that I had all the facts in the matter. I played along pressing my apparent advantage. I took a stern tone – something fully unfamiliar to me.

“I certainly hope that won't be necessary. Why don't you lay it all out for me – your side of the story? Pure and simple.”

“Pure and simple. Yes, sir. Well, about a month ago, he offered me a great deal of money to make your likeness into a mask and keep quiet about it.”

“He?”

“I was never given his name and it was a cash transaction.”

“Go on.”

“He presented me with a dozen head shots from various angles. It was a rush job. It took most of a week just to create the base. I fell behind with this project.”

“Base?”

“The clay sculpture of the head. From that I made a latex mask – full head. I added the color and make up. That's all I did, I swear.”

“You still have the base – the sculpture you created?”

“Up there on the shelf.”

I motioned for him to get it.

He moved a short stepladder into position and climbed to the third step. I snapped off a sequence of shots of him retrieving it and finally holding it under his chin to document his role in the proceedings. I produced a picture I'd taken of Barry at the athletic field on Saturday.

“And you can identify this man,” I said, firmly presenting it as a question.

The doctor nodded.

“That's the man.”

He dabbed at his forehead with a paper towel awkwardly torn from the roll on his table.

“If you will, please, on the back of this photo, write that this is the man who ordered and received the mask of Tom Trent – that's me, by the way. Sign it and date it. Add your private phone number.”

I placed the pictures he had of me along with the sculptured head into a plastic bag and left. I didn't have the

story I had intended to obtain but I had obtained the one I needed. I hoped my young partner had found information that would fill in the gaps and help solidify the unfolding saga. He had – well, sort of.

“You're gonna be proud of me,” Dante said.

He was waiting outside my door when I returned.

“I can't think of a time when I haven't been proud of you.”

He smiled and nodded and held my glance for a long moment. It was a nice, warm, exchange.

We went inside.

“I got Barry's font and if I do say so myself it was an ingenious ploy.”

“And now that you have said so, yourself, do I get to hear?”

“I went to his website and like I figured there was no Shruti font there. So, I went to his article page. He has a download feature. I downloaded one of his articles and just as I hoped, the downloads came from his computer. The files were in their original format, and . . .” He paused and motioned to me with an open palm as if I should continue for him.

“You managed a, “Bingo”!

“Right. Those files are all in Shruti. There are probably another million guys who use it but none, I'll bet, who are connected with your thing. When you going to fill me about all this, anyway?”

“I suppose now is as good a time as any.”

I laid out the whole story. It sobered and clearly saddened him – perhaps frightened him although I couldn't be sure of that. As I recalled, fifteen-year-old males are often stoic in the face of such previously unexplored inner states.

“I have two more things,” he went on, “if I can use that word without causing an undue adrenalin rush. First, there were several men Barry's age who disappeared from the four-state area at the time we're interested in. With what you've just indicated, one on them suddenly moves to the top of the list. He was a third rate hit man who posed as a reporter to get close to his targets or whatever they're called.”

“Marks, I believe is the word you're looking for.”

“Yeah! Right. Good. I guess your old gray matter still has some miles left in it. Anyway, his name was – get this – Bart Potter – BP. Meant he didn't have to get new monogrammed luggage or towels, I suppose.”

“If the two B.P.s are actually one and the same.”

“Oh, they are! It just gets better and better. If you don't already realize it, you're working with a true genius, here. Let me show you on your computer. Where is your file of pictures from the night of the killing?”

I pulled aside my chair and he rolled into place. I pointed to a file on the desktop. He opened it and perused the thumbnails. After a moment, he selected one of the full-face shots. He enlarged it well beyond anything I had done or even considered doing. Presently the screen was filled side to side with eyebrows, eyes, and the bridge of a nose.

“What do you see, Mr. T?”

“I think I see what you saw. That is really great detective work young man – er, young genius – make that, young magic genius.”

He grinned and nodded, clearly both excited and pleased about his discovery.

“Did you even know Barry had one hazel and one blue eye?” he asked.

“I did, but I got so used to it I never really thought about it.”

“Well, there it is. Two eyes peering through the openings in the mask – one hazel and one blue. What's the chances?”

“One in millions, I suppose. I'm sure you can find the exact ratio on Google if you look.”

He grinned. I tried to summarize.

“So, let's see. We know the man in the mask – the murderer – was Barry. We assume that rather than being after young Paxton, he was really after a million dollars from what he mistakenly thought I had won. Pretty careless for a hit man.”

“I said he was third rate, remember? That's how the other BP was described by a police detective in an article I dredged up.”

“Yes. Well that goes a long way toward explaining it, I

suppose. We have the testimony of the mask maker – thanks to you. We have the damning eye color connection – thanks to you. We have Barry's probable former identity – thanks to you.”

Dante continued.

“And I'm afraid we know how he found out about your late-night habits, thanks to me.”

“You couldn't have known. The one remaining question is why did he select the young Paxton man to kill? My run-in with the family was surely not a big enough deal that anybody would ever believe I would have killed over it.”

“It may have been all he could find on short notice,” Dante said. “And, he did create a compelling scenario, as they say on CSI.”

I nodded thinking that seemed to fit the goings on.

The doorbell rang. That reminded me that sometime I'd have to instruct Dante in its use. I answered. It was Sam the UPS guy – UPS person – excuse me.

“Hey Sam. Thought you were still on vacation.”

“First day back. Mary Ann do a good job for you while I was gone?”

“No complaints. This isn't your regular delivery time.”

“No. Have a long-lost envelope for you. It's actually several days overdue, sorry about that. Should have been delivered Friday morning. It came to Frank Flint – the name you use sometimes when you send photographs off to big magazines and such. Mary Ann had no way of knowing that plus it was addressed to 507 Blake, Apartment 503 instead of here at 707 Blake, apartment 503. Since there was no Frank Flint listed on the apartment roster at 507, she tried to leave it with the manager over there but the apartment was vacant and he'd never heard of Flint. I spotted it first thing but just now found time to bring it by.”

“Thanks, as always. Best service in the universe, I always say.”

I went back inside. I had nothing outstanding in the Flint name. Dante had heard the conversation.

“So, you going to open it or just stand there sweating on it letting it deteriorate in the aging envelope as we sit here growing older?”

I managed a smile, pulled the pasteboard zip strip and bent it open at the top. Inside was a letter size envelope. I removed it. It was neither addressed nor sealed. I opened it and removed the contents. It was a cashier's check payable to cash for – gulp – one million dollars. I turned it toward Dante.

“You been holding out on me, Mr. T. That's worth a lot of hotdogs! What's going on?”

“I suddenly have a theory – that's all it is but it seems to fit. I need to get my old friend Lieutenant Miller over here right now. Let me place that call, then I'll fill you in.”

With the call made, I began.

“What about this? It began with Barry's mistake about me winning the lottery. Then, he kidnapped the Paxton boy – say on Wednesday, maybe – and requested a million-dollar ransom from his father to be sent in care of Frank Flint to that vacant apartment where he would be waiting to accept it. It never arrived because of the things Sam recounted. My professional name – Flint – was no secret at the paper. Barry could have easily known about it. It was a pay-me-a-million-tomorrow-or-your-boy-gets-killed sort of demand made to the elder Paxton. Barry would have killed him either way. His plan was a double dip arrangement. First, get the money from Paxton, Senior. Then implicate me later on, after I paid up to keep Barry quiet about my apparent role in the killing. I was never to be off the hook. Barry ends up with two million – Paxton's and mine – I get blamed for the crime, and he moves on to new territory a wealthy man.”

“If that was third rate, I'd never want to see first rate,” Dante began. “That means Barry was willing to kill one person in cold blood and send you away for life or worse for a crime you didn't commit – all for some money. I think I'm beginning to understand what they mean by 'evil genius'. How could I have been so easily taken in by him?”

“It's what con men do. I'm sure you're only one in a long, long, line of folks he's conned down through the years.”

“You sure things are going to be okay for you when the cop gets here?” Dante asked.

“With your help we have it all wrapped up for the lieutenant. When they find Barry's fingerprints at the false

apartment address – as I believe they will – it will be a wrap, as they say at the end of a photo shoot.”

* * *

Eventually Lieutenant Miller left with our version of what happened, copies of all my photographs from the night of the murder, and the other evidence we had collected. He assured us he would contact the senior Paxton and that he would eventually get the money back to him. He was sure there would be a sizable reward for the fleeting firm of Dante and Thomas – a good start on the boy's college fund, I figured.

As Dante downed the third soda of the afternoon, he spoke about something else that was on his mind.

“About that making babies thing that we've been kidding about. I have a couple of questions.”

I wasn't at all sure that my color photo shoot a few years back for an airline magazine featuring birds and bees was going to qualify as adequate preparation for what was about to transpire. The topic did, however, take me back to my own fifteenth year and a fleeting memory of a most memorable student teacher.

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Thomas Trent Meets the Ethereal Killer

By Tom Gnagey

Case #2:

A Thomas Trent, Crime Photographer, Short Mystery

“I got a new assignment I’m sure you’re going to like helping me with.”

It was 15-year-old, wheel chair bound, Dante’s opening volley as he wheeled himself into my apartment, several floors above his own.

“You’re sure, are you?”

“Absolutely. Let’s face it, you’re always eager to help me and you know it.”

“You got me. What’s up?”

“You remember I’m taking an independent study in the history of city life.”

I nodded.

“I’ve decided to do a study of the ornate doomafatchies on the old buildings here in the city and trace their origins. I’ve done a little preliminary research and frankly after 1935 architecture became pretty plain in a hurry – unornate if that’s a word. So, I’m going to concentrate on buildings prior to that time.”

“Doomafatchies?”

“Do-dads, decorations that serve no function other than just being there.”

“I got the drift with ‘doomafatchies’, actually. Just wanted to see you squirm your way in and around it for a few moments.”

“Did I come through for you?”

“About a C+ I’d say.”

“Last of those. I’m going to ace this project.”

“No surprise. You always ace your school work. How can I help?”

“I figure you must have a gazillion pictures of old buildings in this city.”

“I’d estimate just short of a gazillion, but go on.”

“I’ll zap them into my laptop and scan them for their doomaflatchies.”

“I imagine most of them will be pretty small to even discern,” I cautioned.

“Discern. Good word. Discriminate, detect, recognize. Exactly what I’ll be up to.”

“Up to. Good preposition at the end of a sentence – in fact I do believe you managed to end that one with two prepositions.”

“Not a case where more is probably better, huh?”

I smiled. The two of us had always enjoyed such friendly banter.

“Back to my topic,” Dante said. “My uncle got me some new software that enlarges down to the level of the pixel. You’ve probably seen it on CSI – well, no, you probably haven’t since you don’t watch much TV, but if you did, you’d know.”

“I know. From whatever source, I know.”

“Great. It takes so much of my valuable time to teach you about all the new stuff.”

We exchanged a smile. Dante continued.

“It’s the software that first gave me the idea for the project. The two things just came together, you know?”

“I believe I do, if an answer is actually called for.”

“Nice preposition at the end of that . . . I’ll let that one pass.”

“I fully deserved that.”

“Yeah. I know, but such jibber jabber slows down the wheels of progress. So, when can I get the first installment of photos?”

“I’m sure I have a number of flash drives that will be loaded with them. Let me check my file.”

While I completed my search, Dante continued chatting

– his not being jibber jabber, understand!

“Jackson and I are double dating again Friday night. Mexican and bowling.”

“I had forgotten you bowled.”

“My friends are willing to modify the approach rules for me. Jackson rolls me up to the line at lightning speed and I deliver the ball from my right side. I’m not very good but I enjoy it and Dad always said to remember that the purpose of games was to have fun. I have fun when I bowl and my friends are understanding.”

“What do you bowl?”

“I find a ball works best.”

“Clown!”

“Oh, score, you mean?”

I nodded as I began looking in a different drawer.

“Two sixty was my best score. I usually fluctuate around the two hundred mark.”

“I’d tell you that two sixty is better than I’ve ever bowled in my life, but you’d never let me forget it.”

Dante shrugged and nodded a halfhearted nod, verifying that the score was really quite insignificant to him.

“I once bowled a strike while popping a wheelie.”

“It does sound like you have a good time.”

“The alley manager frowns when I take off down the alley after my ball seeing if I can beat it to the pins.”

“What a party pooper!”

“What a what?”

“A term from the old days meaning a downer or the purveying thereof.”

“Gotcha.”

I handed over one flash drive and four CDs.

“These should get you started. You’ll find lots of stuff besides picture of buildings but I think I can do better when I have more time to look. I did a photo study of the wharf a few years back and that’s loaded with just what you need. Oh, I know where it is. Give me five seconds.”

“One Mississippi, Two Mississippi . . .”

He got the raised eyebrows from me that he was working for, so stopped.

“Here you go, Impatient One.”

I proceeded with the slightest hint of an oriental bow.

“Got food?” he asked.

It was what he always asked.

“Cold pizza from last night. You overlooked it when you left.”

“Had girls on my mind – the date you know.”

He emptied the refrigerator of the pizza and a can of pop, and the single remaining slice of cake from the week before.

“Has your mother stopped feeding you again?”

“You know better. The cake’s for my little brother. I gave him a really hard time last night so it will be like a peace offering.”

With his lap filled, the boy was gone. I finished dressing and prepared my camera bag for a special shoot at the police academy. The photos were to be in support of a reporter’s story. It had been a slow week on the crime front so I’d take what I could get in terms of work.

I arrived back at my apartment at noon, fixed some lunch and worked through the pictures I’d taken. I printed what I thought were the best and slipped them, along with the source flash drive, into a brown envelope. Later that afternoon I dropped them off at the paper and swung by school to see if Dante was interested in a ride home. It was never really a question. Secured into the front seat and his chair in the back, Dante began – well, continued, actually – his never-ending monologue on life, love, and a variety of related topics.

“I got something really interesting – maybe scary, maybe even important from a cop’s standpoint. I’ll call mom and tell her I’ll be up at your place. Can we stop for a burger? I’ve had an exhausting day?”

We entered my apartment fully prepared to endure a lengthy famine – double cheeseburgers, fries, cherry pies and other assorted goodies.

I felt my arteries clogging just watching the boy eat.

“I kept it up on my laptop to save time, he said.”

The picture was soon in view.

“What’s there to see, and any answer you give will be

wrong?" he said making full sense only to himself.

I took up the challenge.

"An old, dark red, soft brick building, four stories high, paint chipped window trim, rain gutters hanging precariously here and there. Built in the very early nineteen-hundreds. How's that?"

"Very good but like I said you missed the important stuff."

"Fill me in."

Dante manipulated the photo, first focusing in on one upper floor window near the rear while enlarging it to the limits of his regular software. He copied and pasted it to his new software program.

"See the smudgy whatever inside the window?"

"Sort of, I suppose. Has an ethereal air to it."

"Ethereal?"

"Eerie, other worldly, ghostly."

"Gotcha. Keep your eyes on the screen. See how this program clears up the image with every sweep?"

"I do."

"See that!"

"Yes. Resembles two human figures, perhaps."

"No perhaps. It gets better."

The passes continued.

"See. A man to the right and a woman to the left. The man is standing behind her. The woman's wearing a huge hat with a wide brim and two flowers sticking up from the band."

"I see. I also see what your concern is."

"Yeah. The guy has a knife and is holding it up like he's about to plunge it into her back or neck."

"Oh, my!"

"That's just the beginning, Trent. You shot a series of six pictures apparently in quick succession. I have them re-pixelated and stored in the order they were taken. Let me bring them up in thumbnails."

That was soon completed. I again marveled at the boy's skill. The picture Dante had been working with for his demonstration was the first in the series. He had originally been drawn to that window because of the unique scrollwork on the framing. Moving from one to another the direction of

the knife's movement became clear, even to the point of entering the woman's upper back down to the hilt.

"What you think?"

"I think you may have stumbled across some important evidence. When were they taken? They should be time stamped."

"They are. June 15th five years ago. Six am, it says. Who's up photographing old building at six in the morning?"

"Rhetorical?"

"Goes without saying."

"So, what do you propose as your next steps?" I asked sitting back in my chair.

"Our, next steps, I'm hoping."

"Okay, but you have the lead in this one."

"I guess we need to check and see if any known crime – stabbing – was committed on that date at that time in that place."

"Time and date are good," I said. "Maybe place, but bodies can be moved."

"Do you think our friend, Lieutenant Miller down at the precinct can help with that?"

"Probably. I'd like to have more to go on before we bring him into it though. He's like a nervous old grandmother when he knows we're following leads. Can't you search some magical site that will give us that same information?"

"Police reports section of the Daily News on and just after that date might give us a starting place. Let me get back to my regular internet program. I need more RAM to run both at the same time. The new one hogs memory like sows at the trough."

I noted the odd saying but didn't comment. Seeing my reaction, Dante provided a minimal explanation.

"Jackson's from the deep south."

He nodded his head suggesting that had been his fully meaningful explanation as he began the search.

"Got the site, got the archives section, got the year, got the 15th. Now let's see. My gosh, Trent, there must be three dozen crimes listed for that day."

He flipped on down the column.

"This would probably not a robbery, not an auto theft,

not domestic abuse, here. Homicides. One hit and run down town. One bank guard shot during a holdup. Here's an unidentified female found washed up under a dock."

"Stabbed?"

"Doesn't say."

"See if you can find a news article about it."

"A Jane Doe probably won't make the front page. I'll search page three first."

There was a rare moment of silence as Dante systematically scrolled around the page. I watched over his shoulder."

"There," I said, pointing. "Lower right corner. It seems to be about the unidentified female."

Dante began reading.

"At approximately 8:30, Tuesday evening, the nude body of an unidentified woman was pulled from the water by two boys playing under the fifth street wharf. Cause of death was multiple stab wounds to her upper back. Neither fingerprints nor DNA have been able to identify her. The body does not match any missing person report."

"That's short and sweet. What does it tell us?" Dante said sounding disappointed and looking back around at me.

"Well, that there actually was a stabbing of a woman around that time. That typical identification factors are not on record so she was probably not known to police, the military, or state or federal employers. The body had been moved and that since her clothing was removed the killer may have believed it would help identify her. High end fashion design, perhaps."

"So, the killer didn't want her identified?" Dante said, stating it as a definite conclusion.

"A good hypothesis, I'd say."

"So we just need to identify her, then."

"Yes. Just that!"

"I sense sarcasm. But let's look back at the photos. She is wearing a distinctive hat – large flat brim, basic black, looks to be something like straw rather than felt, and has those two flowers on stems sticking up from the hat band on the left side. I think if I sweep it a couple more times I can get the colors of the flowers even if I lose the shape. Let's see."

It took about a minute for enough additional sweeps to achieve what he was after.

“There they are – one yellow and one orange blotch and see down where they are attached to the band there is a crest or button or something that’s bright green.”

“Can you work that same magic on the dress?”

“Let’s see. Looks to be maybe twelve or fifteen inches of it showing. Just the back. There. It has a high neck with a collar in white lace. Sort of old lady looking, I’d say. Can’t tell about the sleeve length except that it does have some kind of sleeves – her shoulder is covered.”

“That’s all good. See if we can determine anything about the fabric – plain, design, shiny, dull, things like that.”

“You seem to know dresses.”

“I’ve done my share of glamour and runway shoots and no, they were not THAT kind of runways so you can just put your hormones away.”

“That’s never any fun.”

The sweeps continued.

“Look. There is some sort of design,” I said. “Can you do anything further?”

“I can keep sweeping until it gets too fuzzy to make out. The program can add what it thinks is missing. It’s usually fairly accurate with definite designs. Not sure what it will do with such a plain, dark, surface. I’ll let it just keep on keepin’ on.”

He turned back around toward me and smiled.

“More Jackson. He’s got a million of them.”

I returned his attention to the screen.

“There we go,” I said. “How would you describe it?”

“Like little, shiny, leaves turned every which way. Just texture. It’s all the same basic color.”

“That’s how I see it, also. Very subtle. That’s some software. Must have cost your uncle a pretty penny.”

“He knows a guy who sells it. Got a good deal I assume although Unc’s by no means poor. I think he gets me stuff because he feels sorry for me. I’ve done everything I know to tell him there’s nothing to be sorry about. I’m just a bit inconvenienced. It gives me a chance to see how creative I can be. There’s almost nothing I can’t do for myself. Mom

says I just need to let it go with him. That it's his problem and not mine. I'm trying."

"A wise mother, I'd say."

"Yes, she is. You happen to be in the market for a wise woman who makes killer pies, and has two stupendous kids, yet?"

"We've plowed that territory, Dante."

Dante nodded, not content about it but he would not pursue it. He just felt the need to check in about it every so often.

"Just for kicks, what details can you bring up about the man with the knife?"

"Let's see. Glad you reminded me about that 'cause earlier I thought there might be something on his hand. I'll need to go back to the last picture in the sequence. Let's see. There. Now let's try to clear it up. He's a white guy so there's more color variation to work with – I know – 'with which to work', but really, who actually talks like that?"

It had clearly not been a genuine question.

"Looks like there may be two significant features there," I said.

"A tattoo maybe on his hand and what else?" Dante said, puzzled.

"Look at Butt end of the knife handle. Can you do your magic on that? There where it just shows through the end of the clinched fist in which he's holding it."

"I see. Yes. Let me isolate both of those. On the hand below the thumb on the inside. Like a four-pointed star, wouldn't you say?"

"I agree. And a single line across the center where all four points join."

"Colors?"

Dante went to work on them and was able to maintain a good likeness of the star as well as pull up some color.

"Blue outline of the points and the cross line is red. There may be little dots or circles at the base of each point. I won't be able to keep the integrity of the form but, again, we may be able to get color splotches."

A minute or so later four colored areas appeared – red, blue, yellow, and green.

"We really have no idea what shape those blotches are," Dante said.

"We have what we have. Now, move to the end of the knife."

"It is clearly a sizable knife handle. What would you say that butt end is – probably three quarters of an inch in diameter?"

"About that, yes. But it's the surface of the rear end of that handle that caught my attention. Can you focus just in on that?"

"Done. Like that. Oh! I see. It looks like an etching of the same design as the tattoo – only not in color. And, those little areas of color on the tattoo are diamond shapes. For some reason the etching stands out more clearly."

"Let's get prints of all those significant items – the hat, the flowers, the hat band, the design on the dress fabric, the tattoo, and the rear surface of the butt of the knife handle."

"It will take a few minutes but we'll have 'em shortly. What do you suppose they tell us?"

"The dress and hat are expensive and may be ones of a kind."

"So, she may have been rich or upper class or some such thing?" Dante added

I nodded.

"Or she might be a model wearing the outfit for some special event – a show, a shoot," I added."

"Okay. Either one probably explains why her personal stuff isn't anywhere in the data bases."

"Then the tattoo and the knife etching have to be significant in some way – both being the same. Maybe a gang insignia. I suppose you can check that out."

"Sure can. Could it be something more personal?"

"Of course, it could. That will be far more troublesome to check out, however. I'd suggest the gang thing first. Expand that to clubs and fraternal organizations if you need to."

Dante nodded and continued with the several assignments he had just acquired. One by one the prints fed out of the printer. Within minutes they were all available.

"Nice job," I said removing each as it arrived in the tray.

“I’ve saved it all on the computer as well. When we need to make copies for Lieutenant Miller we can crank them out in no time.”

“You have homework?”

“Just geometry. Half hour, tops.”

“Do you need to check in with your mom?”

“I’ll make it down for supper at five. I’ll check in then. We still got some time. Let’s go after that symbol.”

“Okay. I just don’t want to jeopardize my chance for a piece of your mom’s next blueberry pie.”

Dante flashed me a look that suggested his personal quest to determine just how much interest I might have in his mother just might not be a lost cause after all.

Half an hour later we had come up empty. No gangs or clubs we could find used such a symbol.

“Is there just some general symbol site you could examine?” I asked.

“Time consuming. Have to roll through a billion designs one at a time.”

“How about something as simple as Googling something like ‘four pointed star logos’?”

“And the tech challenged photog once again scores a point, folks. Sometimes I tend to get too caught up in the advanced applications. You want to do the honors?”

“You go ahead. I’m tech challenged, remember?”

It was worth a smile between us. We had always had lots of smiles between us.

“Geez! There must be a billion entries.”

“Well, that’s down from a gazillion. Should be a piece of cake for you.”

During the next fifteen minutes Dante moved from entry to entry. When something looked promising he went to the site.

“Hey! Look here! There’s a martial arts center that uses that exact logo. Oh. Problem. It’s in Thailand. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It gives our first real connection – martial arts. Can you search sites of martial art centers here in the city? See if any contain the symbol.”

“You’re really on a roll this afternoon for such an old guy. Look at that. There must be a million of them listed.

And, yes, I know – a million is a good deal fewer than a billion. How about you get on this site on your laptop and we can share the work. I'll begin at the end of the listings and you begin at the beginning and we'll meet in the middle."

"Good idea. I can do that. Here. Get me to the page."

I handed over my laptop to Dante who soon had me up and running.

We searched until it was time for Dante to leave for supper.

"I'll be back. Promised my brother I'd play catch with him, so that will take some extra time."

"Don't cut him short. He treasures his time with you."

"That's me. Dante the Treasure."

"And, get the geometry done before you come back. I have an idea that I need to pursue on my own."

Dante mounted the grin of all grins.

"Mom has those sites blocked on my computer."

"He giggled himself out the door and down the hall."

I closed the door after him.

"That kid is certainly one in a million – billion – heck, one in a gazillion."

I went through folders in my 'probably will never use again' file. It could just as well have been labeled, pack rat. Specifically, I searched the year of the homicide for any model shoots I'd been a party to. I had nothing specific in mind, just the notion I had seen that hat before. I had photographed several shoots that year, but in the end, none of the models had worn the hat. It hadn't been a waste of time, of course, forcing myself to ogle all those gorgeous young women.

As I continued moving to the end of the last file, I ran across one of those 'what the hey' pictures I had just snapped on impulse because something in the setting attracted my eye. It was a photo of a woman leaving the hotel at which the photo shoot had taken place. She was ducking into a waiting limo. There were a series of several pictures, in fact, and there it was – the black straw hat with the wide brim and the two colorful flowers. For some reason, I had taken pictures of the limo as it departed. She was a strikingly beautiful woman but as far as I could remember she had not been one of the models. Perhaps a little too old. The final picture included the

limo's license plate, although it was unreadable. If Dante could sharpen it, we could track it to the limo company and using their records should be able to find who was being transported and to where at 2:44 on the afternoon of March 9th. Sometimes it just takes dumb luck.

I reheated the remains of my burger and fries, opened an orange soda, and reclined in my – well, in my recliner. Presently I dozed off, only to be awakened sometime later by the familiar, incessant knocking at my door.

"It's open," I called sitting upright and stretching.

Dante was immediately inside.

"Jerry's really getting to be a pretty good ball handler. I suspect that since my range of mobility is limited it has forced him to improve his accuracy when throwing. I'm really proud of him."

"Hope you told him that."

"He's my little brother. My job is not to give the kid a big head. My job is to motivate him to reach for the stars – or at least for those balls I put just almost out of reach over his shoulder."

It seemed like an odd relationship to me, but they seemed to have worked out an acceptable and loving – if screwball – arrangement. Dante loved Jerry and Jerry idolized Dante. I'd leave it alone – well most days.

I showed Dante what I had found.

"I'm impressed. I don't know of a site to trace license plates. I imagine those are restricted to law enforcement. I'll bet I can clear up that plate image, however."

Five minutes later he had done just that. HV 25479.

"Not very creative. I'd have thought a limo company would have had their own vanity plates."

He made a print.

"I guess it's back to martial arts centers, then, huh," Dante said.

"I suppose."

"You do have popcorn for later, right."

"Right. I do have to wonder where you put it all."

"That's sort of a cliché question about all teen boys, isn't it?"

"I imagine it could be characterized in that fashion, yes."

Like 'old man' is used by some to refer to us still fit and macho not quite yet middle aged males."

Another smile.

Dante opened his file first and got to work. Less than a minute into his search came his familiar, "Bingo!"

"Got it I think. John Black's Martial Arts Studio on 44th avenue. Talk about not being creative."

"Perhaps you need to write several letters with suggestions."

"I just may do that. May I use your return address?"

The question was intended to have been ignored and it was.

I stood behind the boy with a suggestion.

"Let's go to his website."

Once there, we studied it for several moments. Not only was the logo repeated – large, bold, and in full color – there was also a picture of the proprietor, John Black.

"He looks to be in his mid-thirties, I'd say," Dante suggested.

"Accurate, I think, although no telling how long ago the picture was taken. Can't see his hand. Looks like some action shots down below. Can you find anything there?"

Dante went to work isolating hand after hand to no avail.

"How about that one," I said at last. "He's made a fist out in front of him. Look at that right hand."

"I see it. Let's see what we can find. First, I'll enlarge it. Great. I think the tattoo is there. Let me transfer that to Unc's new software."

A few moments later the scanning process had begun. Hope increased with every pass. Finally, there it was. A four-pointed star and the red crossing line. The software couldn't bring out the circles or the colors, but, in essence, there it was.

"Clean it up the best you can and make a couple of prints," I said, probably with some enthusiasm.

"Sounds like it's finally Miller time – Lieutenant Miller, that is."

"He's working third shift this week. Let's begin by seeing if the case is still open. We may have just taken ourselves on a fascinating journey that was not necessary."

“Lieutenant. Tom Trent here. Got a question.”

“You always have a question.”

“Five years ago, mid-June, a Jane Doe washed up under the wharf at 5th Street. Died of multiple stab wounds to her upper back. I’m wondering if it’s still an open case.”

“Pretty sure it’s still open. Let me check. . . darn computers . . . Dave! . . . Oh. Never mind . . . Here it is. Yes. Still open. Never an ounce of useful evidence. Didn’t resemble any missing person report. One piece of info not generally shared with the public. She had a horizontal scar just below the hairline across her forehead. Looked to be a very attractive woman – mid to late twenties. Now, what you got?”

“Oh, I thought this was just a one-way arrangement.”

“You do often act that way,” he said.

“You remember Dante. He was recently perusing some of my old photos of buildings and stumbled onto a picture we have determined probably was the moment she was being stabbed. I’ll drop off what I have tomorrow. I suppose at this late date a few more hours won’t matter.”

“Just don’t the two of you wade into something that’s going to get you hurt.”

“The two of us. Lieutenant, I’m surprised at you. We are the poster kids for investigative safety. Tomorrow then.”

He hung up.

“Investigative safety?” Dante said with a grin. “Where in begebbers did that come from?”

“He was worried about our safety.”

“Oh, well, then that fully explains it.”

I picked up a yellow pad and tossed it at Dante.

“List time, young man.”

“Beginning with how Jane Doe and John Black knew each other,” He suggested.

“Followed by looking into the date and such with the limo company. I can take care of that while you’re in school tomorrow. I think I’ll pay the John Black place a visit, also.”

“I’m with Lieutenant Miller on that one. You need to be careful. If he did what we think we have pictures of him doing, then he’s not to be messed with.”

“Hey. I’m the cautious one on this team. You’re the

one always wanting to go off halfcocked.”

“That’s true, but just the same, you need to be careful. What else for the list.”

“Not sure it’s for the list, but Miller said Jane had a long narrow scar just under her hairline in front. I’m guessing it may be why she opted to always wear a hat – to cover it up. Wide brims probably added shadow to help with that.”

“And it may have been a wound inflicted by the same guy who killed her – sometime earlier in their relationship,” Dante added. “The John dude is handsome, I suppose. They could have made a striking couple, I guess.”

“I agree. Looks like our list is shorter than usual.”

“Because we don’t have much to go on yet.”

There is one more thing. We need to identify that building. I have a good idea about where it is. After school tomorrow, we can swing by that area and determine which one for sure using the photos.”

“And then we can go up to the top floor and find the window in the pictures and look for traces of blood on the floor – it’s likely wooden so would hold it for years, right?”

“Not sure about the blood holding qualities of wood. I’m not inclined to go searching for old blood stains in an abandoned warehouse, however. Besides, the elevator undoubtedly no longer works.”

“Hey, I’ve piggy backed on you before.”

“Yes, back when you weighed fifty pounds soaking wet.”

“I’ll hold my breath.”

“And that will affect the situation how?”

“I’ll float like a balloon. You have, yourself, been heard to say I am full of hot air.”

“Very funny. We’ll see. Need to eyeball the building first. It may be occupied.”

Dante took my response as a positive sign and felt sure that before that time the following day, we would have the evidence we needed to prove a crime scene existed.

We had popcorn, soda, and called it a night. We had done good work that day. I watched him safely to the elevator.

* * *

The following morning Dante stopped in just long enough to say he really didn't have time to stop in, but that he'd be waiting at the usual spot after school. If he was with a girl, my instructions were to circle the block at least once.

I love the boy but I was glad for some private time in which to pursue the several next steps. The first stop was the precinct where I dropped off copies of the pictures. I had a standing arrangement with a middle-aged clerk to gain access to all things only marginally appropriate for me to have. The limo was registered to Ritz Limos, Inc. on 33rd street. It was close to the best hotels and clubs in the city giving well-to-do patrons easy access to upscale rides around the city.

Before entering the small office, I sorted through my official plastic badges and selected, 'Police Photographer', as the best I had to get the effect I wanted. The small room seemed to be the front for the garage to its rear. It was manned by a graying, overweight, ever-smiling older gentleman who smelled of cigars and had no idea that he did.

"How may I help you? Oh! The Police. Then, most certainly, how can I help you?"

I produced two photographs – the first of the license plate and the second of the woman in the hat entering the limo. Both were time and date stamped.

"We need to know as much as you can tell us about this ride."

The man put on his reading glasses and leaned close down to his desk top to look them over.

"I will have some information, I'm sure."

He turned in his chair to face his computer screen. A few moments later he began speaking as he came across things.

"Picked up at the Belmont Hotel at 2:44 pm and driven to 12579 44th Street where she was dropped off at 3:28 pm. She paid by credit card. I can give you the number. The pick-up had been ordered through the driver at the time she was dropped off at the hotel at nine that morning. We had picked her up at the 12579 address earlier. Hank, the chauffeur gave her his card for future contacts. Often that becomes a card exchange. I have no info about that. I'm afraid that drained my Mac."

“Lots of good information. How can I contact Hank?”

“He’s in the driver’s break room right now. Scheduled out in fifteen minutes so it will need to be brief. That all took place years ago. Can’t guarantee old Hank will remember anything helpful. Follow me.”

“Hank. This is Mr. – he leaned in and read from my badge – Trent, Thomas Trent. He’s with the police. Has few questions about a fare some years back.

Hank stood. We shook hands. The first man left. I showed the picture of the woman and pointed to the date stamp.

“Any chance you remember this lady?”

“That’s Jane Donovan the super model – well, ex-super model by that time. That picture is of one of the first times I drove her. Lots of times after that. We got on good. She wasn’t much of a talker and I never pried. I think she liked that about me. I’d say the last time was maybe five years ago. Ain’t seen her since. It was like she just dropped off the face of the earth. You know, I may still have her business card. I remember we traded early on.”

“He picked up a fanny pack that lay on the couch where he had been sitting and placed it on a small table. It contained hundreds of cards, separated by tabs showing the years. With a nimbleness not expected of a man his age he soon had procured the card. Here she is – Jasmin Dupree. That was the name she used back in her modeling days. I’ve been keeping it thinking she might return. She was a real lady – never put me down, always respectful, tipped very well. In our own ways, we took very good care of each other.”

“May I take a photo of the card?”

“Sure. Fire away.”

“He handed it to me. I placed it on the table and captured it in my camera.”

“Any little habits or personal tidbits that you can remember. She appears to be missing and we are searching for anything that might be helpful.”

“Not really. She produced fashion shows and organized publicity get-togethers for businesses and celebrities. One thing. She always wore a wide brimmed hat. See, like that in the picture you have. She must have had a

hundred hats, but always with the big brim and often with flowers like them there. There was a rumor she had some kind of an accident that scared her face so she had to quit modeling. I never seen no scar but her face was always in the shadow of her hat. And, oh yes. There on the back of her card is a website that features lots of her pictures as a young model. Maybe that can help in some way.”

“Did you figure you knew her home base, where she lived or an office or such?”

“Apartment building at 8654 33rd Street. You know there is one more thing come to think of it. The last time I seen her she said she was leaving for France for a few months. Never seen her after that. Maybe she stayed.”

“Did anyone ever accompany her in your limo?”

“Only once. Toward the end. A man about her age. Nice looking. Well built. Spoke with an accent like from England or Australia. Dropped him off before we reached her place. Maybe over on 44th street. I can’t guarantee that.”

Trent produced a picture of John Black.

“You’re good, sir. That’s the man. They didn’t seem happy together. Didn’t speak a word the whole ride. Unusual. Most shared rides drive you wacco with their chatter.”

“You have been a great help, Hank. How about one of your cards just in case I ever win the lottery and can afford your service.”

Hank happily peeled one off his stack and handed it over.

“You find Ms. Donovan and your rides will be on me. If you find her, tell her old Hank says hi.”

I left thanking the owner on my way out.

The stop had produced way more information than I had hoped for. I figured that perhaps for Dante’s birthday I would just provide him with the website that featured Jasmin Dupree back in her low cut, mini-skirted heyday. I doubted if his mother had blocked that one. I had to chuckle. Heck, I just might do that for my own birthday.

My next stop would be John Black’s establishment. I had rehearsed my lines during the drive. I entered.

“Mr. Black, I assume from the picture on your website,” I began.

“Yes. John, please. I usually suggest Judo for a man your age unless you already have some training.”

That threw my script out the window so I wined it.

“An interesting suggestion. I was fascinated by it as a boy and, of course, my friends and I were sure we had mastered all the moves – most of which we had invented ourselves.”

John offered a broad smile.

“Me, too, actually. It’s how I got started back in Dorchester England.”

“I figured England or Australian.”

“Most Englishmen would take offense at the Australian insinuation, you understand.”

“I didn’t, but I do now. I didn’t mean . . .”

“Just kidding. One of my best friends . . . visited Australia once.”

The man had a sense of humor. Had I known a whole lot less about him, I even imagined liking him. I would continue to fish.

“I’m a photographer by profession so have an artistic side, I suppose. I was taken with the logo I saw on your website. Does it represent something I’m not aware of?”

“Afraid not. It began as a doodle on a napkin a girlfriend made in a restaurant one night. I liked it and was looking for a symbol to use in my advertising. So many of the martial arts guys go for the oriental that I wanted something different. Over several months, I improved on it until it became what you see. I even had it tattooed on my hand.”

He lifted his fist and alternatively squeezed and relaxed it. The shape changed from narrow to fat reflecting the manipulation. The colors in the dots went from brightly colored to pale as they contracted and expanded. It was an interesting, if pointless, demonstration.

“You have been in this country for some time, I assume.”

“Since I was twelve. Came over on the Mayflower.”

I smiled. A kidder for sure. The information was interesting but far less than helpful.

A man entered and stood busying himself at a rack of pamphlets, poorly disguising the fact he was impatiently

waiting to see John, but didn't want to be noticed by anyone else. I knew the man – Benny Winters, allegedly a right-hand man of the local mob Don.

John handed me a booklet in which the various training programs were described and pointed me to video display I could watch.

“While you become acquainted with my classes, I'll go see what the other gentleman wants, if you don't mind.”

“No. Fine. I'd like some time to brows a bit, in fact. I'm quite poorly versed on the martial arts.”

Black and Benny talked in hushed tones, as it is said. Trent could hear the voices but not make out the content. It seemed to be more of a heated exchange than polite conversation. Candidly, I shot a few pictures on my cell phone. I picked up several brochures, moved toward the door and, lifting the folders in John's direction as I passed him, said, “I'll be back. Have to keep an appointment.”

He raised his hand acknowledging my comment.

So, a possible mob connection, he thought. Jane, John, Benny, the mob, and of course, Hank. It was a strange cast of characters that was developing.

I needed to know if there was or had been a connection between the mob and local modeling activities – shows, whatever. More than that, what about the mob and local martial arts activities. I would need Dante's expertise in ferreting out such information. I also had to wonder why he had gone to such a length to lie about the origin of the logo. Vanity, perhaps.

It was noon. I was hungry so drove to the high fashion section of 33rd street and found a restaurant – probably way too expensive but figured I might be able to find out something more about Jane or Jasmin.

I had been right on both counts – a twenty-one-dollar ham salad sandwich (of course it came with a dozen, in-house made chips and a full, quartered, dill pickle and a talkative waitress who had seen far more moons than her lavish application of make-up suggested she wanted to admit.) How could I start the conversation without offending her?”

“You're a photographer, the way it looks with that fancy camera,” she began. “Models?”

“Some, yes. Did more of those shoots back in the old days.”

“Been there, seen that,” she said unexpectedly allowing some indication of her age. “Who you work with back then?”

Trent was hard put to recall names. That didn’t stop him. He could fabricate with the best of them.

“Mitsy Leflore, Veronica Vance, Jasmin Dupree.”

“Don’t recall the first two, but, my, that Jasmin Dupree was something special, you know. She dined here a couple times a week – noon, salad, water with lemon. Not only beautiful but such a nice person. She’d ask about my girls – things like that. Really nice.”

“Interesting coincidence, you knowing her and all,” I continued, not entirely sure where I was going with it. “I’ve been trying to get in contact with a gentleman friend of hers – after she retired and began producing.”

“I might know him. She had lots of men on her arm, though.”

“John Black.”

She frowned and shook her head.

“He was bad news. No offence if he’s a friend of yours.”

“No. Not a friend. I have heard stories – rumors, you know.”

“Well, if they was about how he mistreated her, they’re not rumors. He had a terrible temper and jealous – you wouldn’t believe the stories I’ve heard.”

“Took out after his competition, did he?”

“That’s a polite way of describing it. Beat them senseless, the way I heard it.”

“Oh, I guess I have heard about one incident – what was his name – Jim or Jimmy, maybe?”

“Could have been Tim Findley. Story is he vanished and never was found.”

“Oh, yes, back about what, five years ago?”

“About that. Never could understand such a fine lady hanging out with such a low life. I figured maybe he had something on her, you know. Something that would be an embarrassment or could ruin her career. Well, I better get back to my other tables. Nice talking with you Mr. . . .”

“Trent. Tom Trent. And thank you. You’ve been very informative.”

I handed her my card.

I was determined to enjoy every crumb of my sandwich, every drop of grease in my fries, and every drip of vinegar dropping from my pickle. I did. Still, I doubted if it had been worth the price but did feel somewhat smug about not leaving a single trace behind.

As I finished paying at the register, the waitress returned and walked me to the door.

“I thought of one more thing you may be interested in. There was a boyfriend before the John Black guy. Smith, I think, if you can believe that. Not sure of his first name – William or Willard or Wilson or something like that, I think.”

“Do you know what happened to him?”

“I seen him in here one time with her after she and Black got together. Then never again. Maybe Black snuffed him – that is the right term, isn’t it?”

“That would be the right one, I believe. Again, thanks, Ms. . . .”

“Lake, like the late and great Veronica. I suppose you’re too young to know about her.”

“Hair over one eye. I’ve read about her. Seen pictures. A raving beauty, for sure. Thanks again.”

Just as I reached my car a police call came over the scanner. A hit and run at Broadway and twenty-third. It was close by. I headed in that direction and parked a block away. A police barricade was already in place. I walked toward the scene taking some wide shots as I approached. I knew the patrolmen maintaining the scene until a detective could get there to run the show.

“Need any pictures? Thought I’d shoot a few for myself with your permission.”

“Sure. Go to it Mr. Trent. Always welcome what you bring to a crime scene.”

“A hit and run, I understand.”

“That’s what a dozen witnesses tell us. Hit the woman there and then careened off that red Ford Ranger and the old green Dodge in front of it. Did minor damage to the doors on both vehicles.”

“Have an ID on the victim, so I can attach it to the photos?”

“Her driver’s license confirms her name – Cynthia Parks. Sixty-six. Lives in a flat one block south. Nobody’s been notified yet so hold that name.”

“Yes, sir. What a shame. Probably just started drawing the social security she’s been paying into all her life.”

I got all the shots that seemed useful. When the detective arrived, he asked for several more of the victim. There were no visible wounds on her legs, arms or head. Must have been a full-on body blow. I wrapped it up, got the case number and said I’d email the pictures to the Detective as soon as I got home. I was sure the Herald would buy at least one shot of the scene. That way I might be able to afford to feed the bottomless pit who I was almost late picking up.

I could see no member of the fairer sex in his vicinity so stopped at the first turn around the block. He waved his usual enthusiastic greeting. If Dante was anything, he was animated – well from the chest up.

“So, we gonna troll the docks for the building?”

I feigned a surprised expression.

“What?” He said, understanding my insincerity, but not seeing where I was going.

“Work before food?”

He nodded and smiled.

“Had a double lunch. Sherry was off her feed this noon so I agreed to clean up her tray for her.”

“How gentlemanly of you.”

“I thought so. So, the dock or what?”

“Sounds like a good plan. I’m fairly certain I know right where the building is.”

It was a twenty-minute ride during which I heard a detailed accounting of Dante’s day and more than a few editorial comments on teachers, girls, rules, girls, world politics and girls. I figured a good ten percent of a teen boy’s body weight had to be hormones. Details of my own adolescence were fading so it was great to have such a direct line into the teen consciousness.

I was able to drive directly to the building.

“That’s it, alright,” he said. “So, we goin’ in, right?”

I looked at him. He launched his big, sad, puppy eyes and I agreed.

“This is against my better judgment in more ways than you can imagine. You owe me.”

“Noted. Like I figured, it’s vacant. What was it, do you know?”

“Had something to do with importing or exporting I think.”

We got him arranged in his chair and moved to the front door. He pointed to the sign. Black Brothers Import/Export.”

“I guess you nailed that coming and going, so to speak.”

For some reason, he thought his comment had been hilarious.

“A connection with John Black’s family, perhaps,” I said. “They came from England when he was a boy.”

I hoped the chill playing up my spine had not shown

The door was easily pushed open. Its lock had been jimmed – years before if the darkened color of the broken wood and rusted hasp told a proper story. I imagined vagrants used it.

“After you, sir.”

Dante only used that title on rare, carefully chosen, occasions.

“A bit skiddish about this now that we’re here?” I asked.

“I believe the word is actually skittish, with t’s, and, yes, maybe a little. I never broke into a place where a woman was killed, before.”

Beyond the first room, which had clearly been an office, lay an open area with an elevator to the rear. It was a weight and pulley system so we entered and I began pulling on the thick rope marked ‘UP’. It was surprising easy to operate and we were soon at the top floor. I sensed a flurry of skittish myself as we entered the huge, open space. The entire floor was one room. A few units of shelving remained against the rear wall. They were empty except for years of gray dust.

Dante rolled right over to the area near the window we had only viewed from the outside. It was considerable grimier than when I had shot the photo. Probably wouldn’t be able to see through it from the outside anymore. The floors were

severely worn and light colored – pine I suspected.

“Nothing,” was Dante’s evaluation upon his initial inspection.

“The floor is covered in a layer of dust. Grab that old broom down there and let’s see what may lay under it.”

I was not allowed to participate in the process and he soon had a space some eight feet square cleared.

“You see what I see?” he said rolling to within inches of a series of large, generally circular, dark splotches.

As he had earlier predicted – or guessed, more accurately – the soft wood had absorbed something that had turned dark through the years. It could well have been blood. I took a number of pictures from a variety of angles.

“Look on the wall, there, beside the window,” he said. “More stains – like splatter. Gives me the heeby geebies.”

“I believe we need to get Detective Miller up here,” I said.

I took out my cell phone.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” came a moderately familiar voice from the top of the stairs off to our right. It was John Black closing on us fast, knife at the ready. All quite automatically I flashed several pictures of his advance.

“Ah. The Rear Window technique. Won’t work. Sun glasses you see.”

His reference was to the Alfred Hitchcock/Jimmy Stewart movie from fifty years before. I was impressed because that was actually what I had in mind. He came closer and stopped between the two of us his knife held ready.

“I hear you’ve been asking around about an old flame of mine. Naughty, naughty. Shouldn’t snoop into my affairs. Who’s the cripple?”

“If you’re referring to my friend in the wheelchair, his name is . . . Atherton.”

I moved slightly to my right and Black turned with me, his back toward Dante. A split second later, Dante propelled his chair into Black’s legs, doubling them under him. As he began falling to the floor, Dante grasped him around his neck in a death grip, cutting off his air. As I moved to try and extract the knife from his hand Detective Miller and a half dozen uniforms rushed across the room from the stairs.

“The cavalry,” Dante said, releasing his grip and letting the man fall to the floor.

“I thought I told you two to be careful,” Miller said as two officers cuffed and removed Black.

“We figured that was just a good-hearted suggestion, Sir,” Dante offered from where he had fallen to the floor.

I moved to assist him back into his chair. Miller raised his eyebrows. Dante pointed to the stains on the wall and floor and briefly explained our suspicions. Miller called for the CSIs. He accompanied us down in the elevator.

“I suppose there is some explanation for your last second presence here,” I asked more than stated.

“I have to admit I’ve had you tailed ever since you had Milly run that license plate. The Ritz Limo service is affiliated with the local mob. I didn’t need more than that. The tail, made the John Black connection. He’s a known mob associate. His family owns this building.”

“And you just let us continue marching into danger?” Dante asked.

“Tell me, son, is there any way my prohibiting you from continuing would have in any way deterred you?”

“Deterred. The perfect choice of a word, by the way, and of course not.”

“Tell me what you guys have.”

I gave him the unabridged version. He shared a few details that would send Black away forever. The hilt on the knife left a distinctive impression in the skin of his Jane Doe. There had been a John Doe a few years before that had the same mark. I suggested it was probably W. Smith, Jane’s former boyfriend. Later, that would be confirmed. The motive for her killing could only be speculation – most likely jealousy.

“I do have a question for you two.”

“Shoot, well not literally, you understand,” Dante said.

He looked back and forth between us.

“What was that about you telling Black the boy’s name was Atherton?”

Dante and I exchanged a smile.

“Me or you?” Dante asked.

“Oh, I think this one is all yours”

“There was a book Trent used to read to me when I

was in kindergarten. It was about an organ grinder and his monkey named Atherton. Once, when the man was held up on a street corner, Atherton jumped on the back of the bad guy and held him around his neck until the beat cop showed up.”

Dante turned back to me.

“That was a stroke of genius, by the way, old man. Of course, my plan would have also had everything under control, you understand.”

It was worth a three-way chuckle – and a bit later a large pizza, two liters of pop, and the majority of one of his mother’s blueberry pies.

Thomas Trent Meets Two Pairs of Shoes
By Tom Gnagey
Case # 3
A Thomas Trent: Crime Scene Photographer, short
Mystery.

The incessant, five a.m. knocking at the door of my apartment signified several things: One, that it was my young, wheelchair bound 15-year-old friend Dante; two, that it was Sunday – our regular jogging morning; three, that I had stayed up way too late the night before; and, four, that there was indeed a five a.m. at least one morning a week.

I pulled on my sweat pants and stumbled toward the door.

“Thought you were dead in there, Trent. You really should give me a key, you know. Hope you have juice. I’m already dehydrated.”

He wheeled past me into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He chattered as he poured and sipped and followed me into my bedroom while I finished getting ready.

“It’s a great spring morning out there – 62 degrees, sunrise at 5:41, slight breeze from the south, no rain in sight.”

“Is that the forecast or just what you are demanding of the universe this morning?”

It got the wonderful smile I had hoped to see. The boy was a delight. I had first met Dante when he was five. The bleachers on which he was sitting at the local high school football field had collapsed during a game and he was pinned at the bottom of the rubble. I was the first to reach him. The

tragedy had rendered him incapable of walking but hadn't dampened his cheerful, positive, take charge approach to living. That had been a bad year for the lad and his family in other ways as well. His father had been killed while serving in the military. He soon became the bright spot in my life, and it often appears that he is in charge of it. He, his mother, and younger brother, Jerry, live two floors below me.

When asked what happened to him – usually by younger kids who haven't yet succumbed to the social edict known as tact – he delights in telling them it was a football injury. I suppose that may help satisfy some unfulfillable, macho wish that he harbors all quite privately.

As to our jogging, I've never determined whether it is I who am moderating my pace to meet his capacities or he who is moderating his pace for me. Regardless, we have worked out a comfortable solution. We do get looks from other joggers who haven't before witnessed our roll-along-jog-a-thon on Sunday mornings. The regulars always smile, wave and call a greeting. Sometimes there's a package of cookies dropped into Dante's lap from two elderly women – those two elderly women who regularly zip on past us as if we were still moored at the dock.

"Drink before we leave," He said. "I bought two bottles of water in my chair's backpack.

I had some juice and we were soon on our way.

"How about we try the walker's path a block east today. It has a gentle rise for about two miles and then circles back. About an hour, I'd say. Not sure why we haven't used it before."

"It seems you know about it someway."

"Saturday morning walks with Roseanne."

"Do I assume there are some nicely secluded spots, then."

"Oh yes. Small, secluded, grassy."

The trail began in a small park and traveled the course Dante had outlined. I preferred a flatter course and, since I tended to fall behind that morning, I suppose that answered an earlier question about who was doing what for whom. I would miss the cookies on that route. It was actually less well kept up and went through an older, poorer section of the city.

As we approached the crest of the rise we heard a puppy yelping. The noise was coming from off to our right. There was a narrow dirt foot path.

“Let me take a look,” I suggested thinking it would be too narrow and difficult for the chair.

Not a bit surprised, he took off in front of me. Twenty yards on, we came upon a small clearing where we found a very small mixed breed brownish dog – clearly not a pup. It had been wounded and was bleeding from its left right hip. I looked around for somebody it might belong to. I called out but got no response. Dante removed a towel from his backpack and spread it out on his lap. I picked up the dog and handed it to him. He worked at cleaning it up. The bleeding had mostly stopped. It was a vicious wound apparently caused by, what the CSIs would refer to as blunt force trauma – an area of matted blood about the size of a half dollar. The animal clearly had great difficulty using that leg and trying to, caused him high pitched yippin pain.

I walked a little further along the dirt path, which extended beyond the clearing. There were several things of interest strewn on the ground: two women’s high heeled shoes, a pair of sneakers, a woman’s purse and a man’s wallet. Several ripped photographs lay beside the purse. I called to Dante. My camera was in his backpack.

After taking more pictures than any detective would have requested, I handed the wallet to Dante while I examined the purse.

“Leave no prints, I suggested/ordered/commanded/whatever.”

“Wallet has nearly two hundred dollars in it. No license or ID stuff. No pictures.”

“Pretty much the same here with the purse. A little more money but no ID. No pictures. I have the feeling those torn ones on the grass came from the purse.”

Dante wheeled closer and looked down at them.

“They’re torn.”

“I noticed. Let’s see if we can reassemble them.”

Dante pulled out his lapboard from behind his seat and handed it to me. I sat on the ground and put it on my lap, proceeding under the watchful eye of my young friend. We

came to same conclusion at the same moment.”

“None of the parts fit together,” he said voicing our find.

“And,” I went, on looking around the ground some more, “the other portions of them seem to have been removed from the scene.”

“Unless they were torn up earlier and only what we see was actually carried in the purse.”

“Good thought. Certainly raises questions.”

“Like?”

“Like what is missing from each photo?”

“Oh. The heads of the people. Hmm? Did the person who did this not want us to see the heads or did he just want to have the heads for himself?”

“That seems to be a good start,” I said. “And why not just take the whole picture in either event? And then there is the biggie, I suppose . . .”

“ . . . where are the people who belong to the shoes and purse?”

“Did they walk away on their own or something else? Couldn’t navigate this thicket in high heels for sure, especially if trying to run away from somebody.”

“Something else like being carried out as dead bodies, you mean,” Dante said.

“Of course, we don’t really know people were here.”

“Oh, yeah. That new brand of shoes that take strolls all by themselves. Saves on the breaking in period, I’m told.”

“Doofus! But you made your point. Someone had to leave them behind.”

“Or Pooch. Maybe he’s a pack rat and this is his locker.”

“Can you see that tiny mutt dragging that big purse any distance at all? A better idea might be that he was being carried in it. He’s small enough for sure.”

Dante nodded then pointed back to the clearing.

“What’s that on the ground over where Pooch was laying?” he asked, pointing.

I got up and walked to the spot taking several more pictures.

“Looks to be a piece of fabric – jagged like torn from a larger piece.”

I leaned down and picked it up.

“Denim.”

I handed it to Dante.

“Denim soaked in Pooch spit,” he said.

He was right. I had assumed dew but it was soaked. Laying on the dew laden grass for a short time would not have soaked it through.

“So, Mr. Pooch took a sample of somebody’s pants,”

Dante said putting together what seemed a likely scenario.

He studied the denim.

“We may just have another Bingo. Look here at the denim. Blood, maybe?”

“Sure could be. Sharp eyes. Nice going!”

I was struck by something that I had noticed earlier.

“There’s more, Dante. Both shoe laces have been removed from the sneakers and there appears to be blood on the tongue of one of them.”

“From Pooch?”

“I doubt that. Not likely blood from his hip would have been transferred to the tongue of a shoe.”

Dante nodded.

“We need to get Pooch to a Vet. He seems to be losing steam. He’s breathing hard and his heart is racing – of course I have no idea what’s normal for a four pound, long haired, huge eared, mutt like this. Look at him. You have to wonder if even his mother could have loved that.”

“I’ll agree I have seen more attractive. But those big eyes do remind me of you.”

Dante moved the dog’s head so he could look it in the face and nodded.

“I knew I felt a kinship.”

“I think we better call this into the police before we leave,” I said. “Let me get some good shots of those torn pictures first. The dog doesn’t have a tag in under all that long hair, does it?”

“Nope. And it’s a he, not an it, buy the way. I already searched for a collar. He may have a chip put in by a Vet.”

“Considering his very odd, mixed breed, I doubt his owner cared enough to have done that,” I said.

“Unless he’s a rescue dog. Some pounds automatically

add a chip when they're adopted."

"Well, I'm sure the Vet can tell us."

I made the call, identified myself, explained the scene, and said we'd wait if they planned to come out. After a brief conversation at the other end it was decided I should bring in what we had. No evidence of any crime had been found and it was already being a busy morning after a bad Saturday night of gang violence on the south side. I agreed and proceeded to gather what we had and stow it in one of the large plastic bags Dante always carried. We were soon headed back to my place with the dog and evidence, if that's really what it was.

An hour later we were in my car heading for the doggy doc. The father of Dante's friend, Jackson, was a Vet and he agreed that we could come by their house – it being Sunday.

Pooch turned out to be a cross between a Yorkie and a Chihuahua.

"A dog this size is seldom out on the loose alone," the Vet told us. "Too small to fend for itself. A bunny could take it out. It's also odd that such mixed breeding occurred. Mamma must have run off during heat to go slumming. It is a treasure, however. The Yorkie side of the parentage demonstrates pedigreed blood line. I doubt the same is true for the Chihuahua. I must admit, though, it's one of the ugliest treasures I've ever seen."

"Could it have been an intentional mix?" Dante asked.

The Vet smiled.

"Who would have intentionally created that?"

He had a point. Dante picked him up, perhaps taking offense at the comment and sensing a nurturing feeling for the odd and differently put together.

"Can you tell us if he has a chip?" I asked.

"I can."

He scanned the animal with a small hand held device.

"Got it. Here's the information. Owner is Kate Somers at 1246 West Havens Circle, here in the city. Had his shots. Nine months old. He's going to need a protected environment. That hip was badly damaged and will never be one hundred percent. He'll learn to cope."

He looked down at Dante who had spent many a night

there with his son.

“Dogs – and boys – seem to be able to do that.”

Dante smiled. At that moment, I felt the kinship blossom into a forever thing. The Vet asked me for my business card relative to some advertising he was contemplating but I came up empty – my fanny pack was fresh out – an unusual situation. Dante promised to bring one next time he visited.

We got medicine, gauze pads and ointment, and were on our way – the three of us. I hoped Dante’s mother was open for a third male in her household – the dog, I mean. I also figured Ms. Kate Somers had a custody battle looming in her future.

Once back at the apartment, Dante soon fashioned a low doggie bed out of a small corrugated box and padded it with an old towel. The Vet had provided small sacks of food and treats but Pooch wasn’t interested. He was immediately asleep.

After my shower, I called Ms. Somers only to find it was a disconnected number. Dante was clearly relieved. I had him search for other Kate or Katherine Somers in the white pages on line. He found none – at least that’s what he claimed.

“I suppose we need to put a ‘lost dog’ ad in the classified, I said. “Can you take care of that? The Herald has a free list, I believe.”

That was soon accomplished.

“So, what we got so far in our new case?” Dante said, rescuing a half dozen day old donuts and a glass of milk from the kitchen.

“Our new case?” I asked. “I thought we effectively turned that over to the police on our way back from the Vet’s.”

“You heard them. They’re just going to sweep it under the rug. There may be two bruised and battered people out there needing our assistance. That means they are in desperate need of the services of the Dante and Trent Detective Agency.”

“The old DTDA, huh?” I said allowing his fantasy. “You make the list then, partner. Here’s the yellow Pad.”

He got to work filling in the obvious items.

Shoes – men’s sneakers and woman’s dress.
Sneakers without laces. Possible blood on tongue.

Pictures – heads torn off and removed from the scene.

Pooch – small mixed breed, wounded right rear hip,
high class blood line on Yorkie side

He put the pad down on the table, pausing to feed his
face.

“Remember the information on the chip,” I added.

As he finished making those additions there was a loud
knock – a resounding pounding – on the door. We were both
startled. Sometimes his brother would arrive to retrieve Dante
when he felt ignored for too long but not in two hundred
additional pounds would he have been able to mount such
substantial noise.

I moved to the peep hole. There was nothing to see.

Dante quickly moved in and out of my bedroom,
bearing my baseball bat on his return. He handed to me. I
unlocked the door and eased it open. Such an insistent
rapping followed by no one in sight had raised my level of
caution substantially. I opened the door – it swung in – and
peeked out in both directions. No one was anywhere to be
seen. I was puzzled.

“Look! Taped to the door,” Dante said wheeling in
close to examine it.

“Four words, printed in large letters, on a twelve inch by
twelve-inch piece of brown paper, like cut from a grocery bag
– BACK OFF OR ELSE.”

“Perhaps we do have a case, after all,” I said. “Don’t
touch it.”

Dante procured a tissue from his backpack and used it
to carefully loosen the sheet from the door.

I closed and locked the door.

Back at the table he cut a one inch strip of the plastic
wrap still holding two of the three yellow pads and placed it
against the back of the masking tape. He looked up at me
offering the unnecessary explanation.

“To preserve any finger prints that may be back there.
There often are, you know.”

I nodded. He continued his analysis.

“I’d bet on it in this case because the one end is jagged

like it was torn off the roll. Unless his was wearing gloves, there'll be a thumb or index print there."

"What does the other end of that strip of tape tell us?" I asked.

"Hmm. Oh! It's cut straight like it may be the very beginning of a new roll. Good eyes, yourself, old man."

"What else, young man?"

"Also, used a brand new, extra wide marker, I'd say. See how the excess ink bleeds away from the lines at the beginning of every letter. A well-used one wouldn't do that and an almost spent one would produce a fainter, slicker looking line. He may have bought it just for this sign."

"The paper offer any clues?" I asked.

He perused it carefully and then, as if for no special reason, turned it over. His face brightened.

"I'd say so. Seems he wrote on the blank, inside of the bag. Look here, in big red letters. Top line says RDA and the line below it in much smaller script letters it says, r friendly nei, and the line below that, akwoo. The piece he cut out cut through the name and other printing. What store might that be?"

"Crank up your laptop and go to the grocery section of the yellow pages."

"I'll go to the local neighborhood listing, thinking it may be a local, considering the trail is close to us, here."

"You do think like a detective," I said.

There were dozens and dozens of grocery stores so it took some time.

"The 'Gs' have it!" came his eager finding.

"Look here at the display."

I had been standing behind him.

G O R D A N S

Your friendly neighborhood market

2222 Lakewood Drive

"That's not more than a half mile from here. I pass it when I walk home from school."

Dante never used terms like 'wheeled' – it was always 'walked' or 'jogged' or 'ran' depending on the pace to which he was referring. He continued.

"We better check it out right away. One of the checkers

might remember him.”

“You’re right about the ‘might’. You realize how many customers . . . “

“ . . . but, it was still early when we messed in the bad guy’s affairs. And early Sunday mornings aren’t all that busy at groceries in the spring. Probably only a couple of checkers.”

“And what do you suggest our line of questioning be?”

“How about using one of your plastic police guy helper badges and say we’re helping track down a man who may have purchased a large marker and a roll of masking tape?”

“I got nothing better and I agree that where memories are concerned, the quicker the better.”

“I’m thinking that’s probably all he bought so that may help them remember.”

“What about leaving Pooch here unattended? We don’t know if he’s trained.”

“Of course, he’s trained. A nine-month-old spawn of at least one incredibly expensive parent.”

“A point well taken, but ‘spawn’? Where in the world?”

“The animal channel. I’m trying to become a cultured, planet aware, dude, you know.”

It appeared his answer had been provided in all seriousness so I kept my smile to myself.

We stopped by his apartment so he could check in before we left for the store. Ten minutes later we entered the grocery. Dante had been correct. Still at 8:30 there was only one checker working. She was sixtyish. I hoped her memory had kept up with her nice figure and radiant complexion. I made the pitch along the lines of Dante’s suggestion.

“Oh, yes. I remember him. A huge man. Slovenly in appearance. Jeans ripped, shirt tail out. Unshaven. Generally scruffy looking. Purchased one Black Magic Marker™, a small roll of masking tape, and a pair of children’s scissors – small, you know.”

“Did he happen to pay by credit card?”

“No. I’m sorry. It was cash but I can tell you he had a wad of cash as big as my fist.”

“Well, thank you for your time.”

“Don’t you want his license plate number?”

I was taken aback.

“You have his license number?”

“I got this thing. Suspicious looking characters – and he certainly qualified – always get my special attention. Seldom ever comes to anything but I once gave the police a lead on a child abduction so I keep on doing it. You may also be interested in the vehicle he was driving.”

“Yes, I think we may,” I answered as she copied the number for me from a small spiral pad beside the register.”

“It caught my eye because one of my boyfriends had one like it back in high school. It was what we called a hippy van. I am quite sure it was a VW van. Goodness sake, I didn’t know any of those dinosaurs had survived this long. Actually, my attention was drawn to it when it backfired as he started it. You just don’t hear backfires any more like we did in my time. Painted like a tie-dyed shirt – spirals, orange, red, green mostly. Badly faded so it probably was painted decades ago.”

“Wow. Hope my memory’s as good as yours when I’m . . .”

Dante’s well intended comment died in its tracks as he realized it was probably not an acceptable track.

“Sonny, let me let you in on my secret. On my fiftieth birthday, I started taking Ginkgo Biloba every day. Keeps my old gray head sharp as a tack. You remember that, now.”

“Ginkgo what?” he said, playing with her.

She understood and smiled.

“Can you pop a wheelie in that thing, son? My husband’s been in one for ten years and he pops a mean wheelie.”

Not to be outdone by some septuagenarian, Dante not only popped one, but rotated 360 degrees – three times – and clapped his hands – during the process. It was good for a long chuckle.

Once in the car, I called in the plate number to my Millie – a clerk at the precinct who did more for me than she should have – in terms of police business, I mean. We soon had the name and a street address. I repeated it and Dante copied it down.

“Watson Road can’t be more than a few blocks from the

crime scene.”

“You may be stretching it a bit using that description of the clearing.”

“Doubt it, but then a little disagreement between partners is usually a good thing, I hear. So, how do we proceed, here?”

“I have a way-out idea, Kiddo.”

“Wow, a ‘way-out’ and a ‘Kiddo’ in the same sentence. You having a stroke?”

I ignored the jab and continued.

“Where do you suppose he wrote that note?”

“Interesting. In his van. He wouldn’t have driven all the way home only to have to come back again. And, not wanting to be seen, not in the parking lot at our apartments for sure. Most likely right here.”

“My thoughts exactly. My stroke initiated idea was that he might have unwrapped his purchases on his way to the van and tossed the wrappings into one of trash cans in the parking lot.”

“I think we can call that a ‘stroke of genius’.”

I tried to also ignore that but he wouldn’t let it go.

“Oh, come on. That was a great pun. Deserves at least a chuckle.”

He got the chuckle and more. The first trash can we came to held exactly the assortment of wrappings we were looking for.

“One of your bingos, son. Got a tissue and something I can put them in?”

His forehead indicated puzzlement.

“Prints, partner. We may not have a credit card but now we have both registration information and prints.”

We drove by the precinct to explain what we had and dropped it off for analysis. Our old friend Lieutenant Miller saw us there at the front desk and came out to chat.

“I hear by the grapevine in here you two are at it again.”

Dante needed no more encouragement than that to offer a brief version of what we were about.

“Any missing persons or John and Jane Does today?” he went on to ask.

“Well, let’s look. Millie, since you are a known, long

time accomplice of The Lone Ranger and Tonto, here, see what you can find for us – missing or JDs.”

“Already working it. Ethnicity?”

“Have no idea.”

“May have been very expensively dressed,” Dante added.

“Indeed, they may,” Millie said. “I saw the report on those shoes and the purse. Three hundred dollar sneakers and a Gucci handbag. Hard to get more expensive than that.”

Suddenly the Lieutenant perked up as if taking our case as if it were, in fact, a case.

I made a mental note to have Dante search the newspaper archives to see if he could find any connection between the man in the van – identified as Billy Young, if the registration reflected its current driver – and the owner of the dog – Kate Somers. I turned back to Miller.

“Any way to easily find out if this Young character had any restraining orders out against him – from the Somers woman, perhaps.”

“Millie, work your magic for the masked man and his faithful companion.”

That really hadn’t sounded like he was taking us fully seriously yet, but I’d allow it if Millie could find anything.

“Sorry, neither name comes up on restraining orders. Let me look at assault charges. This Young guy sounds capable.”

“A big nada. Sorry, guys.”

Her printer shot out four pages of information.

“Here’s the missings and JDs for the past three days, she said. “I’ll let you take them with you if that’s okay with the Lieutenant.”

Miller nodded and asked us to keep him informed.

“By the way, where is that spot you found the shoes and such?”

Dante provided the information right down to the mile marker just shy of where the dirt path left the trail. I had the idea Miller just might dispatch a CSI team to the spot where we found the things. Although, in general, he was always helpful and gave me a lot of latitude, he was a cop and wanted the cops to get credit where credit was due. He also seems to

share a genuine concern for my – our – safety. Whether that truly flows from personal fondness or merely his desire to avoid additional paper work continues to elude me.

Back in my apartment we began going through the print outs Millie had provided concerning JDs and missing persons. No John or Jane Does seemed to fit our situation. Two sets of missing persons seemed to hold some promise, however. One was a single man, mid-thirties, had an address on 33rd street – the ritzy part of the city. He was a member of the Kennel Club, which made him a possible for the owner of Pooch. He had been missing seven days but just reported by his ex-wife. I figured he'd probably missed an alimony payment or his whereabouts would still not be a consideration.

The other was a woman, forty-five, a nurse, who hadn't returned home after her night shift four days before. Her husband was listed as a local physician. It wasn't enough to really proceed on.

"Maybe we need to take a whole different tack, here," I suggested.

"Like?"

"We have been assuming the couple belonging to the shoes may have been murdered. What if they had been kidnapped or merely roughed up for some reason? What are the major motivators for crimes – you were discussing it relative to your sociology class."

"Money, power, and jealousy – a PG version of sex, I suspect.

"We can probably rule out money since they had not been robbed. And I can't see a man with Young's apparent reputation and position interested in power – that's more for politicians and crooks."

"Often the same guys," Dante added in all seriousness. "You're saying that leaves jealousy."

"Perhaps."

Dante picked it up.

"And most likely a man – in this case Young – would have jealousy issues about another man trying to horn in on his woman."

"That's what I'm thinking. We need to locate Kate Somers."

"I suppose there are Dog Associations – well, dog owners' associations," Dante began. "Maybe she's a Yorkie or Chihuahua association member."

"See if you follow this. What if one of the two had a Yorkie and the other had a Chihuahua?"

"Ah, some doggie hanky-panky taking place while their owners were engaging in their own people hanky-panky."

"I suppose that might be one interpretation. I was just going for the obvious possibility for a mixed breed to occur as a result of such a juxtaposition."

"I like my interpretation better, but then . . ."

No further explanation needed to be provided by young mister teen hormone boy – or man, in that context, I supposed. It put the kid in a new category for me. It would take some work on my part. He wasn't finished, however.

"Juxtaposition. I've never heard about that position."

He giggled himself into hysterics.

I tried to move on, though it did deserve something more than a polite smile.

"Let's see if we – meaning you – can find the two kind of dog associations in question. Then see if their local membership lists are available. If so, we can cross check them with the lists Millie gave us."

"And updates in the days to come. Missing persons can't be filed for 48 hours in this city."

"When would that be?" I said out loud, but mostly thinking.

"I'm betting it happened shortly before we came up the scene – and I think that's a good assumption considering the shape the Pooch was in. Much longer and he might have bled to death."

"I'll accept that. So, say, four a.m. or so on Sunday morning. Tuesday would be the first date for filing."

"Yeah. Provided anyone missed them and turned them in. Sometimes people are missing days or weeks before anybody realizes it."

"That's true. So, let's get done what we can get done."

"That's what I can get done, I suppose."

"I suppose. I did have another thought. When we first approached the clearing, I took several pictures of the area.

I'm wondering if I got the back of one of those torn photographs."

"Probably. They were scattered willy-nilly. So what?"

"There's a slight chance there may be a name or mark on the back that could lead us to the place that printed them."

"You been into the Ginkgo too? Lots of good stuff seeping out of your gray matter today. But aren't most photographs digital and printed on a home printer?"

"I suppose, but places like Wal-Mart and Walgreens do a whopping big photo print business so clearly lots of folks don't print them off themselves."

"And they may keep digital copies on their computers – for easy reorders. That challenge sounds like more fun. Let's go after that first."

I agreed and slipped my camera card into his laptop. As it turned out, the positions of the photos followed the old flip of the coin routine – six face up and six face down. Dante isolated those face-down and was soon enlarging them one at a time.

"Discount Drugs on Dixon," he announced at last. "Great idea. That's not in this neighborhood, however. There is even a batch number on three of them – all different batches but at least we have something. One has a date stamp – two months ago."

"Good for us. Now that we have the information, I'm not at all sure how we can use it, however."

"It's data. Who knows how it may turn out to be helpful," ever optimistic Dante said.

We spent the rest of the morning searching dog associations – mostly preferring to be known as Canine Clubs. Several had members listed. One even had pictures of the member and the dog – er, canine. No Pooch and no Katherine Somer was to be found, however. Since neither shoes nor purses were shown, it again looked like a nowhere lead.

"Looks like big, bad, Billy Young is our only real lead, then," Dante said stating the obvious. "How about seeing if your lady friend at the precinct can send us a copy of his driver's license?"

"Good idea. Then we'll at least know what he looks like

before we approach him and he gives us both atomic wedgies,” I added not entirely humorously.”

“He’ll never give me a wedgie, Trent.”

“And why is that?”

“I only wear underwear in the winter and I’ve already made the transition to spring.”

“When will I learn not to ask?”

I made the request via email and received an auto-responder message – “Thank you for your contact. We will be back to you in short order.”

Sundays had become a time when Dante’s brother and his mother spent the day together. It had, therefore become a similar time for Dante and me.

“So, where we headed for lunch, today? I’ve been sitting here starving for the past several hours. It’s already going on 1:30.”

“Time got away from me. How about the pancake house on Lafayette?”

“Do I have to get pancakes?”

“You know you don’t.”

“Okay. You still need to shave and I need to deodorize my pits. Got what I need in my back pack.”

“Sometimes I wonder if you were my mother in another life.”

“Just looking out for your love life.”

“What?”

“Face it, your unshaven look is just not a chick magnet. And since most strangers assume I’m your kid, you need to have me smelling like a rose. My natural charm may not always be enough to make your case.”

“I can make my own case and my love life is none of your business.”

“You keep saying that and yet I keep meddling.”

“I’m glad we understand each other.”

“We probably don’t, you understand.”

“I do.”

Soon, two dashing, clean shaven gentlemen with appropriately fragrant arm pits were seated at my favorite restaurant – not so much Dante’s. He was as steak and baked potato man. I received the awaited email from the

precinct on my phone and forwarded it to Dante's laptop. The picture in no way resembled the person the checkout lady had described. The license photo was of a bald, thin man with dark rimmed glasses."

"The soup thickens," Dante said offering a play on the old detective novel saying.

It deserved no more than my half-hearted nod. That seemed sufficient, considering.

"I guess we need to concoct some reason to approach Mr. Young," I said.

As we began concocting, a second email arrived. It contained more data. The fingerprints on the wrapping material were not Young's but somebody named Joe Fischer, a two-time inmate of the state penitentiary. Assault and extortion seemed to be his things.

"So, why was he driving Young's hippy van?" Dante asked.

"Can't know at this point, of course. No wonder we couldn't connect Young to Somers. We should have been looking to a Fischer connection."

"You know, I remember a person who spelled their name that way – not the usual 'Fisher' spelling – on one of the doggie sites. I'll bet I can find it. Most of the membership rolls allowed name searches."

"Let's first finish our relaxed Sunday noon meal together, engaging in our usual witty banter and topics germane to culture and planet health before we retreat back into the world of possible bad guys," I said.

We switched gears relatively easily. Our approach to those times together had become well established as strictly enjoyable, mind stretching sessions. I learned about the plight of the platypus and gave Dante some things to consider in the college search he had already initiated. It was a good time.

We had two addresses. Young's and Fischer's. We headed for Young's first figuring it might be both less dangerous and more helpful if we could determine how the van had come into the hands of Young earlier that day. I decided a straight forward approach with Young would be the best. I wore my simplest plastic badge – Photographer. We knocked on his apartment door.

He was a slight, emaciated, man who, I suspected had lost his hair not because he or Mother Nature planned it that way but do to chemotherapy. He wore a pleasant expression as he greeted us.

“How may I help you gentlemen?”

“My name is Tom Trent and I’m doing an article for the Sunday supplement about interesting vehicles here in the city. I’ve been informed you own a wonderful old VW van, painted in the style of the middle twentieth century. I was wondering if you’d permit me to photograph it and perhaps give my young associate here a bit of background on it.”

Dante lifted a yellow pad as if to verify his role in it all.

“Happy to oblige. It’s parked out back. If you’ll come in we can use the rear door. I’m not feeling up to snuff today, and that will save me quite a few steps.”

We followed him through the living room and kitchen to the back of the apartment. It was an upscale place with original paintings and a large library. The van was right where he said it would be. I began shooting pictures well before we arrived at where it sat. He opened the driver side door and made a sweep of his hand, indicating I should have at it. I continued taking pictures – the driver’s area at that point. Dante rolled in close.

“I see the keys are still in the ignition, Sir. Isn’t that a bit risky?” he asked.

“I loaned it to someone for the morning and just haven’t retrieved the keys yet. I will appreciate it if you will hand them to me.”

I noted how well-spoken the man was, thinking it was not something I would have expected from somebody who apparently preferred to be called ‘Billy’ and drove a hippy van. Clearly that was my problem not his.

He moved to the rear door and struggled to open it. Dante moved in and assisted. Billy smiled and seemed appreciative. The next words out of Dante’s mouths stepped our investigation up to a whole new level.

“Bad stuff in here, guys.”

I was standing on the other side photographing the unusual and colorful designs. I opened the rear door closest to me. His take had been correct. There was a blood soaked

Hawaiian print shirt, and an expensive looking woman's sweat suit. Its variegated rose color was also blood stained.

"I don't understand," was all Mr. Young could muster. "Joe, from the church was using it this morning to pick up kids from the Boy's Club to take back and forth to Sunday School. I just don't understand."

"Have you let him use it before?"

"Not him specifically, but the church, yes, often. The kids get such a kick out of the old dinosaur."

It was the second time they had heard it referred to in the Jurassic sense. I placed a call to the precinct and requested Lieutenant Miller.

"Miller. What's up Tom?"

"Got something you need to see. You'll want to bring forensics. I'll have plenty of photos."

"Any hint or do I go into this blind."

I filled him in.

"Related to your case, you think?"

"I think so, and if I were you, I'd begin re-characterizing it as OUR case."

"Yes. I suppose so."

We hung up. Dante had assisted Mr. Young to a nearby bench in the shade. I opened the motor compartment. It was still second degree burn hot suggesting it had just arrived. I looked around hoping to see a very large man focusing his attention on us. No such luck. Certainly, whoever was responsible would be back to clean things up. Unless, of course, the person responsible was sitting on the bench. That seemed fully unlikely.

I walked over to the two of them.

"Do you regularly drive the van?" I asked.

"I haven't been able to drive for many months. Chemo. Not sufficient strength to believe I'd be safe behind the wheel."

"Do you actually know Joe Fischer very well?" Dante asked.

"Not at all, really. When the church wants the van I usually just put the keys in it and they come by on their schedule. It was a little different this week. Joe came by last evening and said the church needed it really early for a sunrise service. He wanted me to know so I would have the

key ready.”

“May I ask which church?” I said.

“The storefront church on Benson – some sort of Seekers Temple, I believe. I’m not affiliated with it but I know they have a big soup kitchen program and run an afterschool program for kids. I met the pastor just one time when he dropped by and told me some of the kids had seen my van and he wondered if they might bring a few by after school to look at it close up. I said, yes, of course, and the relationship just grew to what it is today. I love that the kids enjoy it so much.”

I took out my Police Photographer badge and showed it to him.

“I regularly work with the police. Lieutenant Miller will be here shortly to look into all this. I’m wondering if you will do us a favor before he arrives.”

“Certainly, if I can.”

“Would you call the church and make sure they actually used your van today?”

“Of course. I have the number in my phone.”

The call was placed. The perplexed look that came over him gave me the answer long before he hung up.

“They did not arrange for it and they don’t know any Joe Fischer. The man showed me his driver’s license. I was so sure it was all on the up and up. I feel just terrible. What do you suspect happened? I now assume your initial story to me about the article was a rouse.”

“Yes. Sorry for having had to take that route.”

“No apology necessary. I’m very appreciative of our law enforcement department. I am happy to help. It would be exciting, even, if it didn’t present such gruesome possibilities.”

“My take is that Fischer may frequent the soup kitchen and found out about the church’s use of your vehicle. Then, when he needed transportation he also mounted a rouse and you know the rest – well as much as any of us know at this point.”

“I have to ask,” Dante said addressing Mr. Young. “Of course, you don’t have to answer.”

He paused and Mr. Young cocked his head slightly, offering a smile. Dante continued.

“You are obviously an educated man. I was just wondering what field.”

“Archeology. Taught at the university until last year. On sabbatical now to get this condition rectified. You, too, speak well. May I ask what your field is?”

Dante smiled.

“Girls mostly, I’m fifteen. Not sure where I’ll head eventually. College is definitely in my future, however. I have a trust fund that will more than handle it.”

“I’m glad to hear all of that. Do I assume correctly that Mr. Trent is not your father?”

“You assume correctly. I suppose you could say best friends, if that doesn’t sound odd – the age difference and all.”

“Not at all. My best friend is just eight.”

His eyes twinkled. Dante’s brow furrowed.

“Rover, my dog. Actually Rover, III. Saw no reason to change names from one incarnation to another.”

“Rover, actually? I love it,” Dante said.

I couldn’t resist.

“Interesting. I have been considering that name for the kid, here.”

“And a doggone good one, I’d say,” Dante said getting the last laugh out of the exchange.”

Lieutenant Miller arrived closely followed by the CSI van. Dante met him as he exited his car and began filling him in from the point of the last installment. An all points was issued for Fischer. The forensics team went to work. I realized they would have no answers other to confirm it was human blood. They asked me to take additional photos of the clothing – as it was found and laid out for a full view. Prints from the wheel were verified to be Fischer’s. One bloody print on the inside of the rear right door was his as well.

“You two have this figured this out?” Miller asked at last.

Dante took it upon himself to answer.

“We figured out a crime had likely been committed and found Fischer was the best candidate to be the bad guy. Don’t know who the victims may be. Figure a man and a woman of substantial means. It appears Fischer had some big hairy problem with the woman because of the way he

ripped up the pictures in her hand bag.”

“I guess we wait on missing person reports and JDs, then,” Miller said.

They wrapped things up and had the vehicle towed for a more thorough going over. Dante and I prepared to leave. He had one final necessary comment to Young.

“Just let us know when you need transportation and we can probably help you Mr. – Well, I assume it’s Dr. Young.”

“Thank you. Do you really suppose your chair will be able to transport both of us? And, about the Dr. thing. I don’t spread it around out here, Okay? I’m just old Billy – Dr. tends to put folks off.”

“Gotcha. We’ll be in contact.”

It seemed to require a mutual thumbs-up. The two of them shared a side of life I was not privy to. At that moment, I seemed to feel both fortunate and deprived.

It was going on four o’clock when we got back to my place. Seldom had so many things transpired during any given eleven hours of my life. Dante got right on his laptop.

“I got a feeling we’re close to having this case wrapped up,” he said.

“And here I thought we had just neatly handed it over – for a second time – to Lieutenant Miller and the city’s finest.”

I got his look. It said, ‘I’m sure you really know better than that.’ I did and I awaited his next move/ revelation/ conclusion/ whatever it was to be.

“So, what are you up to?”

“Most of those doggie sites had articles about club get-togethers, parties, even doggie weddings, if you can believe that. Lots of long shots, as a photog friend of mine might say. I know it’s probably a billion to one shot but what if we can find a couple wearing the clothes we found in the van?”

“A very interesting idea. Ingenious, even.”

“Would you expect less?”

It had been delivered with a broad grin back over his shoulder at me. I moved in behind him and offered a bit of my own genius.

“Or, clothing left in one of the torn pictures.”

“Very good. Yes. That would really tie the pictures to the purse lady and lessen the possibility the bad guy had

brought them with him, for some reason.”

“Someone always eventually wins the lottery despite the odds. Someone regularly walks off with the check from Publisher’s Clearing House. And that day, Dante walked off with . . . well, I’m not sure what to call it.”

“Look at that, Trent! Let me work some digital magic.”

He soon had a couple isolated and enlarged. A few more sweeps from his pixilation program and he not only had the outfits, but he had faces.

“So how’s that for eleven hours and ten minutes of detective work, Watson?”

“And here I thought I was the masked man. You confuse me.”

It garnered a very weak shrug.

“It is very good work, of course, but I do believe you can do even better.”

He offered his patented furrowed brow. It was seldom seen since few things rarely really puzzled him. Neither would this, for long.

“I’ll tell you, Gingko AND Lutein.”

“Lutein?” I asked.

“Eye health in the aged. You spotted the name tags, didn’t you? It will challenge my software but just maybe we can get something. Might even get a clear picture of her handbag – I guess that’s what it is there in the shadows under her arm.”

He pressed some keys.

“I really need that extra RAM. I’ll have to get a part time job.”

He shut down all the other programs and gave his new software its head. Pass after pass after pass worked, each one appearing to only clear up the focus a little bit.

“Looks like the first name’s on the top and last on the bottom of the tags. She’s in front and hers is coming into focus first. I don’t get a second name but there it is, Emily, big as . . . whatever that saying is.”

“Want to borrow some Gingko?”

He let it pass. I felt vindicated.

“Well, his first name is in a shadow. I doubt if any more passes will clear it up, but we have a new winner – Adams.”

“So, if they are married that would probably be her last name as well,” I said extrapolating.

“Okay. Off with pixelator and on with the internet. I saved the doggie sites in a desk top folder. Here’s the membership list from the site with the pictures. It’s searchable. I’ll just enter ‘Emily Adams’ and click on ‘GO’.”

“Shucks, no results.”

“Try just ‘Em’.”

He redid the search. Still nothing.

“How about just the last name?”

“Got four people named Adams. Looks like only one man, however. We’ll see if it gets us anywhere.”

It did. Would you believe ‘John Adams’?

“And look down here. See who he’s married to.”

“Well, I’ll be. Emily Somers. Look her up, I suppose.”

“There she is – drop dead gorgeous, I’d say – and clearly I shouldn’t have, considering the probable circumstances. No doggie picture.”

“Be patient with me on this, Dante. Bring up her picture at the party or whatever it was, in your pixel thingy. See what you can do to improve the image of what we assumed was her bag.”

That was call for two of those infrequent looks within an hour – a first, I was certain.

Within minutes it became clear that it was not a bag at all but, you guessed it, Pooch.

“I feel on a roll here, kid.”

“That phrase is clearly more appropriate for me, but you can borrow it.”

“You said they had news articles or some such thing. That site have that?”

“Let’s see. Yup. ‘Member Briefs’. Sounds like an ad for high class underwear.”

We shared a deserved smile. He found the page.

“Search for our Emily Somers.”

“The articles aren’t searchable. We’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way – read.”

There were LOTS of articles. Eventually we hit pay dirt in more than one way. It was a summary of a legal dispute between the owner of a Chihuahua named ‘Taco’ and Emily

Somers and John Adams, owner of Pooch – in reality Lombard Ellington – called ‘Lee’ for short.”

“Who names a dog Lombard Ellington?”

I raised my hand.

“OOO! Me. I know. Call on me, teach,” I said playfully.”

“I know, but the name’s bigger than the animal. He has enough going against him without that.”

Dante summarized the details of the nature of the suit brought by the Chihuahua owner against the Yorkie owners.

“The owners of Lombard did recklessly allow their female Yorkie, while in heat, to roam the neighborhood in which his male dog lived. The indisputable laws of biology required his dog to mate with the Yorkie and therefore the offspring should be half his. He had tried to sell his portion of the rights for ‘the establishment of the new and unique breed’ to Emily for a cool million dollars. She answered him in court and the judge tossed out the case as frivolous. At least we probably have the connection to Kate Somers – sisters maybe. Pooch seemed to have changed hands several times. It would seem Emily may have given it to Kate and then maybe when Kate left the area – her phone being disconnected and all – she returned him to Emily.”

He scrolled down a bit further.

“And the owner of the Chihuahua is – drum roll please,” Dante said, drawing out the total lack of mystery, “Joe Fischer. Looks like he took things into his own hands this morning. All that makes sense, but why mutilate the photographs and why not at least take their money?”

“I imagine the answer to the second question is that we came upon the scene before he could do that. Here’s a possible scenario: He somehow lured them to that spot, removed the identifying data from their wallet and purse leaving the wallet and purse behind so they wouldn’t be found with the bodies – if he indeed did kill them – tied their wrists with the shoelaces, and marched them without shoes to the waiting van some distance beyond the trail – deeper into the overgrown area. Hard for a tenderfoot to run far in bare or stocking feet should one escape. A ploy often used in detention centers. During the process the Adams man may have attempted to overpower Fischer and that’s when blood

was spilled onto the tongue of his sneaker. Also, at some point the dog attacked Fischer and tore the chunk of denim from his jeans. It's probably when Fischer retaliated with the toe of his boot and landed the blow to the dog."

"And at the van he bloodied them if not killed them," Dante went on. "Then, when he went back to collect the cash he heard or saw us approaching and skedaddled. But I still don't get the pictures."

"Until the police locate the digital originals, we can only speculate. Perhaps, and this is a big perhaps, he felt he had been unreasonably excluded from the Canine Club and the pictures were of club members. In his twisted mind, he decapitated them in front of the couple thinking that would inflict some final pain – seeing their snooty buddies done in, if only symbolically. Or, it might be as simple as thinking the faces might be used to identify them so he took the faces with him to be burned or flushed or something later."

"He must have somehow followed us back to your apartment in order to know where to post his threatening note."

"Or, those business cards I couldn't find at the Vets may have fallen out of my fanny pack when I sat on the ground to work on the torn photographs."

Dante nodded, not really concerned about the how. The apartment had been located. He continued.

"He must have had a gun. If only a knife, I'd think they would have made a run for it back to the trail."

"Likely, I imagine," I said agreeing theory – and theory was all we had.

We sent the facts, as we had found them, along with our speculation, such as it was, to the Lieutenant. Dante was finally ready to consider it police business.

"So, what happens to Pooch?"

"He'll need a good home. I'll see what our friend Judge Bane has to say about it. If the owners are dead, I just imagine you have a step or so up on anybody else."

He nodded and closed down his laptop.

"Hungry?" I asked.

"Not really. A pizza maybe, some pop, some of those cinnamon sticks and maybe a side of ravioli."

“And then for the main course?”

He shrugged.

“There’s a downside to solving a case so fast, you know,” he said.

“And what might that be?”

“We got nothing but boredom facing us all evening.”

“What about Pooch? Perhaps the two of you need some bonding time?”

“Good point. And I’ve been thinking, if it turns out he can’t use that damaged hind leg, I can build him a set of wheels to strap onto his hind quarters and the two of can go trolling for babes together.”

* * *

The couple’s bodies washed up under the 44th Street Bridge. Fischer confessed, verifying most of our take on it all. Pooch, new set of wheels and all, found a good and appreciative home down on two hundred. Billy and Dante became fierce chess rivals and the checker lady received a gift certificate to the pancake house. To their amazement, Miller even emailed a, “Well done, guys.” Dante searched the sky for flying pigs.

Thomas Trent Meets the Amenable Jumper

By Tom Gnagey

Case #4:

**A Thomas Trent: Crime Scene Photographer, short
mystery**

“You expecting a package? Came complete with a plain brown paper wrapper. You into something kinky in here, Trent?”

It was Dante’s smiling opening salvo as he handed me the package upon wheeling his chair in through the front door of my apartment. Fifteen and hyper hormonal, the lad all quite normally saw – or hoped for – kinky everywhere.

“Not expecting anything.”

I turned it over examining both sides.

“No address, but as the return address there is the number 1888. Odd. Where was it exactly when you found it?”

“Leaning up against the door – center of the door as if not wanting to be overlooked.”

“You realize you just imbued a six inch by six-inch package with human characteristics.”

“Better than imbuing myself with the package’s characteristics, I suppose.”

“Believe me, Dante, there is nothing brown paper wrapper about you.”

It deserved and got a minimal response. I’m not sure either of us completely understood my twisted analogy, but neither of us questioned it.

“You gonna open it or wear it out holding it?”

He handed me his pocket knife – short blade at the

ready.

I slit the paper more carefully than the situation probably called for. Inside was a case containing a CD or DVD; I still don't completely understand the difference. Dante had a tissue ready for careful handling and I nodded, suddenly agreeing that caution might be advised. Wanting to avoid either leaving or spoiling fingerprints, I opened the case and without removing the disk, showed its contents to Dante – my constant sidekick in all things mysterious, and boy computer genius – really! He already had his laptop removed from the backpack that always rode with him on the back of his chair. A few moments later the CD (or whatever) was inserted and booting up. (I always thought that meant getting dressed to go out in the snow, but my young friend tells me different.)

“It's a single video file. Let me scan it for viruses and such. Just take a sec.”

Provided a sec was measured as ten seconds, it had been an accurate estimate.

“Play it?” He asked looking up at me.

“Sure, play it.”

There was no message and no title or credits. After a few moments of smudges and flickering burst of colors, the picture came into focus. It was a view of an alley – specifically the roofline of an alley as if being shot from an upper story window or even from the roof across from it. A person's form appeared, walking to the edge of the roof and without a moment's hesitation, taking a header into the alley below.

“Yuk!” was Dante's full and complete take on it, turning away momentarily.

The video followed the body's plunge to the brick pavement below. It bounced slightly, adding to the horror of the scene. It lay motionless, of course. Dropping ten stories tended to effect bodies that way.

The video immediately scanned back up to the roof line. Two other figures appeared.”

“Oh, no. Not a trio of jumpers,” the boy said putting on a shudder.

The men looked over the edge for a long moment and then turned and left.

“Do you suppose they are friends of the jumper who arrived just too late, or the bad guys who made him do it?” he asked.

“No idea, of course.”

“Any idea why you’d get this video?” Dante asked.

I raised my arms indicating confusion, shaking my head.

“Well, somebody out there thought you needed to see it,” he went on working toward an answer by himself. “A cry for help, maybe. The newest rendition of the old film classic, Rear Window. Maybe somebody wanting to use you as a funnel to the cops for some clandestine reason.”

They had all been reasonable possibilities.

“Burn a copy,” I said. (Another phrase that would have indicated a very different message when I was a boy.)

That was soon accomplished. He watched the new one all the way through to make sure it was an accurate rendition of the original. Our emotions were clones of those we experienced during the first look. It raised lots of questions beyond why it had come to me.

The usual quandary set in when such evidence fell into our laps – so to speak. Should we dust it for prints or wait for forensics? It was seldom a dilemma that lasted long. Dante opened the clear plastic case and placed it flat on the table preparing it for dusting. I went to the kitchen and got the box of powdered sugar. I tapped a bit onto a piece of paper, much like the process when rolling a cigarette. Dante took it from me and, leaning down close to the table, gently blew a thin coat of sugar across the surface. He tapped the sides of the case and then proceeded to blow off the excess. There were several prints. He captured them on cellophane tape, and then repeated the procedure on the other three, flat, surfaces – inside and out.

As he captured a print he handed me the tape and I fixed it to a sheet of dark paper – white showing up well against it. I made a crude drawing of the case, numbering where each print had been laid down. The process took a good ten minutes. I could tell from the most cursory examination that the prints had come from several sources. Clearly there had been no attempt made to conceal whatever

identity or identities might be revealed by them.

We repeated the process for the disk itself. That proved to be more informative. Two thumb prints on top and two index fingers on the bottom. It was where the disk had been handled going in and later coming out of the computer. The user was apparently not familiar with the 'only handle it by the edges' rule for disk care. Perhaps an older person. It, too, appeared to have been a copy – probably of a digital card from a camera.

"Why not just send the card?" Dante asked then answered his own question.

"Because disks are universal and cards are more specific to the make and type of camera."

I nodded.

It was a very warm July, Tuesday, and fast coming upon noon.

"How about we drop this at the precinct for Lieutenant Miller and then go grab some lunch," Dante asked/suggested/assumed.

Girls and food ran a very close race within the young man's being. I'd not wager on which might win – well, not until after a meal, at least. (But, isn't there something about waiting an hour after eating before – oh, no, that's swimming.)

The video certainly grabbed the Lieutenant's attention more than our initial information on a case usually did. He even thanked us.

We ate at Aunt Sally's Café across the street from the precinct. As Dante enjoyed explaining, 'In addition to donuts, the café also serves . . .'. He would giggle himself into hysterics. I didn't have the heart to tell him that despite the popular cultural caricature, I'd actually never seen a cop with a donut in hand.

The conversation soon turned back to the package and the video it contained.

"I don't suppose there is any way to back trace the disk, is there," I asked indicating no confidence in the possibility."

"None."

"Then I guess we will have to search for that alley. Any ideas about how to go about that?"

"I suppose the 1888 on the front of the package is

possibly a lead to that.”

“Can you imagine how many 1888 addresses there must be in city this size?”

“Maybe not a street address. Not sure what else it might be, though.”

“A post office box or a locker at a train station or a bus station or an airport,” I suggested.

“Or a private club or the YWCA,” he added with a grin.

“I suggest we begin as if it were a street address. The contents seem to be about a place – that building.”

“The rear of that building actually,” Dante said trying to clarify the setting.

“I’ll bet we can cut down the population of 1888s a good deal by eliminating all the addresses that don’t have an alley running behind them.”

“And what about only looking for ten story buildings? I think that’s what I counted. We can verify that.”

“And 1888 needs to have a building of at least similar height across the alley. The video shot began almost head on across from the roof line of 1888.”

Dante nodded.

“Okay, Brainiac, how do we condense the city buildings using those parameters?”

“This may seem way to high tech for you to understand but how about starting with a map of the city.”

“You got me. A map. Of course. I used one of those on the crossing in the Mayflower.”

“Have we made our inane points?” Dante asked with a grin. “We do waste an inordinate amount of time with foolishness, you know.”

“And would you have it any other way?”

“Of course, not. Absurdity is our wellspring of life.”

“I think you’ve been spending too much time with the flowery talker, Dr. Billy Young. He still hanging in there?”

“Actually, doing better. The tumor continues to shrink. He’s optimistic about his progress.”

“Good. I must drop by and see him again. Life shouldn’t get so busy that I fail to do things like that.”

“I agree. Naughty Thomas Trent.”

“You’re not at your best when playing the part of my

mother.”

We finished our meal and left. In the car, Dante began a search for maps on his laptop.

“We may be better off to print out little sections so we can X off the areas that don’t fit what we’re looking for.”

“I have reams of paper.”

“I figure there will be just four basic sections of 1888s – the 1800 blocks on the north, south, east, and west. I’m sure they all aren’t neatly aligned like that, but it’s a good way to begin I think.”

On the way back to my place, I was called to photograph a five vehicle pileup on an off ramp at the 55th Street Bridge. It took a half hour. The detective on site wanted lots of views of the vehicles and the skid marks and such. To simplify my life, I just handed him the card from my camera and we continued the drive home.

On our way up to my apartment, we stopped off at Dante’s place and picked up the newest member of his family – Pooch. He was always eager to accompany Dante. The set of hind quarter wheels that Dante had fashioned for him to replace the lost mobility in his damaged hind leg worked well. He didn’t wear it around the house but always drug is out as a sign he was ready to go outside. Although his appearance had grown on us, in actuality, his looks had not improved one whit. He felt at home in my apartment as well since the two of them spent a good deal of time there.

I had a theory that I thought might move the search along more quickly.

“I’ve photographed all over the city and I’m inclined to think brick paved alleys and buildings with old style wooden sash windows are more likely to be found in Old Town between tenth and twentieth.”

“Okay. Good idea. Let’s take a scroll through the map of the Old Town area. I’d forgotten about the brick paved alleys. The heights of the buildings and kinds of alley pavement aren’t indicated on any of the maps.”

“I’ve heard about Google Earth. That’s like 3-D maps, right.”

“Excellent. It’s actually pictures from satellites. It’s a great idea. It may take a bit to figure how to make the specific

request since we don't have an address."

A few minutes passed. As it turned out most of the Old Town area alleys were brick paved but there were a limited number of buildings that rose to a height of ten stories. A half hour later we had a mere half dozen possible 1888s in that area of the city. The search seemed to be proceeding far faster than I had anticipated.

"Up for a field trip?" I asked.

"Always. Need to take Pooch back down stairs. Don't want to chance leaving him in a hot car while we stroll the cobblestones."

Old Town was a considerable distance away. We parked near the center of the area just north of the 1800 blocks. As I counted floors, Dante checked out the alleys. When we found the proper combination, we entered the alley and compared what we found to some still shots Dante had printed from the video. They differed enough that it didn't appear confusion of one for another would be a problem.

The three o'clock sun had become sweltering so we took a break in a small coffee house, ready for a cold something-or-other to drink. We aren't latte sort of guys so opted for 40 ounce lemonades from a self-serve fountain. We found a tiny table and sat. Dante took out the stills and we studied them, neither of us certain what we might find that would be helpful.

"Widow's Way."

We both looked up. The comment had come from a white aproned old man passing our table. As it turned out he was the proprietor and seemed to bus the tables as well.

"Excuse me but what did you say?" Dante asked.

The old gentleman tapped one of the pictures with his finger.

"Widow's Way is what we used to call that alley. Back in the forties when the mob controlled this section of the city, they had a habit of tossing those they thought were undesirables off the Bergin Building onto the pavement in the alley – Widow Way, you see."

"How interesting. I'm a photographer and I've been told that alley is loaded with early twentieth century architectural features that might lead me to a photo essay for the Sunday

supplement. All I have to go on are these pictures. We've been searching for it. I imagine you can point us in its direction."

"You're sittin' in the Bergen Building. Alley's just out back – around either corner."

"Is it brick paved?" Dante asked.

"Original. Lots of these alleys have been re-paved, but not that one. Never thought of an alley as bein' photogenic, but you'd know better about that. Let me know if I can be of any help. I can always use a mention in the Herald. I sell it here."

He pointed to the papers stacked beside the register and removed a business card from his wallet, handing it to Dante.

"I'm Tom Trent, by the way," I said doing the half stand thing and offering my hand. "This is Dante, by helper."

"Nice to make your acquaintance. They call me Lem – short for Clemens. Been here for fifty years. Started out as a grocery then gradually moved toward the high-ticket items – drinks. And, here we are. Do a darn good business. Lots of offices in these old buildings. Cheap rent and easy access to the rest of the city. If you need an office down here, let me know. I can get you a deal. My nephew's wife's family owns this building and several others. I live in an apartment behind the store – opens onto the alley."

"Is it a pretty quiet alley?" Dante asked going as far as he thought he dared without showing our hand.

"Except for Gert's old Tom cat. He can set up quite a howl when he's courting the ladies."

He chuckled.

"If that's an every-night thing I'd think it would get on your nerves," Dante continued.

"Ya learn to just turn it off. Like Saturday night he wasn't out there I missed him, if you can believe that. I peeked out about 2:30 but the lights were off. Pitch black. Once in a while a breaker gets thrown for no obvious reason. I figure the circuit may just be close to being at its max and on hot days – like Saturday – it over heats."

My eyes met Dante's. We knew each other's thoughts. 'Or, perhaps somebody intentionally threw it into darkness on Saturday night – early Sunday morning.' It had been the night

of the jump. I couldn't figure out why he would fail to mention a dead body in the alley. Protecting the reputation of the area, maybe. I tried a different tack.

"You say this area used to be mob controlled. How about now?"

"They've been gone for decades around here. We're proud of our friendly, safe, neighborhood. Not even a mugging in months. Oh, from time to time some upstart wannabe mob type makes a play for power but it never lasts long."

"Now?"

"Some gossip, but that's all as far as I know."

"A name?"

"Al Rossi – not even thirty – a punk – like I said a goin' nowhere wannabe. Why you so interested?"

Dante handled the question.

"If we're going to be poking around the alley we sure as heck don't want to be stepping on any bad guy feet, you know."

"No worries. Lots of apartments filled with good people open onto the alley and that translates into lots of eyes keeping track of things. You'll probably get some questions, yourself."

"Just for background information for the article, what's in the building across the alley – facing the alley side?"

"Mostly apartments and single rooms all the way up. You'll see everybody takes good care of their places – clean windows, trash picked up, fire escapes painted. Lots of plants on the fire escape landings. A really nice little community back there. Mostly retired folks on both sides. One flower shop at this end of the block and a leather worker up at the other end."

The end of our conversation also marked the final slurps of our drinks. We thanked Lem for the conversation, and left. Dante was full of thoughts.

"Why no mention of a body? Surely somebody would have seen it. Weren't the cops called? What happened to the body? If there's been a cover up it sure is complicated – has to include, what, 200 people the length and height of the alley."

"I agree there are lots of questions. I just assumed the police were involved. I'd better give Lieutenant Miller a call and get some things clarified."

"Let's put eyes on the alley first to make sure it's really the right one," Dante suggested.

I agreed. It was a two-minute walk around the corner to the north. Lem's place was smack dab in the middle of the block. At the alley entrance, we were met by a sign which read: "No Through Traffic." We assumed that referred to vehicles and not pedestrians. A trash pick-up truck was just beeping its way backwards out of the far end.

It was a long, narrow area. The backs of the buildings had been laid up in soft, red to rose hue brick. Lem had been correct. It was a well-cared for area. It took but a few seconds to verify it was the alley in the video.

Dante pointed here and there.

"Lights. Probably helps keep out the riffraff at night. It's why the video was so well lit. I wondered about that – a time stamp of 2:11 a.m. and yet it was still light enough to follow the body all the way to the pavement and see the forms appear on top of the roof."

"Let's locate the exact spot where the body landed," I said.

It seemed like the logical place to start. I took more shots of the buildings than was necessary just to establish our cover story if asked about our presence.

The spot was in about forty yards from the north entrance and easily found since it was flanked by two, large, bright red downspouts no more than ten feet apart. From the stills, we determined the spot was a third of the way from the opposite side of the twenty foot wide alley. I shot it from all angles. Dante rolled in close to examine it.

"I was hoping for blood but instead, look!" he said. "It's like a newly washed area some ten feet in diameter and it extends in a narrow path to the storm sewer drain in the middle of the pavement. It's pretty obvious with the dust and oil everywhere else."

"And that tells us . . .?"

"That it was very well washed down and cleaned up. Could have been a city crew of course. Could have been bad

guys. Several water faucets within a few yards.”

I had some thoughts as well.

“And very likely nobody witnessed the clean-up crew because the lights were intentionally off. That seems to lean in the direction of the bad guy theory.”

“You need to make that call to Miller, I guess,” Dante said.

I agreed. There was no record of a police call to that location. He said that he had been puzzled because there had been no jumper reported at the time of the date stamp. He would send a forensics team immediately and asked us to remain there to fill them in on with our information.

“I’m thinking if they remove a few of these bricks they’ll find blood that seeped down in the cracks,” Dante said champing at the bit for me to do it right that moment.

He knew that would be overstepping even the wide latitude the Lieutenant allowed us. I used the time to take more photographs. It was actually a very quaint space with the shops, large flower urns sitting in various places and a number of small tables and chairs hugging the walls, resembling an old fashioned, open air, ice cream parlor. There were window boxes with flowers and ivy, some places trailing four and five stories down the wall. There just might actually be a photo story in it after all. Caption it, “Lem’s Alley”, and there just might be free lemonade for a long time.

It took the CSIs a good forty minutes to arrive. Dante had begun working on the video in his lap. He began by isolating frames in which he thought the jumper’s face might be clear. He did the same for the two late appearing forms at the edge of the roof. He would later enlarge them and use his pixilating software to see just how much he could clean them up. He knew the police lab had far more powerful software for that purpose but he characterized it as a challenge, a race, little guy against the big guys. I had to smile at his diligence and intensity. He was by nature a fierce competitor. It had been a trait that had served him well since his accident. He accepted defeat when that was realistic, but not until he had exhausted every alternative.

All that keyboard plunking had rendered the lad famished so we did a drive through, and before long were

back at my apartment, munching our way through KFC's family pack – original recipe, of course.

Two frames enlarged to show a very good likeness of the man's face – the jumper. We discovered that his mouth had been taped shut – most likely duct tape and probably to minimize any attention-calling sound on his way down. It was clearly a man but difficult to estimate his age with his mouth covered and face drawn from the taping. He appeared to have white hair cut as a flat top. That probably signified an older man who was still holding on to that part of his youth.

"I think I can do better with the pair on the roof. Have a whole series of full face frames," he said.

He went to work again. He had been correct. There were two faces that should be easily identified.

"Can you manipulate the jumpers face?"

"Like how?"

"Remove the tape, add seventy-year-old lips, and rotate it so it appears more like a portrait."

"You know I love challenges. I just may be able to do that. It'll take some time. I'm not willing to guarantee the outcome, understand."

"Understood. First, will you print what you've done with the guys on the roof? I have a hunch."

Using the email address on Lem's business card, I sent him a heads up that I was attaching some pictures and would appreciate it if he'd see if he could identify them. Within ten minutes we had a response. He said he was sorry but that he didn't know either one. I thanked him and said I'd be back in touch.

It took Dante the better part of an hour but his finished product looked to be worth it. A man in his late sixties with a severe scare across his forehead and down one cheek. He had not been unable to retrieve the eye color but was betting on brown in that generally Italian neighborhood. Blue eyed Lem Clemens seemed to be a Dutch interloper

I emailed it to Lem. Five minutes later we had an answer. It was more positive but perhaps no more helpful. The photo was of a man who was a known associate of the old crime bosses that had moved on to the water front decades before. The only name he had was Bosco. He

didn't know if it were first, last, or a nickname. Again, I thanked him for his help. I had to wonder how he thought my recent questions could have been related to the story I had presented to him, initially. He hadn't asked. Perhaps I would clear it up for him later.

I had a new challenge for Dante.

"Give us your best take on where the video was shot from – the floor and the angle from the line of fall."

He reran the video numerous times.

"Here's my best take on it. From the good full face, photos of the men up top, I'd say the camera had to be up high – eighth floor or above. The good shot of the jumper's face came when he was just passing the seventh floor. The angle was just slightly down on him. It was definitely located to the north of the drop line – probably four to six windows."

He made a sketch indicating the drop line – the opposite wall, and a line showing the angle that seemed to be necessary to account for the various aspects he had specified.

"Looks like the fifth window in from the north on the ninth floor. That's my best guess, anyway."

"We need that room number. I guess there's only one way to get it. Go there," I said. "We will need to figure a very accurate distance from the north end of the building to that fifth window since we have no idea how the doors in the hall may relate to the windows."

"Okay. A little help here. A starting point, old man."

"Bring up a picture of that wall."

It was soon there for us to view even though distorted since it had been an upward shot from the alley.

"I'm quite certain those little round tables were close to thirty inches in diameter. How many table widths from window to window?"

"Excellent. It will be easier to work from a hard copy, I think."

The printer whirred and we had what we needed. He had been correct. It was far easier.

I handed him a ruler. He drew a vertical line from each side of a table to the top of the picture.

"From the middle of one window to the middle of the next is exactly five table widths. Two and a half feet times five

gives us twelve and a half feet. The space from the first window to the north wall is only half that so that fifth window that we're interested in is – drum roll please – fifty-six feet from the north wall. Assuming the windows are in the middle of each room, it makes the rooms about twelve feet wide, allowing the extra six inches for walls.”

“Lem said there were lots of single room units in that building. Something to keep in mind although I guess that may only become meaningful when we actually eyeball the floor and the position of the doors.”

“So, now?” Dante asked assuming the answer would be yes.

“Well, it's going on five. I'm meeting a woman at seven. We may have time. I'll call her and set the time back to eight to be on the safe side.”

“Big date, huh. I know her?”

“Nope.”

“You gonna let me meet her?”

“Nope. You always tell embarrassing stories about me when I introduce you to the women in my life.”

He shrugged and nodded admitting the truth in my reason.

I placed my call and arranged the time change. Fifteen minutes later we were headed back for Old Town and Lem's Alley. We liked that better than Widow's whatever that Lem had called it. Once there, we found the only access to the floors above first was from the front – the other side – of the building.

“A problem,” Dante said pointing. “A button arrangement – press the button for the apartment, tell them your business, and wait to be let in. Doesn't look promising.”

“I have an idea. I saw it used on a sitcom once.”

I ran my thumb down the entire first row of buttons. One of the apartments answered.

“Delivery,” I said.

The lock clicked and we let ourselves in. The building was divided front and back by halls on each floor. Two elevators occupied a section off the hall to our right. We were soon at the ninth floor and made our way to the far north end. I paced off what I figured was fifty-six feet. The spot matched

up well with a door. It was numbered 905-N. We had the information we come for so turned to leave.

There behind us stood a giant of a man. He seemed quite unhappy to find us there and looked to be the kind that would delight in demonstrating that to us. It may have been man who let us in expecting a delivery.

"Don't know you. What you doing up here?"

I didn't want to show our actual hand.

"We just delivered a package to 903-N," I said.

"903-N is vacant."

Dante saved the day.

"No, dad, not 03, 04."

"Oh, that's right. Sorry, sir."

The man frowned.

"Mrs. Prendergast. Very unfriendly, sort. Surprised she answered the door. You leaving now?"

"Yes, sir," I snapped.

He stepped aside and we hurried on our way. Once in the elevator we began breathing again.

"That dude could have smashed us like ants," Dante said expressing my feeling, although with perhaps more uninhibited emotion than I would have shown.

In the car, Dante locked his door and nodded for me to do the same. It was probably not a bad idea.

"So, your assignment for the evening is to find out who lives in 905-N. You got some idea about how to do that?"

"I'll find a way. So, tell me what color is her hair?"

"The occupant of 905-N?" I said, pretending ignorance to his actual reference.

"No, Doofus. Your date. I need information. Gorgeous? First date? Model? Independently wealthy? Just the basics."

I exaggerated a yawn and remained quiet. I fully understood that in the end he would weasel the information out of me but until then I would enjoy my feeling of fleeting power.

* * *

I had a very nice evening, stayed out too late, and was once again awakened far too early by my young inquisitor pounding at the front door.

I donned my robe and let him in.

“So? All the poop and don’t leave out any details you think I may be too young to hear.”

“We had a very nice evening – dinner, dancing, the end.”

“See, when you do that I don’t know if it’s just to exasperate me or it’s because nothing noteworthy ever happens when you’re with a woman.”

“And I guess we’ll leave it at that. Eggs or cereal?”

“Both. I worked up quite an appetite worrying about you last night.”

“I gave him a look that I hoped conveyed the idea that the topic was closed.”

I scrambled while he cerealed.

“I got a name – George Guccione. Lived there the past 46 years. Has a driver’s license. Attends St. Francis Catholic Church. Plays bocce ball at Latimer Park on Wednesday mornings with other male octogenarians.”

“Nice work. How much of that is for sure true?”

“His name is George Guccione and he has a driver’s license. He’s 82 years old. Have his picture from a newspaper article a few years back. It was about his Bocce Ball playing at the park across from the church. The rest of that just all seemed to fit together.”

“You have the article?”

“Printed out and ready for your perusal.”

He handed me a folder that contained copies of everything he had found.

“While I read, you examine that picture closely and tell me what you missed,” I said.

“What? Okay. Oh. Sure enough. One of your photos. Got your byline and everything. You suppose that’s the connection with you – why he got the video to you instead of the police?”

“I’m thinking so. I remember about him now. A former beat cop. He did lots of undercover work in his days on the force – some commendations, even.”

“Speaking of undercover work brings to mind your date last night.”

He giggled himself silly. I did my best to ignore him –

never an easy task. There weren't many topics that were off the table between us, but my romantic life was one of them.

"Got a phone number for the man?"

"I do. Would you like to know the price I'm asking?"

"I believe I know and the answer is still no comment. I'll give him a call. What time is it, anyway?"

"Eight thirty. I figured I needed to let you sleep in this morning."

"And I appreciate that. Things did get late last night."

"Things?"

"Give me the number."

"It's in the folder."

I placed the call.

"George. This is a voice from your past – Tom Trent. A few years back I did a photo shoot about how you organized the Bocce Ball league for senior citizens. I've been working on a photo piece for the Herald and it's taken me back to your neighborhood – the alley below your apartment in fact, if memory serves me straight. I got to thinking about you so found your number and you're experiencing the rest."

"You can't pull the wool over the eyes of an old cop, Tom. So, you figured out it was me who dropped off the package. Didn't want to have it known I was involved and couldn't be seen around the precinct. I suppose we need to get together."

"I think that would be helpful. You say when and where."

"My place at ten this morning be okay?"

"Fine."

"You should come alone. I've been watching you and the lad in the wheelchair examining the alley. We shouldn't risk getting him involved."

"Alright. I'll play it your way. At ten, then."

I explained the arrangement to Dante. He was disappointed and went on for some moments about how unfair it was but, in the end, came around. I showered, dressed, and left. Dante returned to his apartment.

For some reason, I felt compelled to park several blocks away and walk to 1888. The door to his apartment was ajar when I arrived. I called inside. There was no response. I

edged the door open further and entered – just a step – and repeated my greeting.

“George, are you here? George? It’s Tom.”

He was not there. In the kitchen, his breakfast was still on the table. He had clearly been interrupted. I began taking pictures. There was no sign of a struggle. I called Lieutenant Miller, and gave him the short version. He asked me to stay there. He hadn’t asked for the address. Odd, I thought. He said he’d be along in a few minutes.

While I waited, I emailed a half dozen of the new photos to Dante and asked him to give them a careful going over. It was mostly to keep him included but who knew what he might find.

Miller was soon there.

“Several things you need to know,” he began. “George insisted on continuing his undercover work well after he left the force. He maintained some of his contacts with the mob. I have to assume he got a tip that something was to take place on that rooftop early Sunday morning so had his camera rolling. I’m sure he didn’t know what it was, or he would have let us know so we could intervene.”

“You think he was found out and they came after him?”

“It looks that way. There’s always the chance the mob has somebody inside the precinct. Not a good thought but one we always have to consider. You clearly figured out the window the video had been shot from. The bad guys might have done the same if they somehow got their hands on a copy. As soon as I saw it I figured it was George’s work – knowing where he lived and all. I started out walking that Old Town beat as a rookie.”

I added a few things I thought I knew.

“It appears the man who took the header was associated with the old time mob. If my information is correct he was in his late sixties and was called Bosco.”

“You’ve done some really good work. That could all well be correct. Our lab couldn’t get a detailed enough image of him to identify him.”

I took the picture Dante had reconstructed of the man’s face from my folder and handed it to Miller.

“My god, man. How did you get this?”

“My young sidekick is a computer genius. I’ve been telling you that for years.”

“That’s Bosco, alright. I suppose you got the faces of the men on the roof, as well. My guys got them, also. Neighborhood punks.”

“Wannabe’s sending some kind of message to the old guard?” I asked.

“Looks like it. They’re fools. Be dead before the week’s over.”

“What do you suggest we do about George?”

“If he can, he’ll contact us. He’s a wily old coot. I fear for his life, however.”

“If the video was leaked from the precinct, it would mean it’s most likely the old mob that took George. Why would they want him?”

“They wouldn’t want any other upstarts to think they could be had in that way.”

“In that scenario, the only reason for taking George would be to punish him.”

“That’s my take.”

My phone rang. It was Dante.

“May have something from your pictures. Go to the kitchen and look at the cinnamon toast. Looks to me like there are the numbers 9047 and the letters BSD drawn into it. Can you verify that?”

We moved into the kitchen and I pointed it out to the Lieutenant.

“Any ideas?” I asked him, putting Dante on speaker.

“BSD most likely indicates Broad Street Docks. It’s deep in the old mob’s territory. The number is likely a warehouse address. Let me get some squad cars out there.”

He made the call as we left and rode the elevator together.

“We’ll undoubtedly need photos if you’re up to it, Tom.”

I nodded and rode with him in the squad car. The twenty-minute trip took less than ten. Three cars were there ahead of us and one pulled in behind us. We walked about a block before coming upon the rambling old building. Miller directed us to stay in the shadows as we approached. A black SUV pulled up front from the opposite direction. We waited

quietly. Presently, the two men in the front seat exited the vehicle, opened the rear door and pulled out a third person. It was George.

Miller gave the order and the police descended on the car before the men could draw weapons. George came to sit in the lieutenant's car. I took what shots seemed useful. Not many, really, and remained with George. He revealed what had transpired.

An hour or so after he hung up from my call, he received a tip from one of his informants that they were coming after him. He only had time to leave the toast message before the men forced his door and were upon him. He had known for some time the location of the building out of which the old mob operated and figured that would be his destination. He had figured correctly.

Before it was all over that morning a dozen men were carted off in police vans and charged with an assortment of crimes related to the abduction.

I was impressed with George. Through it all he appeared unruffled, although at one point he did allow the comment, "I just may be getting too old for this sort of tomfoolery."

I couldn't be sure about him but I was quite sure about myself.

As Miller drove us back to George's apartment I had several questions. I put my phone on speaker so Dante could be privy to the conversation.

"Will Bosco's body ever be found?"

"Depends who cleaned things up. If it was the old mob, no. If it was the newbies, then yes. Its whole purpose was to send the message they were reestablishing mob rule in Old Town."

His answer had handled my next question about which group had taken the body. Wait and see if the body showed up.

"Can the new guys be prosecuted for the death, since there is no video evidence that they forced Bosco off the roof?"

"I doubt if the DA will proceed on that unless some further evidence is found. Like I said they probably won't be

around to prosecute anyway.”

With that I felt Dante’s wheels begin to turn from clear across town. I would be interested, if not eager, to hear his thoughts when I got back to the privacy of my car.

“So,” he began. “I figure there are basically only two reasons a non-depressed person would volunteer to take a header off a ten-story building. First, to avoid certain, horrific, torture which was bound to end in death, and second, if it were necessary to save the life of a loved one. We can’t know for sure about the first of those so, let’s look into the second.”

“Okay. Sound thinking. What do you propose?”

“I not only propose, I’ve done preliminary research. It seems Bosco, a nick name, by the way for a long-time mob associate named Tommy Davison, only has one living relative – a thirty-one-year-old daughter who goes by the name of Brenda Davis. She is a flight attendant for a regional commuter airline. I have an apartment address but no phone number. I assume we will go there immediately. I’ll be out front waiting.”

I picked him up and we drove to 7239 Parkway Circle. It was a short, col de sac street just off Airport Road. It was also in a direct line with one of the landing runways and small planes could have just as easily landed on it as the air strip.

“How we gonna play this?” Dante asked.

“You got us into it. I’m counting on you for an approach line.”

“Okay, then. Your Herald press pass badge. You’ll say you’re working on an article about smaller, locally based airlines, and your editor wanted to have it written from the perspective of flight attendants. Ms. Davis was on the list the company gave to the paper.”

“Actually, pretty good.”

“You think I’ve just been passively watching you as you promulgate your subterfuge case after case.”

“Wow. Promulgate and subterfuge in the same sentence. Think that’s ever been done before in the history of the English language?”

We shared that smile and nod thing we always shared when one of us pointed out the absurd to the other. The apartments had the look of a cheap motel – two stories with

entrances from a sidewalk below and a narrow concrete porch above.

“The room number I have is 133,” he said.

With Dante affixed into his chair we headed for the first-floor door. I knocked. A sleepy looking blond opened it – not fully but way too far for safety sake if that had been her intent. I went with Dante’s story line, prefacing it by asking if Ms. Davis was available.

“Not here. Haven’t seen her since she got back on Saturday about noon. She’s my roommate. We often pass in the doorway but we both had most of this weekend off. We were looking forward to doing things together. For roommates, we really don’t see that much of each other. She said he had an errand to run. That was two days ago.”

“No idea where she might be?” I asked.

“Not where. Maybe who with. She’s just started dating a guy named Sandy, short for Santucci – his last name I think. I’m sure they hadn’t set any plans or she wouldn’t have made plans with me, you know?”

I nodded.

“Any idea how we can contact this Sandy?” I asked thinking I was probably pushing my luck.

She left for a moment and returned, producing a business card.

“This is where he works – Banacelli’s Garage. He’s a mechanic, she says. Odd, though. I’ve dated mechanics and they never have clean fingernails. Sandy’s are always clean and manicured. I warned her to be careful. She said she would. That’s about all I can tell you, I guess. If you find her make sure she calls me. I’m worried sick.”

I thanked her and we returned to the car.

“What was really odd about that whole exchange?” Dante asked as he arranged himself into the front passenger seat.

“The first blond I’ve ever known without dark roots?”

Since I had no idea what he was thinking, I had gone for the laugh, which I got.

“Sometimes I think you’re the one with those teen boy hormones you keep referring to.”

I shrugged having wondered, myself, if Dante’s had in

some way infected me.

“She didn’t once ask about who I was or even acknowledge me with a glance.”

“Perhaps, in her concern . . .”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. Got nothing better, but I doubt it.”

The garage was only a few blocks away. It was locked up without the usual, oil stained, ‘Be Back at _ O’clock’ sign in the window. We went around to the back – well, Dante went around to the back and I followed close behind. As was often the case in crime ridden sections of the city, the windows had been replaced with glass blocks for protection against breaking and entering.

“Up there,” he said pointing to such a reconstructed widow.

It was high and small like a bathroom window.

“I can see movement behind it,” he said.

I saw it too – flashes of color moving on the other side of the glass.

“Shall we call out?” Dante asked.

“Not yet. We have no idea if that’s friend or foe or Polly the Parrot seeking her freedom.”

We continued to watch, trying to decide how to proceed.

Presently, Dante pointed again, offering a whispered, “Look there!”

One of the glass blocks seemed to be moving toward us. The cement crumbling from between it and the blocks surrounding it. Within the minute, it had been pushed out from the inside and fell to the ground at Dante’s feet.

A face appeared. It was dirty, terrified looking, and female.

“Ms. Davis? Brenda Davis?” I asked.

“Yes. Oh, please get me out of here. I’m in terrible danger.”

“That’s bound to be probable cause for entry,” Dante said, rolling toward one of two back doors.

I called Lieutenant Miller while Dante removed a tire iron from his backpack and began accosting the padlock. By the time I’d alerted our friend at the precinct, the hasp had

broken loose and he pulled the door open. I entered ahead of him with numerous questions about the tire iron, which would need to wait.

“To the left,” he whispered to me.

I nodded equally as aware of the layout as he. We came upon the restroom. It, too, had been padlocked. I waved Dante toward it. He had been quickly effective against the other one.

A car pulled up out front. I could make it out through the front window. It was not the Lieutenant’s vehicle. I looked down at Dante, who continued to struggle, and then back at the front of the building. The man had a key and was approaching the front door. He inserted the key and opened the door. We were out in the open with no place to hide and no real way of protecting ourselves unless the man was held together with lug nuts.

The man’s cell rang and he returned outside. In unison, Dante and I sighed. The hasp gave way. I pulled the door open with my finger to my lips. The woman understood. I motioned Dante to take the lead to the back door and for Brenda to follow. I was not hanging back by any stretch of the imagination.

We were outside.

“Did you see the man out front?” I asked.

She nodded.

“He’s been holding me captive here since Saturday. Sandy Santucci. I thought he was my friend but it turned out it was just a way of luring me here. He and his friend killed my father.”

We didn’t hear sirens but soon saw Miller’s friendly face come around the side of the building.

“Silent approach. Nice touch, Lieutenant,” Dante said.

“Glad you approve.”

“You get the man out front.”

“Cuffed and awaiting his fate in the squad car. I’ll need something more than your cryptic phone call to proceed.”

Brenda related her story. Saturday noon, Sandy had stopped by and asked her to go get a sandwich with her. She agreed, happy in fact to see a friendly, familiar face after two days of flights with bawdy business men. They had been

seeing each other for two weeks. Instead, he took her to the garage. He took several phone pictures of her holding the Saturday Herald up beside her face, date in evidence. Then he locked her in the bathroom. At about one a.m. according to her watch, he returned and they drove to 1888. He said he was going to let her meet with her father, but if she made a single sound, his friend, listening in on the phone, would kill the man. She obeyed even though she had been estranged from her father for many years. On the roof, she saw him, mouth taped and tied, back against a ventilator pipe. Sandy put a gun to her head. The other one directed her father to jump off the roof or Brenda would be shot on the spot. They untied him. The man who had been with him said, "You have until the count of five. Go."

She said her father blew her a kiss, turned, ran to the edge and jumped without hesitating. She wept, saying she had no idea he still loved her and expressed her own guilt over the terrible feelings she had been harboring about him.

It had been sad in many dimensions. A police woman handled Brenda's transportation. Lieutenant Miller directed one of those short, quick, turns of the head, toward us – the kind universally understood to mean, 'I can't believe you did it again, guys' – well, universal at least in our relationship with Lieutenant Miller.

Back in our – make that, MY – apartment, Dante sat in his chair stroking Pooch, freed momentarily from his rear wheel assembly and settled in contentedly on the boy's lap.

"You happen to get any candid shots of that first flight attendant?" he asked.

"Sorry. Got a good one of the bad guy at the front door."

Dante shrugged.

"So, after all my fantastic help on this case, may I assume you are going to allow me to surf the web all quite unrestricted and privately on your computer?"

"Certainly."

Dante did a double take such that Pooch was startled and offered a series of repetitive yips in my direction.

"That is," I continued, "when I receive a notarized statement from your mother specifically allowing that."

“Sometimes you’re just no fun. Chess, then?”

“How about chess, pizza, and a gallon of pop!”

The boy nodded his approval.

“Now, son, about that tire iron . . .”

Thomas Trent Meets Scarface

By Tom Gnagey

Case #5

**A Thomas Trent: Crime Scene Photographer, short
mystery**

The bullet tore through and through Dante's upper leg leaving a jagged wound on both sides of his left thigh. But, the story gets ahead of itself.

A little over a month ago, while Dante was wheeling his chair home from school, he noticed a black van pulling to the curb half a block ahead of him. Not all that unusual except it had no license plate. It had a sliding side door and only widows in the rear – both covered on the inside with newspaper.

A little girl, five or six, he estimated, was walking alone ahead of him. The Van door opened and a large man emerged, reaching out toward her, clearly prepared to accost the child. Dante, who had been propelling himself through the world in his chair for the previous ten years had, understandably, developed a powerful upper body. As he approached, he disconnected the straps that held his helpless legs in place and clicked open the belt across his waist.

The scene progressed just how he had feared it was going to. The man took hold of her arm and the little girl began screaming and pulling away which indicated to Dante it was not her usual after school pickup. He closed in on them and pulled the girl back out of the way. With his arms he propelled himself toward the man, grabbing him around his

neck in an inescapable hold that both cut off the man's air supply and the flow of blood to his head. They fell to the sidewalk. The girl kept screaming. Dante turned the man over onto his back and secured his arms behind him as he lay there relatively helpless to do more.

Hearing the little girl, several other high school boys ran to assist Dante. The police were called. Dante put himself back in chair – always fiercely independent when it came to his condition – and gave his statement to the officer on the scene.

Back to the present.

Dante rolled into my apartment at nine o'clock hair combed, dressed in a suit and tie and looking prom-date ready.

“Too much, you think he asked sweeping his hand across his torso. Mom says no. Dr. Billy got me the suit. Pretty, nice, huh?”

Quickly calculating the combined intent of his first four staccato comments, I went with: “I think you look great!” It was clearly the correct response and garnered an ear-to-ear grin, as writers often sink to writing when clichés are all that will come to mind. The accuracy, however, could not be questioned.

In light of Dante's role in foiling the abduction and single handedly apprehending the perpetrator, the mayor had selected Dante to receive his 'Kid Hero Award', a quarterly presentation made on the steps of city hall with a medal on a ribbon around the neck and handshakes from a bevy of genuine dignitaries. Dante was both thrilled and embarrassed by the selection. He had given his several Special Olympics Trophies to his younger brother but I had the feeling the new medal would remain in his possession.

I had been asked by the mayor's office to photograph the event. I was always asked, less, I figured, because I was so good at my trade than that I volunteered my services, free of charge. Dante rode with his mother, brother and Dr. Billy (from T T Meets a Pair of Shoes). I arrived a half hour ahead of time to get some background shots – preparation, the gathering crowd and candid of the dignitaries pursuing politics in low tones among themselves. I define crowd in that

instance as three dozen citizens who intended to be there and another dozen or so passers by who would stand gawking, sipping their mid-morning lattes, while wondering what it was all about.

Eventually, everyone was seated, Dante's special people on the front row and he in place in front of the ceremonial curtain, beside the mayor at the top of the low set of cement stairs. The podium had been removed at my suggestion. It had thoughtlessly set up an impossible barrier for Dante.

In dress up situations such as that, he always loosened and hid his seat belt and the straps that held his legs. I could see his hands fidgeting and feel his heart pounding from fifty feet away. When you love a young person, you want to rush in and fix things – make them immediately better or easier. Sometimes the best way to assist is to let the youngster learn he can get through it on his own. That was one of those times.

A mayor's aid appeared on the steps and raised his hand signaling for silence. He retreated and the mayor stood to polite applause. It received the expected politician's raised hands and broad smile.

Before it could run its course, the mayor grasped his lower abdomen and sank to his knees. Blood gushed from his body. In an instant Dante surmised that he had been shot, although no defining sound had been heard. Dante rolled close, the man by then laying spread eagle on his back on the cement. He propelled himself on top of the mayor to protect him from further shots. His own leg began to bleed as a second bullet had been fired. A group of men – security I figured – surrounded the two of them where they lay. They were being attended to.

I took a shot of the scene atop the steps but then turned my camera on the crowd and the building across the street. I needed to capture as many faces as quickly as I could. I saw a momentary glint – a reflection – from the roof of the building which sat opposite city hall. I zoomed in as best I could with lens set-up I had brought for the occasion. Whatever it had been, was immediately gone. It might have been police security for the occasion. I had no idea. Having

taken all the pictures I figured would be useful, I went to where Dante's mother, brother and new friend stood on the top step. The ambulance siren wailed as it pulled in. The EMTs rushed onto the scene. We stood in silence.

That had all taken place yesterday.

"Dante rolled into my apartment at nine o'clock dressed in a Tee shirt and very brief shorts. His upper leg was bandaged where he had been hit very high on his thigh."

"So, what we up to today?" came his opening volley.

"Oh, I don't know. Hang around with the mayor again and see if you can take another bullet."

"Sarcasm?"

"Most definitely. How are you? What was the damage? What's the prognosis? How's your family doing? What girls do you have lined up to come over and change your dressing?"

"Fine. Not much, Good, Okay, Rebecca and Candy."

He had answered my five questions in order.

"Smart Alec," I said then continued. "Most important, of course, how are you doing. Pain?"

"I'll give you a moment to retract that question."

"Oh, yes. You have no feeling in your legs."

I felt bad that my lapse required the fact to be brought up. As I stood there unsure how to get my foot out of my mouth (an image I sure the reader is enjoying) Dante went on.

"That no pain thing seems to have been the sole upside to my condition these past ten years. They have no leads on the shooter. The mayor's office is keeping me updated."

"At your insistence, I assume."

Dante smiled and shrugged.

"I figured we needed some perk from all this."

"As to this morning, then," I said moving the conversation back to his original question, "I have dozens of pictures we need to go through. There may be a lead or two in there about the shootings."

He moved to the table and set up his laptop.

"Let's look at them in sixteen inch, high definition, here instead of on your camera's little screen."

No agreement was needed from me. I handed him the card from my camera. We were soon scrolling through the

photographs. I had already been through them and found nothing I felt was useful. I had managed to get one of the reflection on the roof, but a reflection can't be fingerprinted or run through facial recognition programs. We began with the long shots of the crowd, which, had been significantly larger than those I had covered previously. Standing room only across the back as lots of high school kids had showed up to honor their friend.

Dante spotted something.

"Do you have this dude in a close up?"

"Only way to know is to keep scrolling."

Presently several different views of the 'dude' were located and saved. I immediately saw what Dante had seen and what I had missed, but let him describe it.

"See how he's holding his briefcase up under his arm instead of down at his side by the handle. Odd."

"It may contain something precious and he's merely protecting it," I said.

Dante nodded and enlarged each picture giving them a thorough going over.

"What's wrong with this picture?" he asked putting his finger to the screen.

I leaned down closer.

"Looks like some damage to the end of the briefcase."

"The front end. Let me enlarge it a bit more."

"Oh. I see. Looks like a hole."

"A round hole just about big enough to exit a . . ."

With his hand, he indicated for me to finish his sentence.

". . . bullet, your thinking?"

My tone was that of a question.

"Here's my theory. A hand gun rigged inside so it could be fired from a button or some such thing on the outside. It would necessarily have had a silencer on it since no shot was heard. He's standing there along the right side of the chairs. The way the case is being held it is plenty high to fire over the others' heads at a target on the platform. That explains something I thought I remembered from the moment I landed on the mayor. My head was facing the crowd. There was a – I'm not even sure how to describe it – like a mini-flash or

reflection. Since I didn't feel the bullet enter my leg I can't know if the two things occurred simultaneously. I didn't linger over the image because I knew I had to immediately apply pressure on the Mayor's wound. I lifted myself up enough so I could put the heel of my right hand on his stomach and stop the bleeding. A few moments later an aide tried to pull me off of him. I protested, explaining the need for continuous pressure. Another aide had heard and replaced my hand with his. By then a wall of men in dark suits was surrounding us.

"That was when somebody called out, 'The kid's been hit, too. There, in his upper leg.' I looked down and verified it for myself. An EMT was on it immediately. I'm so lucky it missed the big artery or you'd have to be going through these pics all by yourself."

"Stop that kind of talk."

I shuddered and felt sick to my stomach. It came to me that in all the times he and I had put ourselves in danger, it was during a time when there should have been no danger that he actually got hurt.

"Sorry, Trent. My way of trying to minimize one of the two biggest deals in my life – well, make that three."

He flashed his wonderful smile.

I wouldn't ask about the third. I did have a question, however.

"All we have of the man with the briefcase is a fairly long shot in profile. What can you do to clean it up and make it useful?"

He did the finger twiddling thing made famous by safecrackers in old black and white movies just prior to begin working the dial.

First, he cleared up the image – sharpening it. That really didn't help a whole lot. It could have been a hundred different men.

"Got an idea," he said

"Surprise, surprise," I came back.

It produced a smile but not distract him from what he was about.

"From the profile we have, the basic shape of the nose, lips and ears. We have the length of the face relative to those three features and we have the hairline."

“And the prominent Adam’s apple,” I nodded.

“Good call. Now, I will try to construct a face-on – front view – picture. You can help me select the features from the vast array in my facial reconstruction software.”

“How have you come by all your software? They must be terribly expensive.”

“I know a guy who knows a guy.”

That was going to be all I was going to get.

“Begin with face shape – long and narrow will be a good starting point. Then front view of those long, prominent ears. What do you think?”

He had pulled up a page of likely candidates. We settled on one for the time being and followed a similar procedure for adding the eyes, nose and mouth.

“A chin is always hard to translate from profile to full face. How about one of these?”

He selected one without my input.

I leaned in close.

“I saw that man milling around before things got underway,” I said. “I know I did. Widen his nose at the base just a bit. His eyebrows were bushier. The mouth seems right and you did a good chin. Oh, there was a long scar on his right temple – from about the center of his forehead down toward his ear. It was obvious enough that it stuck in my mind.”

Dante soon had the image doctored. He printed it. When I picked it up to give it my approval I saw it had been captioned: ‘Scarface the Shooter’. Dante was clearly convinced of the validity of his formulation. I maintained some reservations still having the reflection from the rooftop on my mind. It could have been a rifle scope or binoculars.

“I’m going to zap this image to Lieutenant Miller,” I said. “I’ll just ask if it can be identified.”

“Yeah. I do suppose it is too early to arrest him,” Dante said indicating he realized his early enthusiasm may have been at least mildly misplaced.

That accomplished, and the two of us fortified with bacon, eggs, raisin toast and yogurt, we set off to see if we could get access to that roof across the street. The building was three stories high with an elevator that gave us

unrestricted access up to the third floor. There were rows of offices off to both sides of a long, wide hall that ran the full width of the building.

“There should be some way of accessing the roof,” I said, stating the obvious since that was the sole reason we were there.

“That door down there at the east end of the hall, looks promising,” Dante offered, rolling off in its direction.

I followed. It wasn't locked and I pushed it open. It was what we were looking for. One problem – fifteen steps to the top. We had handled such situations before. I went to the top and opened the door, noting to Dante there was no knob on the outside so it would need to be propped open. He tossed me the tire iron he carried in his back pack – L-shaped and a perfect choice. I descended the stairs to the hall where he was already positioned back toward me. Between my pulling on the back of the chair and his pulling the wheels toward him, we found ourselves on the roof in no time.

From the picture I had of the reflection – or perhaps of the gun flash – we located, quite accurately, we agreed, the specific spot in question. At the front of the flat roof was the typical raised brick wall some eighteen inches high. It was capped with a copper sheet bent over front and rear.

“Surprised some metal thief hasn't removed that years ago,” Dante said. “Now what?”

“It's all supposition, of course, but if somebody had been up here yesterday, laying or crouching down so as to not be seen, might he just not have left some fingerprints on the metal?”

“Excellent?”

Dante soon had his printing kit out of his backpack and was opening it on his lapboard.

“Hope there's enough powder left in this bottle. I'll need to refill it when we get back to your apartment.”

Realizing the task was not going to be completed from a wheel chair he opened the bottle and handed it to me. I spread it about with his wide, soft bristled, printing brush.

“You actually got some prints there. I was betting on nothing more than pigeon tracks, myself,” he said.

“So, how does it feel to have been wrong?”

“Interesting, it be my first time, and all. I’ll get back with you on it.”

He handed me the cellophane tape and a piece of dark paper on which to place the printed tape for safe keeping.

“Your backpack is a neverending source of amazement to me. Sandwiches?”

“Not today, but often.”

He smiled. I worked. He chattered on.

“No bullet casings left up here. Nothing at all that seems worthwhile. Aren’t the bad guys supposed to leave telltale, off-brand, cigarette butts or gum wrappers behind?”

It didn’t call for a response.

In all I collected ten good prints. Whoever had been there had placed his full hands on the copper as if to let himself down or help himself get up – fingers on the top surface and thumbs on the back surface. It seemed likely that such perfect prints would have been laid down very recently. It seemed likely that since they were where they were, that they would be associated with the reflection in my photograph. More than that, I had nothing solid to connect it to the shooting.

I took a nice, clear, close-up photo of the prints and emailed them to Miller. If they turned out to be salient to the case I’d drop off the originals.

The trip down the stairs was considerably easier.

“You just balance me from behind. I’ll handle the decent,” Dante said.

It worked perfectly. By eleven we were back in the car.

“You look like you could really use a hot dog,” he said as we pulled out of the parking lot.

Four hot dogs later – one was for me – we were back on the road and soon home. Lieutenant Miller had a hit on the face we had constructed from the profile photo – Jake Wilmot, a not too bright, marginal hood for hire.

“Not too bright probably means he couldn’t have devised the mechanism in the briefcase,” Dante suggested/stated/declared.

“Probably not. We need some sort of motive.”

“I suppose a mayor may make numerous enemies over time,” Dante said. “I suddenly feel the need to pay him a visit

in the hospital.”

We had the name of the hospital but the room number had been kept a secret. Such a small thing as searching a 200-room hospital for one well secreted patient seemed to pose no problem in Dante’s thinking. I had met the mayor on so many photo shoots that he called me by name – Trent, like everybody else. Certainly two such close friends would be allowed to make the visit. (That was presented with sarcastic intent.)

In a half hour, we were inside the reception area. I donned my plastic, ‘Crime Scene Photographer’ badge, held my camera as if at the ready, and we approached the desk.

Dante launched the first salvo.

“I’m the kid who ended up on top of the mayor when he got shot yesterday. I’m here to pay my respects, if that’s allowed.”

“I recognize you from the picture in the paper. Let me make a call. Security is very tight up on five.”

It seemed to be going well. The woman behind the desk had agreed to ask for us, and she had supplied the floor. We waited as we listened to the woman make the request. Much to my surprise – not, of course, to ever optimistic, Dante – we received a positive response.

“A security officer will be right down to show you upstairs.”

She pointed to the elevator.

Five minutes later we were at the door to the mayor’s room being told we could have five minutes. Dante entered first, receiving a broad smile and a thumbs-up from the bedridden mayor. He removed his oxygen mask and beckoned him over to the bed.

“How nice of you to drop by. I expect you are here to tell me one, Kid Hero award is no longer sufficient.”

Dante cocked his head in puzzlement. The mayor proceeded.

“One for saving the little girl and another for saving me.”

“I’m glad to see the ordeal hasn’t dampened your sense of humor, sir. I assure you one is more than sufficient.”

“I’m really doing almost as well as the press releases say I am.”

He chuckled.

“How are you doing, Son. I’m surprised to see you up and around so soon.”

“And that is what it would say in my press release if there were to be one,” Dante countered.

“I’ll see to it.”

“That really isn’t what I intended. Just going for another one of your great chuckles.”

“I’ve had my staff do some research on you two – hello, Trent. It seems you are some sort of super detective team according to my old friend Lieutenant Miller, who, by the way tells me he has no leads whatsoever in this shooting thing.”

Dante saw his opening.

“Well, sir, we believe we have several leads and are passing them on to the Lieutenant. You have any ideas who’d want to do you in – so to speak, no disrespect intended?”

“The lad is a talker, isn’t he?”

The comment had been directed to me. I raised my eyebrows and nodded.

“Politicians make enemies. That goes with the territory. You never know either how personally someone may take something you do or say, or how crazy they may be underneath their skin. Sane people work things out. The less sane do things like this. Short answer to your question, no idea. We’re looking through my recent hate mail. Some of that arrives every day. Your job is not to worry about me. Just get that leg of yours back to normal.” He paused. “I guess it’s my turn to say it – I meant no disrespect by that comment. I admire the courage you displayed yesterday but more than that I admire what I understand is the ever positive, helpful way in which you are coping with your situation. You are an inspiration to me.”

He pointed toward his brief case and an aide seemed to understand. He sat it on the bed beside the mayor and opened it. The mayor took out a small felt covered case and handed it to Dante.

“This is your medal. In the not too distant future we will finish that ceremony but in the mean time I believe you should have it. I’d hang it on you right now but I’m still not able to reach very well.”

The aide looked at me and tapped his watch indicating time was up.

“We will be on our way, Mr. Mayor,” I said. “It’s good to see you in such good spirits.”

Dante, of course, had the final say.

“When you’re better I’ll come by your office and challenge to a game of hoops or bocce ball, whichever you think you may have some slim chance of winning over a young stud like myself.”

“Chess is more my speed.”

“Chess is it will be then, sir. We’ll keep you informed about our progress on the case.”

The mayor looked at me. I shrugged and threw up my hands indicating the boy did what the boy did.

He turned to his aide.

“Give the lad my private number on one of my cards.”

“Sir?” the aide responded.

Don’t Sir with a question mark me. I’m wounded not senile.”

Dante offered his card in exchange. I didn’t even know the boy had a card and wasn’t at all sure I wanted to know what was on it.

Again, we got escorted – all the way to front door. We took it as a positive gesture.

“He seemed nice,” was Dante’s full response to the meeting.

I nodded but supposed, nice, in its cumulative senses, probably did sum up the man.

It was at that moment a shiver rose from the base of my spine to the scalp on my head. Standing beside a black van near the entrance to the parking lot appeared to be our suspected shooter guy with a Scar. Dante paused his forward motion and looked up at me. He had seen him as well.

“I don’t understand that,” he said, as we slowly resumed our way toward my car. “You think he’s going to make another attempt on the mayor while he’s in the hospital?”

“No answer for that, of course. First, let’s get to the relative safety of my car. Then I’ll call the Lieutenant.”

Those two items checked off our list, I started the

engine and pulled out onto the street.

“He kept us in view all the way, Trent,” Dante reported.

“I noticed. He would have recognized you, for sure from the ceremony,” I managed. “Probably more idle curiosity, than anything else.”

We had no sooner entered my apartment than I received a call from Lieutenant Miller.

“Scarface, or however the boy refers to him, was gone by the time the squad car got there – about three minutes after your call to me. You don’t suppose he’s staking out you two for some reason, do you?”

“Have no reason to think that unless he believes I got an incriminating picture.”

“I’ve put word out among our patrol units to bring him in for questioning. So far nobody’s spotted him. I’ll get back to you. Keep your door locked. Have a gun? No, of course you don’t.”

He hung up. Miller was not much for the social niceties of life. His question about staking us out suddenly added an ominous aspect to the case. I wanted to make sure Dante remained safe. The article about him in the paper had listed his address, along with the name of his mother and brother. My whereabouts, however, should not have been so easily available.

“So, why would the Lieutenant think Scarface would be following us? You steal his woman?”

He giggled – some at the humor and some out of nervousness, I assumed. I supposed I had probably made some enemies, also, in my work for the police. However, it had not been Thomas Trent who had been shot at during the ceremony.

It was as if Dante had been reading my mind.

“You’ve probably made some enemies as you’ve assisted the police, you know, but it wasn’t you who got shot at. A really scary idea just popped into my head. What if Scarface was just a bad shot with that gizmo of his, and I was really the target all along. The mayor’s abdomen would have been at about the same level as my chest as he was standing and I was sitting. We were no more than three feet apart.”

“I’m sure you were not the target, son.”

“No, you aren’t. The two of us think too much alike. I know what you’re thinking.”

“So, you do. But why? You been sneaking about with older women behind my back?”

It had seemed humorous in my head but got no such reaction from either of us once it had been launched.

“We have helped put some pretty bad guys away – the two of us working together. That mob thing last month may be having some repercussions.”

“The shooting doesn’t stack up to a mob hit. It’s one shot and out with their hired help. This was far more amateurish. The shooter, whoever he was, had two shots and neither one killed anybody. Amateur, plain and simple.

“I guess we all know who that leaves,” he said.

“The man who tried to abduct the girl. He’s out on bail due the technicality that he had not put the child into his van at the time you attacked him so technically no abduction had occurred. It’s strictly a go nowhere defense, but enough to buy the man a few more months of freedom before his trial.”

“It wasn’t Scarface I attacked that day.”

“Shall we call the Lieutenant and make a bet with him about whose fingerprints those were up on top of that building?”

“The abductor’s? What was his name? Latimore?”

“That’s my studied opinion,” I said.”

So, you’re thinking he’s working for Scarface and the original plan was for him to kill me. Retaliation for what I did. I suddenly don’t like your theories – studied or otherwise.”

Miller still didn’t have the report on the prints. It had been a huge lab day. He said to call later. I told him whose they would be. I couldn’t tell if he was also already there.

Dante rolled over to the front window and pulled back the curtains looking down on the parking lot below.

“Looks like your studied opinion is shared by Miller.”

“What makes you think that?”

“There’s an unmarked police car sitting downstairs.”

“How can you be sure if it’s unmarked?”

“It’s parked facing away from the building and bears a city tag number – they all begin with MV, for municipal vehicle, I have always imagined.”

“How do you know such things? Never mind, you do and that’s what counts.”

I went to the window and saw what he had reported. It wasn’t really to verify it, just to see for myself.

“It’s an odd feeling, right?” he said.

“Odd?”

“Great that we’re being looked after and bad that we have to be looked after.”

I nodded.

“Does this mean we’re prisoners up here?” he asked.

“I’ve received no directive I can’t leave. Have you received such a directive?”

He smiled.

“What you’re saying is so long as we don’t acknowledge the cops presence to Miller, as far as he is concerned, we have no reason not to come and go as usual.”

“More than that.”

“More?”

“You missed the second car at the other end of the lot. Miller expects us to leave and has that second car to tail us.”

“Why not tail us with the first one? I don’t get it.”

I got it but just shrugged my shoulders.

“Oh, my god. Mom and my brother, Jerry. The cops are concerned about them.”

There were both advantages and disadvantages to being brilliant and Dante had just experienced the downside.

“I was just thinking, it’s been sometime since I took your family out for a meal and a movie.”

“It has. What’s been your problem?”

He smiled understanding my intent.

“One of two things is going to happen, you know,” he began

“Explain.”

“Either we will all be safer away from here in a crowded restaurant or we’ll be tailed and I’ll be waylaid in the men’s room.”

“Then tend to your bathroom needs before we leave. You okay to go down and deliver the invitation to your family?”

“Sure. I’ll be in the good guy’s view the whole way. One advantage to the open walkway access to the

apartments.”

“Make the date for one o’clock. Hope we catch them before they eat.”

He left. I called Miller.

“See your guys. I’m going to get Dante and his family out of here for a few hours unless you object. I assume you’ve also made the connection between Scarface, the abductor, and that it was, in fact, an attempt on Dante rather than the Mayor.”

“Same wavelength. Best scenario – one or both of them show up and try to enter one of the apartments and we grab them. Worst, no shows. Either way, everybody’s safe. Let me know before you return.”

Again, no goodbye, no good luck, no talk to you later. Just a hang up.

“I was down at their apartment door at one. Jerry let me in. Can we go to Chuck-E-Cheese, please, please, please, came his folded hands plea?”

“I was thinking the Golden Corral first followed by Chuck’s place.”

He did a series of summersaults across the living room floor. Five minutes later we were in the car and on the street. Predictably, the black car pulled in behind us. I felt better. Dante felt better. The others had no reason to feel anything but hungry.

We managed a ninety-minute glutton fest at the Corral and another hour at the kid’s place. I excused myself to use the restroom. Dante rolled along behind.

“You gonna check in with Miller, right?”

“Right. Is my nonchalance that transparent?”

“Only to me. They don’t have a clue. You’ve seen what a great time they’ve been having. They love to be around you. Hint. Hint. Hint.”

“At least I try for nonchalance.”

It got a grin.

Nothing had happened at the apartment building. I told him we were heading back.

With Dante’s family safe and sound downstairs and Pooch with us in my apartment, we settled in for a think session.

“I feel helpless,” Dante said. “Usually, we’re out after the bad guy. I hate this waiting for him to come to us.”

Miller called. The prints from the rooftop were, indeed, Latimore’s. That indicated nothing illegal, however. On a practical level, it did tend to make the connection we had been pursuing. Probably up there watching his plan transpire. The slugs were from a hand gun not a rifle.

I got a call to cover the aftermath of a convenience store robbery a few blocks from my place. I called Miller. He said to go.

Again, we were in good company from behind. It was going on six. There was at most an hour and a half of sunlight left. I wasn’t sure why I had made that observation. Of course, I was. Darkness would not be our friend that night.

I took lots of shots, inside and out, at the store. It had been trashed in the process of the robbery. Six, well oiled, teenagers had done the deed. The proprietor had been hit over the head with a bottle of wine and suffered a bad gash to his scalp. We spent a half hour there. I could see Dante offering suggestions to the officers. I didn’t want to see their reactions so kept shooting.

When I finished, I went in search of Dante and found him watching the surveillance tape with a female officer.

“This is Officer Emily Alfrey. Officer, this is my friend, Thomas Trent. He’s a crime scene photographer.”

A look passed between the officer and me. We had once dated but both were too wise to mention it in the boy’s presence. I figured she had distracted him from ‘helping’ the other’s by having him go through the tapes with her. I remembered what a nice person she was. I couldn’t remember why we stopped seeing each other.

“You won’t believe this, Trent.”

He turned toward the officer.

“Can we show him the guys I pointed out to you?”

She rewound the tape and I moved in to take a look. What I expected to have been the most unlikely reason for my having been asked to look, proved to be the most likely. Scarface and Latimore entered together buying a supply of junk food and pop. They left a few minutes before the gang arrived.

“It gets better. We’ll stop the tape right . . . there. Get a shot of the screen. I think I’ll be able to get the plate number of the car they got into.”

“I set my camera on the very highest resolution and fired away.”

“That’s a pretty grainy video. Do you really think you can clean it up enough to read it?”

“Would I have made the suggestion if I hadn’t, and if you’ll remember, I left myself some wiggle room?”

He picked up a lapful of Zingers, Twinkies, jerky and assorted other nausea inducing products. The clerk wouldn’t take his money but happily placed them in a bag for him.

As an aside as we left, assuming it to be out of Dante’s earshot, Officer Emily said; “He is certainly all you led me to believe he’d be.”

I left.

In the car, Dante became the inquisitor.

“So, you and the beautiful Emily Alfrey know each other. What’s this about you telling her stuff about me?”

“I declare. You have the hearing of a radar station.”

“Not really a good analogy, but I’ll accept it. Now give.”

I told him the story – short and sweet. He was clearly disappointed. He was always disappointed at my descriptions of my romantic life. That’s how I intended it.

Back in the apartment Dante went to work on the still shots I had taken of the video – the one of the plate on the car out front.

A few minutes later I heard the familiar sigh, which usually indicated disappointment at something less than success.

“That last number is in a shadow. No way I’ll ever be able to retrieve it.”

“You have it all but the last digit?”

“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“Rethink time, young man.”

He looked up at me puzzled.

“Oh, Yeah. I was so into the problem I failed to see the big picture. We got a green Ford with a license plate number, BX-8249blank. I suppose we should get that to Miller.”

“I suppose so.”

“I sent the email.”

Dante rolled to the refrigerator, confiscating a Mountain Dew pausing to see if I wanted something. I declined.

While Dante battled the plastic wrappers on the junk food with his teeth, I looked outside. A third MV plated dark colored car pulled in and parked mid-way between the other two. I figured somebody down there knew something we didn't. I decided not to concern Dante with my finding/theory/supposition.

Fifteen minutes and six Twinkies later – I had been offered one – my phone rang. It was Miller. Out of habit I put it on speaker.

“About that plate number you sent me. There's an abandoned dark green Ford parked in an alley two blocks north of your place. It bares the plate. No idea what it means other than that I can only think they have one reason for being in this neighborhood after dark. Lock your windows and pull your curtains if you have them. I'm sending plain clothes detective Domino up to your apartment.”

Before I could question the wisdom in that, assuming the bad guys had us under surveillance, he hung up.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. I turned on the porch light and peeked through the peep hole. I immediately understood Miller's reference. I opened the door to a uniformed pizza delivery man.

“You ordered a large sausage pizza, I believe. I'm Domino, here in thirty minutes or less.”

It was worth a round of chuckles. Dante, of course, wasn't completely satisfied with the performance.

“They don't make that 30-minute promise anymore, but we'll take it. Please join us.”

He closed and locked the door behind him.

“What's being done to protect my family downstairs?”

“Plain clothes officers front and back. Your folks have not been made aware of the potential problem unless it came from you.”

“No. That's great. Thanks.”

“I have a theory,” I began. It's off the wall, and it's no more than that. Since it's doubtful they would just show up here and try to force their way into this apartment, what other

avenue do they have?”

The two of them looked at each other puzzled. Dante, of course, tried some things.

“A transporter misplaced from the starship Enterprise, a recently discovered worm hole, the air conditioning ducts – which we don’t have, by the way?”

I sat quietly while he rambled on.

“So, I’m dry here. What you got?” he said at last

“I’m going to try something. Tell Lieutenant Miller to keep a close look at the roof of the apartment building across the alley from here.”

“Now, I’m with you,” Dante said, amending it with, “Sort of.”

I cut a rough profile of a man’s head from a sheet of paper and pinned it to the straw section of a small broom. I secured a robe under that around the handle giving it shoulders with a coat hanger. With it in hand but below the window level, I sat myself on the floor under the back window in the kitchen.

During the construction process, Domino relayed my message to Miller. I waited a few more minutes to let the police get into position.

“Turn off the light here in the kitchen.”

Dante obliged. The kitchen was open over a counter into the living room.

“Now, adjust the gooseneck lamp on my desk so it shines on the back window.”

Domino took care of that.

“You two stand aside out of view of the window.”

I raised the broom at the wall and then moved it casually across the window. What I hoped would pass for the silhouette of a man’s whole body profile would be easily seen from across the alley. I turned it and moved it back. I repeated that procedure a number of times. Then, I centered it on the window and left it there.

Not thirty seconds later a bullet came crashing through the window into the broom and ultimately on into the counter beyond. It knocked the broom from my hand. We all waited breathlessly. A few minutes later, Domino’s phone rang. It was Miller on speaker.

“Ingenious. We got them with the smoking gun in hand. More risky than I’d have liked but then I realized long ago I have no influence over the two of you. Everybody okay?”

I leaned into the phone.

“I think my crockpot just gave its life in the service of justice. Other than that, things are fine.”

“Forensics will need that slug.”

“Believe me, they can have it. We’ll send it out with Domino. Thanks for the pizza, by the way.”

“It cost twelve fifty. You can send cash out with the slug.”

Domino left with the slug but without the cash. I’d send a pizza to his office later in the week. Dante suggested his mother make it in the shape of a huge donut. That was worth far more laughter than it deserved.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. We both offered a startle and looked at each other. I looked through the peep hole. All quite unexpectedly, it was the Lieutenant. I opened the door. He stood there with what I assumed was the briefcase Scarface had used in the assassination attempt.

“Come in,” I said making no attempt to disguise my surprise.

Dante raised his hands over his head.

“So, you come to finish the job Scarface botched,” he said able to offer more of a smile than I had.

“The idiots left the brief case in the car, if you can believe that. I thought you’d want to see how closely the device resembles your description of it, young man.”

He walked with it to the table and began his description.

“Two holes in the front, actually, one for the exit of the bullet – as you described – and the second just large enough to thread this black string through.”

He opened it.

“You see the layout just about as you described – a hand gun with a silencer secured in place, barrel opening at the hole and the string run around the back of the handle and tied to the trigger. If the man had actually practiced with the weapon it could have easily been fatal.”

Dante commented.

“I’ve considered that since he was standing at the edge of the crowd like he was, it’s possible he got jostled a bit as he pulled the string.”

“Twice?” Miller said.

“I’ll yield to you on that.”

“By the way, guys,” Miller went on. “The mayor has decided that for the protection of Dante, here, we will leave the story as it was originally – an attempt on the mayor.”

“Translation,” Dante added, “the mayor sees lots of political benefits from playing the role of the victim.”

Miller looked at me.

“The boy may just have a future as a political spin doctor.”

He continued to look at me.

“Well, aren’t you going to snap some pictures of this case? What do I pay you the big money for?”

I snapped. We chuckled. Miller left. Dante (you guessed it) had more to say.

“You notice how often the Lieutenant ends sentences with prepositions?”

“I have.”

“It might be a kindness if we’d point it out to him – help him improve his image.”

“Let’s see, year after year he’s recognized as one of the top law enforcement officers in the state, he has been president of the national Law Enforcement Association, and his water colors sell for a thousand bucks apiece. I believe his image is about as improved as it needs to be.”

“I didn’t know all that. I guess I’ll let it alone.”

He contemplated the new information for less than a minute before his mouth was up and running again.

“You know, Trent. That was a good plan of yours with the broom and all, but it could have been improved on.”

“Why did I not suspect that? What ya got?”

“If you would have opened the window first you wouldn’t have all those broken pieces of glass to clean up.”

“Me? It wasn’t me they were after, Mister Kid Hero. Your mess, you clean it up.”

Thomas Trent Meets the Mysterious Projectile
By Tom Gnagey
Case #6
in the Thomas Trent: Crime Scene Photographer mystery series

The idea had been a guy's afternoon out at the ballpark— just Dante, my fifteen-year-old, wheelchair bound friend and me. There were to be hotdogs and popcorn and peanuts and sodas and snow cones. We would see our minor-league baseball team lose once again to our arch rival, boo the ump, go home early, and be sick. What a wonderful time it would be even if the August temperature was predicted to hit the high nineties.

The tickets had been provided by the Daily Herald, a newspaper there in the city that bought many of my crime photographs and often had photo assignments for me. This was to be one of those – candid shots of all the festivities leading up to game time. It would include tailgating, the arrival of the players, owners, managers, cheerleaders; there would be license plates from far away states and tour busses with folks from foreign lands. I looked forward to every aspect of the assignment. Dante looked forward to every 'aspect' of the cheerleaders. My roots were firmly planted in the practical, Dante's in the hormonal – in both instances pretty much like it should be, I suppose.

As often happens when the two of us are together, plans didn't go as . . . well . . . as planned.

It was still three hours until the ump would call the familiar, "Play Ball". Dante had already frequented the ice

cream truck several times. It was usually 'manned' by Anna, an attractive young lady a few older than Dante. Not that day. He knew the man behind the window, however, and they chatted some. It was Mike, a trainer that volunteered at the Boy's Club where Dante worked out three times a week in lieu of physical therapy at the hospital. The man's father owned the truck and had been a pre-game fixture at the ball park for the past forty years. As a youngster, Mike had spent many an hour working the truck. His father was also absent that day – on a short trip to see his brother, and Anna was at cheerleading camp, he said. Apparently, Mike was left to work it alone so he didn't have much time to talk.

The home team members had been straggling in one and two at a time. That made for a variety of good, well considered, photos.

"There's Bobby Daniels, the manager," Dante said pointing as the potbellied, middle aged man made his way toward the stadium entrance. He was surrounded by reporters.

His path would come close in front of me. I clicked off shots at several angles. He knew me by sight since I had done lots of publicity shoots for the team over the years. He saw me and veered just slightly to approach me, probably more out of the hope to see his face peering back at him from the sports page than to promote any sort of friendly encounter. Few people, other than those obliged to, liked the man.

In that instant, he clutched his chest. An arrow or rod of some kind had come out of nowhere and pierced his body, penetrating a significant number of inches.

"Hit his heart," Dante said.

I knew he was right. The man was probably dead before he hit the ground, as is often reported. I took several pictures of him and then turned my camera back in the direction from which the missile had to have come, hoping to catch something of significance for the police. Only a few folks were milling around in that area. I could easily see all the way to the ice cream truck. Mike, the trainer, had seen the event and was immediately out of the truck, running toward the scene.

Dante had presence of mind enough to dial 911. He

was immediately by the fallen man's side looking things over. He only had a minute before the stadium police were on the scene. They stood helpless, looking around, like the rest of us. Their captain announced through a blow horn that statements would be taken and anybody who thought they had seen something relevant should step forward immediately. Nobody stepped forward. I told them I'd make my pictures available to them, but that I hadn't seen anything out of place either.

The body was removed. The game went on – corporate greed winning over compassionate decorum. I couldn't believe it. 'Win one for Bobby Daniels,' and all that jock-promoted nonsense could be heard murmuring through the crowd. Manager Daniel's primary assistant had been fired the week before, so the batting coach ran the game. Interestingly, in the end, they would win. That made the front-page headline. The manager's death was relegated to a sidebar article – front page, but all quite secondary to the unexpected victory.

Once the hubbub surrounding the murder had died down outside the ball park, Dante and I put our heads together as we so often did when confronted by a mystery. His head had already been working through it all.

"I hope you have a shot of the moment of impact. What's your recollection of the angle of the arrow, or whatever it was? Mine is that it wasn't really straight on but from a very slight downward angle."

I agreed. That was what I had witnessed – it had come from just slightly above. That sight had only been available for a second, however, because Daniels had immediately collapsed to the ground. His legs buckled under him.

"Before we leave I want to get some really wide angle shots," I said.

"And a few from the ramp looking down on the area," Dante added.

It had been a good idea. Fifteen minutes later I had taken the photographs and we were headed back toward the car. Neither of us felt a boy's day out was any longer appropriate.

"At least we miss the traffic this way," he said in a faint

attempt to lighten the moment.

We both realized it hadn't.

I hadn't known the man well. In fact, from what I did know of him I would not have wanted to. He had a reputation as a rude, egotistical, ruthless, fully non-compassionate person, liked by few and hated by many. It was a mystery to me why he continued to hold his position. An overall winning record during his tenure there, I supposed.

Back at my apartment – Dante had checked in with his mother to let her know he was fine before we went on upstairs – he liberated two sodas from the refrigerator and we went into the living room. I took a seat in my recliner and, as he often did, Dante managed himself out of his chair and onto the couch. I had learned early on never to offer help with such activities. As I have said before, he was fiercely independent when it came to taking care of himself.

He had backed his wheelchair in next to him so his backpack would be handy. He positioned his computer on his lap and motioned for me to cough up the digital cards from my cameras. He adjusted the screen so I could also see it from where I sat a few feet from the sofa. He located the picture that had been taken at the moment of impact. It was, in fact, clear and presented the fact of the situation well. By the time I had gotten the next one off, he was on his knees and in the third he was already laying on the pavement.

"It's not as severe an angle as I had remembered," Dante remarked. "Still a slightly downward trajectory wouldn't you say?"

I agreed. The shot had come from slightly higher than straight on.

"Can you go to one of those last wide angle shots? Let's see what the possibilities are – a raised platform or whatever."

We looked it over. Dante spoke what we were both thinking.

"Unless it was like a portable stool or something, I don't think the picture helps us much. The only thing back there is the ice cream truck and to have been on top of it would have set up a much more severe angle."

"Maybe from the back bumper," I said struggling to

present some suggestion.

“Yeah, sure. An archer balancing on the back bumper of the most popular vehicle in the parking lot wouldn’t have drawn any attention.”

I shrugged, meaning, ‘you’re right of course’.

Dante shrugged, meaning, ‘sorry, I came off too strongly, there’.

We each understood.

It certainly appeared that what had to have happened could not have happened. The frustration would soon turn into a fascinating challenge but until then it would require a minimum of one large sausage pizza, several liters of pop, and three orders of dessert thingies from Dominos.

“Several things about the missile,” Dante said.

“What do you mean?”

“I got to him first. The reporters immediately scattered to protect themselves, I suppose. I noticed the back end of the missile was wet – not with blood, more like just plain old water. How could it have been wet in 94 degree, sun drenched August. I used a tissue to guard against leaving or smudging fingerprints and it suddenly got even more ridiculous. It was a metal rod – a very cold metal rod. There was copper bell wire wrapped somewhat haphazardly around the rod some four inches in from the end. I mean the entire four inches at the end of it was wound loosely in the wire. I saw one more thing before I was moved back. The very end of the rod had a pink sticky substance on it.”

“Sticky like what?”

He reached into his shirt pocket.

“Sticky like this. I pilfered a tiny part of it in the tissue I was using.”

He handed me the tissue.

“Gum, I’d say,” was my reaction.

“Probably bubble gum – has great built in adhesive qualities necessary to maintain the bubble as it gets filled with air.”

“Want to offer a suggestion as to a brand?” I asked kidding him.

“Most likely Bazooka Bubble Gum, actually – it has that distinctive pink hue.”

I should have known.

“Did you pass all of those observations on to the police?”

“Of course, the stadium police. They looked at me as if to say, ‘you been out in the sun too long, kid, now scram’. They didn’t give me a chance to see much more.”

“If I recall correctly,” I said, “a rod of that type – just the shaft of an arrow, so to speak – won’t follow a straight line without the feathers at the end to maintain its course. The wire you describe doesn’t seem as though it could function as a stabilizer.”

“It couldn’t. If I hadn’t seen it happen, and if we didn’t have these pictures, I’d be inclined to think somebody got close to him and plunged it into his chest by hand.”

“I see what you mean. That would certainly be a more likely scenario, except that it couldn’t have happened that way,” I said.

“Could it be the bad guy hoped it would look that way – like maybe one of the reporters stabbed him?”

“Could be, but it still doesn’t explain how such a shaft could cross so much space in a straight line without feathers or some kind of stabilizer system,” I pointed out as much to myself as to Dante.

“Maybe that copper wire held the feathers and upon impact they flew away. I’m not serious of course and yet it almost has to be so.”

“I’m sure forensics is struggling with the same problem. They’ll be going over every square inch of the area. If there are feathers they will find them.”

“I got an idea,” Dante said, more enthusiasm suddenly evident than before. “Let’s set up a reconstruction on the computer integrating your several shots into it.”

“Oh, that,” I said suggesting I had no idea what he was talking about.

“I’ll show you. What I’m going for is to retrace that missile back to all its possible sources along the trajectory. It all has to begin with the angle of entry, which that one photo shows just about perfectly. There, let me turn Daniels into a stick figure leaving the shaft. Now we extrapolate the line it had to follow back, say clear to the edge of the parking lot.

Can't be that far if it was shot from a bow. That line goes right through the ice cream truck. So, one would assume it had to have been fired from in front of the truck, right?"

"I follow your logic."

"Next we have to add in the spots where there were people. We can use the first shots you took when you turned your camera away from the murder scene. Again, I'll turn them into stick figures to make them transparent. Now, what do we have?"

"Well, it certainly appears the rod had an unobstructed path between the four-people standing there."

"What we need is the security footage," Dante said.

The same thought had just entered my mind.

"Let me call Lieutenant Miller and see if we can get permission to go out and take a look."

The word from the Lieutenant was not good. The cable from the camera covering that section had been cut – recently and all quite intentionally, apparently.

"So, we are beginning to see a pretty well planned event," Dante said. "A specially designed missile, some unknown means of keeping it on a straight path, an invisible bow from which it was fired, and the inactivation of the security camera."

"That seems to sum it up."

"Get a pencil. I got bell wire here in my backpack. Let's see if I can reconstruct the way the wire was wound around that metal rod; it was aluminum I'm pretty sure."

I produced both the pencil and an idea.

"What about enlarging the picture taken just as the missile penetrated his chest. Can you blow up the end of the rod enough to give us some help with the reconstruction? I was standing within ten feet of him. It's a clear and crisp picture."

"Nice thinking. I'll give it a go, Mate."

The boy's attempted English accent was terrible. Perhaps it was Australian. Either way it was terrible.

He worked for several minutes, nodding from time to time and frowning at others. The boy's feelings were typically not hard to read. He made no attempt to cover them up. Dante was a, 'what you see is what you get', sort of person.

“Okay. It worked pretty well. Take a look.”

“Yes, I see. Almost identical to how you described it. The wire coiled loosely along the final four inches of the shaft. In fact, look there! It appears the one end of wire is threaded through a hole drilled through the shaft as if to fix it in place – keep it from slipping one way or the other.”

“Good catch. And see how loose it is. Not a tight wind at all. It seems to just keep making less and less sense.”

He worked with the wire and pencil and soon had it basically duplicated.

“This one does slip up and down the shaft because it isn’t fastened through a hole. That had to be central to the function.”

“Okay. Time for another tack, I think,” I said. “Let’s think about motive. Perhaps if we get some real-life characters added into the scenario something will make a connection.”

“Like find an archery expert who has vowed to kill the man?”

“Yes, something like that. Where do we start?” I said more thinking out loud than really asking.

“Sports gossip blogs. They’re full of unbelievable stuff – threats, conspiracy theories, outright lies, occasionally even some factual inside information.”

“Sounds like the right place. What about that assistant who was fired a week or so ago? That just could be motive.”

Dante found the name from a team roster posted on the team website – Larry Chidley.

“Father of four. Three times divorced. Been with the team eight years – Daniels had only been here five. It lists other teams he’s been with. Not much personal gossip, really. Seems his second wife tried to run him over with her BMW during the divorce proceedings. He didn’t press charges.”

“Let’s look further,” I suggested.

“Looks like old Bobby was in lots of brawls when he was younger – on and off the field. Once spent thirty days in jail for lambasting an opposing pitcher with a bat. He’s had lots of affairs with other men’s wives. There’s a possibility – or fifty.”

“Anything rumored as being recent?”

He searched several blogs with no luck.

“Hey, here’s an odd post. The wife of Chidley has a rant here – you know rant?”

I nodded.

“Well, she’s really angry. Says her husband was fired because she wouldn’t make nice with Bobby – I assume that means get romantic.”

He looked at me. I nodded.

“Maybe she was out to even the score.”

“It’s the best lead the blogs have given up for us, I suppose.”

“Here’s one more. Rumored that Bobby had it out with somebody trying to talk some players into using steroids – which that guy would supply, I assume. Says Bobby became enraged and chased him off the property. No details given, though. Hard to verify that kind of a post – no names, no dates or times.”

“I’d say it’s worth digging into further. Make a note.”

He started one of our famous yellow pad lists. ‘Steroid Guy’ was his first entry. We had soon added several more: Chidley’s ex-wife; cold, wet, arrow; possible sources of the metal rod; propulsion device; gum; enemies of Daniels. More would undoubtedly be added.

“What you had me add about that propulsion device makes me think. Let me pull up those long shots you took looking back at the ice cream truck. There’s a kid in one of them . . . There, see the red head – maybe eight or nine?”

I nodded even though I was behind him so he couldn’t see it. He isolated the boy in the picture and began enlarging it.

“I see,” I said. “A sling shot.”

“And what’s really odd about it?”

“I see that, too. The rubber is many times longer than I’ve ever seen on a slingshot before.”

He eventually cleaned it up so we had a fairly crisp picture of the boy’s face. There was a marginal chance such a device could have propelled the missile – given the right set up.

“Suppose the kid was just messing around and launched some random rod he’d found and it hit its

unfortunate mark,” Dante said.

“A possibility, I suppose. Let’s build a sequence of the pictures taken just prior to that one. Let’s see if we can track where the boy came from. That one you’ve been working on must be one of the very last shots I took.”

“It was; you’re right about that. Let me put those others up as thumbnails. Look to be six of them. I’ll pull them up one at a time and enlarge them, going backward in time.”

It really had been a good idea. The little boy had emerged from around behind the ice cream truck. He had the sling shot. As the sequence was backed up, we could see him originally moving behind the truck from the other end. At that point he had no slingshot.”

“So, Red found the slingshot back behind the truck. All that happened after the missile had been fired so it wouldn’t have been some random accident caused by the boy.”

“That seems to be correct,” I said. “I suggest we find a toxophilite to consult.”

“Ah, yes! A person with an extreme interest in or expertise in archery,” Dante said as if reading from Mr. Webster’s pages, themselves.

“You actually know that word? I was certain I finally had one that would stump you.”

Had he been wearing glasses, the look I got would have been directed over the top with raised eyebrows. When would I learn?

“On a more productive note,” he went on, “Dr. Billy, my anthropologist friend is something of an expert on the history and use of arrows and hand launched missiles. He wrote the entry for one of the major encyclopedias.”

“See if you can set up an appointment. Sooner the better.”

“I’m on it.”

While he made his call I contacted Lieutenant Miller.

“Are you following the death of Bobby Daniels?”

“My lab is handling the forensics. What are you about to talk me into?”

“Hoping the ice cream truck has been isolated as part of the crime scene.”

“It has been although it’s about to be released. You got

something that says it shouldn't be?"

"Maybe. Can you hold it until morning and meet us there with a print guy?"

"Nine, fits my schedule?"

"That will be fine. Thanks. Have several troubling finds to look into. Need your expertise."

"What you need is my key to the ice cream truck and my presence to get you through the police line, but I can interpret that as a kind of expertise, I suppose."

"In the morning, then."

Dante was already arranging himself back in his chair.

"You look to be ready for a road trip," I said fully aware it had been a meaningless question.

"Yup. Especially if it passes a drive through. Got a severe yen for a strawberry shake."

I understood that was the boy's shorthand and for, 'Strawberry shake, cheeseburger, fries, and a fried pie'. Actually, my stomach had been calling out to me for some time.

Dr. Billy, as we had come to know him, was eager to see us and share whatever expertise he might have.

By the time we reached his apartment, the food was gone, the mustard wiped from our lips, and a series of belches had been delivered that would have made any middle-eastern prince pleased.

"Sorry we're late," Dante offered, 'but Trent here insisted on forcing three pickles on me.'

"Three pickles? That code for something I'm not aware of?"

"Three pickles, surrounded by a burger, cheese, lettuce, tomato and onion –hold the mayo."

It produced the desired reaction. Dante got right down to business. We sat around the kitchen table, clearly their place when they were together there. He took the case folder from his backpack.

"We got a problem here."

He took out the picture of the rod sticking from the man's chest. It could have been set up a bit more discretely, I thought, but Dr. Billy didn't flinch.

"A twenty inch aluminum rod launched somehow

across a distance of maybe twenty yards. Penetrated his chest and heart to a depth of five inches and stopped. You see the problem, I assume.”

“I do. No fletching and no nock.”

“Fletching? Nock?”

“Fletching refers to the flight control feature – most typically three feathers. The nock is the notch at the rear of the shaft into which the bow string fits. It keeps the arrow from slipping off the string as it is pulled back ready for firing.”

“Leaving the lack of a notch aside for the minute, under what circumstances could that rod be propelled accurately enough to accomplish this?”

“Only one, really, but that’s impossible.”

“More, please.”

“Rifles can be outfitted to propel arrow-like missiles having no fletching but the power needed to keep it accurately on course would have driven the shaft all the way through the body and far beyond. It is a conundrum.”

Dante smiled up at me clearly enjoying that ‘his’ friend used such a word in our presence.

“Can you make anything of the wire wrapped around the rear end of the rod?” Dante said. “Here, I have a better close up, and here, I have a mockup of it I made on a pencil.”

He examined both for some time.

“If the wire in any way affected the flight of the shaft it would only work to send it off in a fully unpredictable path. And, I assume it would have done that. It has me puzzled unless it held the fletching in place – like the quills of feathers slid in underneath the wire.”

“But, there was nothing attached when it arrived on target.”

“Then, like I said, it has me puzzled. Sorry.”

“Can you make anything of the small wad of gum on the butt end of the back of the rod?”

“Was it sticky?”

“Yes, mildly sticky, I’d say. I touched it only a few seconds after impact.”

“It could have been a temporary adhesive to hold the end of the shaft steady against whatever surface was used to propel it.”

Dante took out another photo – the one of the slingshot.

“Like this?”

Dr. Billy picked up the picture and examined it for just a few seconds.

“Yes, like that. The problem is that there is no apparent method for establishing – directing – the path the shaft would take. No way to hold the shaft steady to set its flight path.”

“So, are you saying the slingshot could have provided the power but not supplied the proper trajectory?”

“Yes, I suppose that is what I’m saying. It is as if the slingshot may only be part of some larger, more complex device.”

“That pretty well wraps it up, I suppose,” I said.

We continued to make small talk for a few minutes. He had finished his chemo and was feeling very positive about his progress and his newly found energy. He looked better than I had ever known him to look.

We thanked him for his help and left.

In the car, I asked Dante if he had an address on the ex-wife of Chidley who might have had something going with Daniels.

“I do. Don’t remember it. I’ll look it up. Give me a second. I remember her name – Tawny Twain.”

“A mother would actually name a child that?” I asked.

“She’s a model slash wannabe movie star. I assume that’s her stage name.”

He soon had the address and the phone number. It was a quandary whether to call first or not. I chose not. I didn’t want to scare her off before we had an opportunity to speak with her.

She lived in a nice part of the city and in a solid middle class apartment building. I donned my Police Photographer badge. Dante rang her bell – well, her door bell, you understand. It was opened almost immediately. She was indeed a very beautiful woman who clearly knew it. She chucked Dante under his chin. He sighed. I spoke.

“We are assisting in the investigation of the death of Bobby Daniels and understand you may have some important information for us.”

I raised my camera.

“If you don’t want pictures I understand. Just say so.”

She didn’t say so. I assumed she adhered to the old adage that any publicity was good publicity. She invited us in. I introduced us in a more personal way.

I’m Tom Trent and this is my assistant Dante. She invited me to sit. I took a place in a chair across from the couch on which she perched, curling her legs under herself and leaning against the arm. Everything about the pose felt seductive. Poor Dante. He rolled closer than usual to where I sat.

“We need to know who might have wanted Bobby dead,” I began hoping that topic might help clear the sudden overabundance of pheromones from the air.

“Lot’s a people, me included of course, or you wouldn’t be here. We had an on again, off again, affair over the last five years – should the kid be hearing stuff like this?”

“He can handle it.”

I hoped I was right. Like he insisted from time to time, there are some things moms just don’t need to know.

“Word on the web suggests you threatened his life.”

“Which time? Like I said, on again, off again.”

“How did Larry – your ex – feel about it or did he know?”

“Larry’s a dear sweet drag. He knew but he’d never bring it up because he figured it might hurt my feelings. No passion, that man. Loving, devoted, a good provider.”

“Terrible traits for a husband – loving, devoted, provider,” I said.

“Sarcasm, I know. What you’re getting at is would he kill the man over it all. I doubt it. Larry and I split three years ago. I really haven’t spoken to him since. He’s moved on. I’ve moved on. That’s that.”

“Anybody else come to mind?”

“I imagine Bobby’s third wife would take great joy in doing me in, but I doubt if she’d do anything to him. They had three children together – all adults now. That’s bound to leave some kind of a bond, don’t you suppose?”

Dante had been taking notes although for the life of me I couldn’t see what he might have thought was that noteworthy.

I thanked her for her time and took a few pictures. We left.

Back in the car I had to ask.

“Notes? Really?”

He offered me the pad to look at. He had been doing successive squares of 2. He was up to about the fifteenth level.

“I had to do something to keep my mind off her . . . features – her many, her perfect, her wonderfully feminine features. And that perfume!”

“She was a flaunter, wasn’t she?”

“Flaunter. I thought she was going to undress and sit on my lap.”

“Well, I must admit that particular idea did not cross my mind. I assume it will be a satisfying image for you to reflect on for some time, however.”

“Let’s just say I’d rather contemplate it than eat – well, for a short time, at least.”

I dropped Dante off at his apartment and went on upstairs.

The next morning Dante was at my door at seven o’clock. I had left it open, not wanting his continued knocking to bother the neighbors while I was in the shower. He was making French toast when I wandered into the kitchen.

“Smells great.”

“And when has one of my culinary undertakings not smelled great?”

“Well, there was that pan fried sauerkraut, limburger cheese, and onion sandwich.”

“I was seven and still had a few things to learn about such things. You did eat it, as I recall.”

“Oh, yes. What we adults won’t do to bolster the self-esteem of the younger generation.”

“In that case, thank you. I have apparently been well and properly bolstered.”

He had indeed, although how much of that was due to outside influence remained in doubt.

“You do make great French toast.”

“I know. I made extra. Makes fantastic peanut butter sandwiches once it’s cold.”

“I’ll remember that.”

We finished eating and I did up the few dishes while he checked email – his and mine. I’m quite sure I never supplied him with my password but then I suppose ‘crime photographer’ would not be much of a stretch for somebody as adroit as he in all things computer. Heck, it wouldn’t be much of a stretch for ninety-one-year-old Greta Ohlman down in 108. I’ll think about a new one. Perhaps, ‘photogstud’. Now that has possibilities.

We met Lieutenant Miller at the ice cream truck.

“So, what are we looking for?” he began. “Forensics found nothing even worthy of their attention in there.”

“I’m afraid it’s one of those, ‘we’ll know it when we see it’ things,” I said.

“Been there many times. Go for it.”

He opened the door on the back side and we entered. There was a pull-out delivery ramp at the base of the door, which gave Dante easy access. There were two serving windows across the side opposite the door – the side facing the crime scene. A narrow, serving counter hung inside and out from the windows. Several chest-type freezers flanked the door. Uprights sat across the far back end. Open shelves sat beside the window on the south and an open chest pop freezer, small refrigerator, shake machine, and sink to the north. The shelves held candy bars, chips, jerky, gum, and a few souvenirs.

Dante pointed out the bubble gum – Bazooka. For just a moment I think I caught the hint of a smug expression cross his face. He enjoyed being right but would never flaunt it – except, of course with his little brother. His position was that things such as that were a big brother’s sacred duty.

Above the pop chest, just to the left of the big windows, was a smaller window. I assumed its purpose was to let in light when the big, serving, windows were closed over with aluminum panels while the truck was closed. As the wind picked up ahead of the promised thunderstorm, that small window vibrated. We all noticed and were drawn to it immediately. Dante handed me his pocket knife, small blade extended. I slid it in between the pane and the frame. It tumbled out. We all saw that the four screws meant to hold it

in place were missing.

It led me to see two sets of two very small holes, one hole above the other, four inches apart and set about ten inches below the center of the window. There were identical second and third sets six inches apart, below them. I looked them over and indicated for Miller to do the same.

"Freshly drilled," he said knowing he had confirmed my conclusion.

"Is there a toolbox or a junk drawer anywhere in here," I asked looking around.

Dante found a toolbox on the passenger's seat up front. He hoisted it onto his lap and brought it to us. Once opened, he and I knew immediately what had taken place. I removed the three small, U-shaped, mounting brackets, like ones used to fasten a pipe to a wall. One at a time, I placed them over each set of holes. The brackets were perfect matches to all three sets.

"Not screws holes," Dante said. "Holes for toggle anchors. Once through the hole the ends open up making the bolt impossible to pull out."

"And how can you possibly know that?" Miller asked.

In the first place, screws wouldn't have been able to withstand the pressure if the set-up Trent and I have in mind is in fact true. And then there is this."

Dante held up an open pack with several unused toggle bolts left inside. He had also discovered twelve bolts with no expansion toggles on them in the tray at the top of the tool box."

We all understood. The three brackets had been held in place by the twelve toggle bolts – four on each of the three. They had then been removed – unscrewed – necessarily leaving the toggles inside the wall and the bolts bare.

I searched the window opening further, finding what I knew had to be there – two more screw holes heading down into the groove in the aluminum frame into which the window pane fit.

"I've followed everything you've showed me and everything you've said, but I have to tell you I can't for the life of me understand how they relate to the case."

Dante removed the picture of the big slingshot from a

folder and proceeded to explain.

“Picture this with its handle slid down into the three brackets, fully secured in place. With the window removed it provides a perfect place – the only possible angle – from which to launch the missile that killed Manager Daniels. With two screws in place on the lower edge of the window frame the missile could be held in place, gently, to be directed along the desired path.”

“But my forensics guys tell me unless propelled by an extremely powerful blasting charge of some kind, like from a modified rifle, the rod could never have been accurately aimed over a distance such as you are suggesting.”

“I can see you expect us to do all the work,” Dante said smiling up into the Lieutenant’s face.

“We consulted our own arrow specialist and he agrees with your guys,” I said.

“So, that merely confirms we are still missing something,” Dante said, clearly seeing it as a welcomed challenge. “Suppose if I left a buck, I could I could have an Eskimo Pie?”

It had been directed to the Lieutenant who shrugged and nodded. Dante dropped a bill on the counter, wheeled over beside the chest-type freezer by the door and opened the lid in search of the treat. He spent more time with his hands down in the freezer than seemed reasonable. Presently, he hitched his head for us to join him.

“We may have something, here, guys. You aren’t going to believe this but I’m quite sure we’ve solved the ‘how’ of this case. With a little luck, it will also provide the ‘who’.

Miller and I exchanged puzzled looks. Dante again motioned us to his side and began his explanation.

“See here. A dozen plastic molds used to make the Flavored-Ice-On-A-Stick that this truck is famous for. But look here. This mold is significantly different.”

He looked at the lieutenant, tissue in hand.

“May I remove it?”

“Go ahead.”

He picked it up carefully, holding the clear plastic mold so we could examine it.

“Two sections held tightly together by rubber bands.”

He looked back at Miller who nodded, understanding.

“When we remove the bands and the mold separates, see what we have?”

“A mold that looks a lot like the three feathers on the end of an arrow. Ingenious!” Miller said.

“Note this small hole at the top that forms when the mold is closed – just large enough to allow that metal rod to be inserted down inside. Close the mold, add water, slip the metal rod inside and freeze. Immediately prior to use, remove mold. Set into the firing mechanism, aim, and fire. Remove the firing set up and nobody should be the wiser.”

The lieutenant picked up the monologue.

“So that explains why the rod was cold when you first touched it. Even such a short flight through the 95 plus degree heat immediately began melting the ice feathers – if not entirely, enough so they would fall away from the rod and end up as puddles on the pavement. The wire created a rough surface, which held the ice in place so it couldn’t slide off the back during the flight.”

It was the most nearly excited I’d ever seen the Lieutenant. He wasn’t finished.

“I agree, we have the ‘what and how’. Now, we just need the ‘who’.”

“And that, I’m guessing will be a piece of cake at this point,” Dante said

The food reference seemed to remind him that he still had not selected the treat he had already paid for so managed one as Miller asked the requisite question.

“Please, go on – the who.”

“I’m thinking the bad guy left his prints all over this mold. Whoever it is hasn’t been able to get back in here to dispose of it because the police have had the truck cordoned off. There should also be the person’s prints on the brackets left in the tool box and on and around the little window, and on the open packages of toggle bolts, and on the flat toggle ends of those bolts we’ll find inside that wall somewhere below where the brackets had been hung.”

“Are you going to tell me who the bad guy is or are you going to make me wait on forensics?” Miller asked, again almost breaking a smile.

Dante looked up at me. I motioned for him to deliver what we had both felt for some time but hadn't been able to prove.

"Mike, the son of the owner. He was the only other person who had easy access to the truck and, as a physical education major in college, I assume he had to become somewhat proficient in archery. I have come to know him because he's a trainer at the gym I use. I've noticed several of the teen boys he works with have developed muscles way too quickly during the past year. I suspected steroids but had nothing more to go on. It seems to be well known in the Blogosphere that Manager Daniels had a run in with somebody who had been pestering some of his players to begin using the drug. Jock's belong to a very close-knit fraternity and apparently, none of them, Daniels included, chose to divulge the malefactor – that's, 'rat out the bad guy', in cop lingo," he added looking up at the Lieutenant.

That did get a full out smile.

* * *

"I always experience a letdown, after we've solved a case. How about you?" Dante asked, after we were back in my apartment.

"Can't say that I do. Relief, perhaps, satisfaction for sure, but I wouldn't call it letdown."

After a few moments of silence Dante became philosophical.

"I've done a lot of thinking about Tawny the last twenty-four hours."

"I'll just bet you have!"

"No. Not in that way – well, yes in that way, but it's not where I'm trying to go here. I really feel for her, I mean feel sorry for her. All looks and no substance – well that didn't come out quite right, either. She seems to think it's beauty that's important to guys – just beauty, I mean. I'm really not doing very well here. Feel free to jump in any time and help me out?"

"My father was a wise man. He once told me if I spent my life trying to figure out women all I'd ever accomplish in life was being disappointed because I couldn't figure out women."

"I think I get it. Instead of concentrating on the figuring,

just concentrate on their figures.”

I had no idea that was what I had just said, but if it put his concerns to rest, so be it! Sometimes my wisdom simply amazes me!