

THE SERIAL INFLATOR, PART 2
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The phone was ringing in my office. Staring at it like it was a live grenade, the last thing I wanted to do was answer it. When it didn't stop after seven rings, I sighed, scratching an itch behind my cropped ear. "I guess they'll let it ring till next year before giving up," I thought, picking the receiver up and gingerly putting it to my head. "Fang," I said, with less confidence than usual.

"Have you seen today's papers?" Said a nasty voice edged with granite. Reluctantly, my eyes glanced down to the newspaper laying on my desk. On the front lines, a female badger was bloated to the size of a van, a crowd of people gathered around her, several of them turned to the throng and gesturing with angry faces at her predicament. SERIAL INFLATION RAISES ANGER said the headline. "Mr. Trimble....." I began,

"Whatever your about to say, Fang, I don't want to hear it." The chairman of the city council snapped. "You know as well as I do that these incidents are going to get the public on the riot band wagon faster than you can say, 'impeachment', which is exactly what will happen to me if you don't catch this lunatic. And let me tell you, I won't go down alone! Get my drift?"

That tore it. I stood up and snarled into the phone, "Listen you sorry excuse for a brown noser! Detective work isn't done overnight, especially on cases like this. I need time. I can't make evidence appear out of thin air, so get off your high horse and, while your at it, my back!!" What Trimble said next uses language I try to avoid, so I hung up on him.

I hadn't felt that bad since the day I first bungled a case. Groaning and rubbing my forehead, I scanned the paper, looking for anything that might help me to find the criminal that had been dubbed "The Serial Inflator". Unfortunately, the paper didn't tell me anything I didn't know already; Ms. Stella Burnthorn, a witness to the first forced inflation, had been walking home last night when an unknown attacker jumped her from behind and blew her up like a blimp. It looked like it was the same person that did it to another young woman in the park the day before, and so this case had started to be called a serial crime by the media.

I rolled up the paper and chewed on it absent-mindedly. I was pretty sure that all the blame the bigots were trying to put on the people known as "ballooners" was unfounded. No, what I figured was someone was doing it to get the city in an uproar about the harmless, albeit very strange, hobby of inflating a person's body. Most likely it was one of the people who had been shooting their mouth off at the crime scene the evening before. The entire event had been broadcasted over the late news. The usual assortment of rubber-neckers had become the audience to several biased speeches about how the ballooners were a menace to society. "What a crock," was the opinion I shared with my friend Jason, who was staying with me for a while since his neighbors found out he inflated.

Rain pelted of my fedora as I jogged to my car. I had put in a quick phone call to the newspaper that had carried the story and had found the names of the different people that had ranted for the news cameras the night before. Just about everywhere I went the routine went the same way; I explained that I was working on the case. The person would start commending me on wanting to put away a leech on society, then would get defensive the moment I asked where they were on the nights of the attacks. Usually I'd get an answer, even if it was a curt one, but a few times I'd get a door slammed in my face, and one right on my muzzle. I rubbed the sore spot where the frame had connected with my jawbone; I'd marked the guy that did it, a burly red fox, on the top of my list.

After I had finished with the visits, I had gone to the crime scene. The search the police did turned up next to nothing; the one guy who video taped the crime couldn't tell me anything his tape hadn't, and while one other guy saw the attacker get in a jeep to escape he couldn't make out the color or license number. The only piece of evidence was another needle, filed down and sharpened. I had tried to avoid the news crews that were still lurking around, but it seemed that Trimble had leaked my name to the press, doubtlessly to try and show me that he was cracking the whip. Several people had tried to accuse me of not doing my job, to which I gave them the same response I gave Trimble over the phone. I had to duck into a barber shop and escape out the back door to get away from the reporters. Frustrated, I headed home.

"Hey Fang!" The voice of Chen, my panda landlord, cracked through the air as I tried to sneak past his ground floor office. Wearing a pained grimace, I turned back toward him. He had on his usual purple shirt with a loose yellow tie and tan slacks, and was staring at me with eyes narrower than usual. "I didn't get your rent this month and you've been ignoring my calls."

"Oh I'm sorry Chen," I grinned sarcastically, fishing a couple of hundreds out of my pocket, "I haven't been taking many calls at home 'cause somebody keeps leaving me messages in Chinese that sounds vaguely like swearing." Chen gave a snort that sounded somewhat like a laugh as he took my cash. "Oh by the way," he said over his shoulder, "I think you left your vacuum on. I've been hearing some strange sounds from your apartment." I scratched my head. I didn't remember using my vacuum this morning, or this week, to be honest.

I cocked my ear as I came up to my door. Sure enough, a sound like rushing air was coming from behind my door. It took me about five seconds to figure out what it was. Rolling my eyes, I tried to prepare myself for the sight I was about to see as I walked in the door. Sure enough, Jason was doing his inflation exercises. The blue dragon had spread out a beach towel on my living room floor and was laying spread eagle on it. An air tank at his side, Jason's belly was a giant beach ball heaving up and down about six feet off the floor. His toes and fingers were puffed up and rounded, his legs were stretching the spandex of the shorts he was wearing and his orange button up shirt was unbuttoned and exposing his chest, which had puffed up slightly as well. Jason cocked his head at an angle, allowing him to see me holding my mouth shut at the sight of his bloated form. "Hey dude," he said, "what's up?"

I couldn't resist such a perfect shot. "Your belt size?" I snorted before collapsing onto the couch in a fit of laughter. Jason rolled his eyes at my bad joke, but the laughter must have been infectious, since he snickered a few times. I pulled myself together after a minute. "It's a good thing my landlord isn't the sharpest tool in the shed; he thought your inflating was my vacuum running." Jason chuckled, scratching his mammoth gut. "Y'know, you should give this

a spin,” he said, patting his stomach, making it bounce slightly, “It’s totally rad!” I gave Jason a knowing grin. “Believe it or not, I did once.”

That made the blue dragon’s face split into a grin of disbelief. “Dude, you serious?!” I shrugged innocently, “What can I say? I was curious.” Jason shook his head in wonder; I guess he figured me to be the last person to try something outrageous just on a whim. “How big did you get?”

“Oh, I’d say maybe ‘bout as big as you’re now.” I mused. Jason nodded. “Not bad, but no were near as big as you can go, believe me. Well this is cool! Hey, why don’t you grab a tank and give it another whirl?” The idea sounded appealing to me for a minute, but I decided to hold off for a while. “Maybe later,” I said. Jason shrugged his bloated arms. “Sure, no ‘prob. So how’s the case coming?” I poured myself a drink before flopping down on the couch and flicking on the t.v. “Well, I think it’s a safe bet that whoever’s doing this isn’t a balloonier.”

“Thank God,” muttered the blue dragon. “I don’t think I’d blame anyone for being so ticked at us if it turned out that one of our group really was doing all this bogus stuff.” I nodded, understanding completely. “More likely it’s one of those jerks badmouthing them on the news. I knocked on a few doors today, and I might have a lead.”

A knock at my door snapped me to attention. I quietly went to the front door. Jason sat up, or tried to sit up, his belly not letting him do much more than push his shoulders off the floor. I pulled my revolver out of the shoulder holster it hung from on a nail in my coat closet. If it was one of the bigots that followed me, I wanted to be ready for the worst. I clenched my teeth as I put my finger gently on the trigger. I stepped just to one side of the door. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Mike,” came the reply in Janet’s voice. Breathing a sigh of relief, I put my gun behind my back, unbolted the door and let my girlfriend in. “Hey honey,” I said, trying to sound calm. I took her red windbreaker, water gently dripping off of her long brown hair onto it, and hung it in the closet, secretly putting my gun back as well. Janet brushed the rain off of her black shirt, causing a few beads of water to run down her very curvy front, giving me one of her concerned looks. “Man, I’m one lucky dog,” I thought to myself.

“I heard on the news about that second woman.” She said, walking down the hall, “I also saw the follow up they did at the crime scene. I hope they didn’t get to you.” Knowing that someone cared was enough to put a smile on my face. “Well thanks for asking, and don’t worry; they can accuse me all they want, but they can’t make it stick.” Janet gave me one of her looks that made me want to melt. Then, gave me an intelligent glance that brought me back to reality. “Still, your not doing your reputation any good by losing your temper at reporters.” I ruefully nodded.

Janet and I came around the corner into my living room at the same time. Looking over her shoulder, I saw that Jason, who had realized who it was by the sound of her voice, hadn’t bothered to deflate. My girlfriend gave the blue dragon a wide eyed stare. “S’up babe.” Jason grinned. I rubbed the back of my neck and stared at the ceiling in embarrassment; I knew Jason tended to be kind of lax about his manners, but REALLY! Janet continued to stare for about another second, then raised a hand to her mouth, and started giggling. I raised my eyebrows as I watched her go from just giggling to collapsing into a chair with one hand over her eyes, her

shoulders shaking with silent laughter. “Jason!” she said, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, “you’ve.....put on weight.” Another round of giggles followed. “Excuse me, I think I need to freshen up,” she said, stepping towards my bathroom.

The blue dragon grinned sheepishly and massaged his throat, exhaling the air and popping back to his normal shape. I shot him a look that I hoped would convey the message that he’d better behave or I’d make a pair of boots out of his hide. He countered defiantly by crossing his arms and giving me a “you’re not my father” look. I returned with a “don’t try and stare ME down, boy” glare. While this little battle of the attitudes was going on, the door to the bathroom, I’d always meant to tighten the hinges, had accidentally swung open. Janet was leaning over the sink, checking what little make-up she wore in the mirror. I didn’t see her at first, but Jason did. When he caught sight of her outline, his expression could be read a mile away: “Whoa baby!” A quick glance was all it took for me to find out he was oogling MY girlfriend. I decided to forgo the warning glance and simply elbowed him in the side. Well, push came to shove, he grabbed me in a headlock, I pulled him to the floor, and by the time Janet came out of the bathroom, Jason and I were wrestling like two kids.

“Well, I think the maturity level in here had dropped by about ten points,” Janet said, grinning and staring at me with my arms around Jason’s neck in a sleeper hold while he had me by the ears and was trying to flip me over. This time it was my turn to grin sheepishly as we broke apart. “Boys,” Janet sighed as she took a seat. Jason and I looked at each other. “Women,” we said at the same time.

“So, Mike, how’s the case coming?” Janet asked. I filled her in on my suspicions and findings. She agreed with the idea of one of the bigots being behind the attacks, but doubted it was one of the speech makers. “After all, why risk being identified by possible witnesses?” She asked.

“Good point,” I mused, scratching my chin. Standing up, I began to pace. “Okay, let’s see; we know this guy, if it is a guy, must know a lot about air tanks. That much is obvious from the way he’s inflating people with some kind of air gun. Now what kind of jobs would require people to know about air tanks?”

“A balloon vendor?” Jason asked.

“A hospital orderly.” Janet said with conviction.

“Or a scuba diving shop owner.” I sighed, dropping back down on the couch. I shook my head, there were too many possibilities. Then my ears shot up as a thought occurred to me. “Wait a minute, we don’t need to figure out who it is!” Both Jason and Janet looked at me like I had lost my mind. Running into my bedroom, I rummaged around in my bookcase until I found a map of the city. Bringing it out, I spread it out on my coffee table. “You see, the first inflation happened here,” I tapped the city park, near the waterfront, “and the second one happened here,” I traced my finger to the corner where Stella had her unfortunate run-in with the inflator. There was less than a mile between the two. I looked up at Jason and Janet and grinned. “I think this creep is making a common mistake: he’s frequenting a certain area.” I felt like I was on a roll. Grabbing the phone, I dialed the police chief, hoping he hadn’t decided to leave work early. The sound of someone picking up the receiver calmed my worry. “Chief Veldon,” came the deep voice of the elephant that ran the city’s finest.

“Chief this is Mike Fang.”

“Yeah? I’ve been wondering how long it would take you to call us.”

I arched one eyebrow, unsure whether that was just a statement of fact or an insult.

“Chief, I think I can get the guy that’s responsible for the two attacks, but I’m going to need your help.”

“Is that so? Well we’ll see. What do you need?”

“I need the help of an undercover female officer. I think if we try a sting in the area.....”

“Forget it! I’m not wasting a perfectly good officer on a piddling little assault case.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Here I thought I could catch the guy who had performed crimes that had the public in a uproar, and this long-nosed peanut addict wasn’t about to give me what I needed just because it fell under the category of small crimes. “Excuse me?” I said through clenched teeth, trying my best not to cuss out the police chief. “The last time I checked, this thing was making big headlines.”

“I don’t care if it causes the sun to crash into the Earth. The papers can blow this all out of proportion all they want, but that doesn’t make these crimes anything more than assaults, and procedure doesn’t allow for undercover officers to work on.....” I hung up, disgusted. “Dude, what happened?” Jason asked. Rubbing my eyes in pain, I tilted my head back. “Justice has once again been thwarted by Bureaucracy, that’s what.” I slumped my shoulders, defeated. I couldn’t catch this guy if the police wouldn’t let me. “Well,” said Janet, putting on a thoughtful look, “If all you need is a volunteer, I could help.” Did I already say I was a lucky dog? “Janet, are you sure?” I asked, completely surprised. She smiled. “Well if the police won’t lift a finger, who will? Besides, if inflating is as harmless as they say, what’s the worst that can happen?”

The street was like a dark tunnel, with occasional specks of light coming from lampposts along the sidewalk. Janet walked hurriedly, acting as if she was on her way home from work. We had gone over our plan all day; she would wander up and down several streets in the area, acting like she was lost. I’d keep out of sight, but stay in touch with her by a two-way radio she’d keep hidden in her purse along with a tazer. The second the inflator tried to grab her, he’d be cooling his heels in a holding cell. I slipped along in the shadows, keeping an eye on my girlfriend. She wasn’t too hard to miss in her sky blue tank top, tan shorts, and sandals. When she asked me whether that outfit was a good one, I wasn’t sure whether I said yes because I thought it would get the inflator’s attention, or just so I could get to oogle her. So far we’d been out for about two hours, but nothing had happened, save a few passing cars slowed down so the guys inside could whistle at Janet.

“Well I think this street’s a no go,” Janet said, speaking softly so no one would notice she was talking into her purse.

“I think your right,” I sighed. I had been walking on the opposite side of the street from her, dressed in a navy blue short sleeve shirt, dark blue jeans and sneakers to avoid attracting attention. Still, I stayed in the shadows, since I didn’t want the inflator to even know I was there. I crossed quickly at an intersection as Janet turned the corner. Now we were walking down a pitch-black back street, with no light except a few faint glows coming from the windows above us. My night vision kicked in, and so did Janet’s, since she immediately called me. “Mike, I think we’ve got a nibble.”

I shot a look behind her. A hulking figure was moving quietly from storefront to storefront. “Okay sweetie, I think this is it. Get ready.” I reached behind me, pulling a flashlight out of my back pocket and my revolver out from under my belt where I had tucked it under my shirt. Janet stopped, and began rummaging around in her purse like she was looking for something. The figure came up right behind her. It was just about to grab her when I threw a beam of light on it! “FREEZE!” I bellowed, leveling my gun on the inflator. He had a tank strapped to his back, and was crouched down, shielding his face from my view. He had on an orange T-shirt with green shorts. “Drop the hose!” I snarled, starting across the street. Janet had pulled her tazer out and was holding it like a knife, ready if the creep tried anything stupid.

Suddenly, he did. Before either of us knew what he was doing, he grabbed a loose brick on the corner of a building and hurled it at me, knocking both my light and my gun from my hands. I yelped in surprise, and then bolted across the street. I heard the inflator grunt in pain as Janet rammed the tazer into his side, several hundred volts of electricity shocking him. I tackled him and dragged him to the pavement, tearing something off his shirt as I did. He tried to reach up and grab my face. Snarling, I backhanded inflator hard, and cut the back of my hand on something sharp. This surprised me, and that was just what he had been waiting for. He rocked my vision with a fast jab. Janet, seeing my situation, ran up and belted him. I think I said before that Janet was no softy, and the whine the inflator gave out was proof of that. He shoved me to the side and went after her. My vision went red with anger as I got to my feet. I grabbed the creep by the shoulders and slammed him against the side of the building. He grunted, but still found the strength to whip a hand out and smack my head against a lamppost. I collapsed to my knees, trying to collect my vision. The inflator had disappeared down an alley.

“Mike, are you all right?” Janet said, kneeling down beside me. Suddenly, she yelped in surprise. The inflator had come back. I tried to get up, but the creep kicked my back down, my head hitting the sidewalk. Janet was growing bigger and bigger. Her stomach was puffing out fast, her arms were swelling and her feet had popped out of her sandals as she grew. Then my vision went black.

I had a tough time convincing myself to wake up. Finally, my body started listening to my brain and began to stir everything. I had been beaten up worse, but I still hurt. My head had stopped swimming, but I had a nasty headache and several bruises, not to mention the cut on my hand. Suddenly, I remembered the last thing I saw. “JANET!” I gasped, rubbing my eyes to clear them.

My girlfriend was certainly a sight. If it hadn't been for the circumstances, I'd have laughed. She was sitting in the middle of the thankfully empty street. I say sitting, she was actually laying in it. Her stomach was huge and round, like a melon the size of a van; it had to be at least ten feet off the ground. Janet's feet and toes had puffed out, as had her hands and fingers. Her arms and legs were still in their original shape, but looked about three times bigger than normal. Her upper body was perched on top of her huge belly, also slightly inflated and still covered by the tank top she was wearing. Her shorts had also survived, thank goodness. "Mike!" she yelped. "Uh," I stammered, still shocked at the sight of my girlfriend, "I know this sounds lame, but are you all right?" Janet looked around. "Well, besides being puffed up like a blimp, I think so. Are YOU all right? I was afraid that guy had broken your neck!" I rubbed the welt on the back of my skull. "I'm okay, I'll live." Knowing that we were both okay brought some mutual relief to both of us.

"Well," said Janet in a slightly nervous tone, "I don't think we want this on the news, so can you help me get back to normal?"

"Yeah, no problem." I said, causing her to sigh in relief. "All you have to do is open you mouth and rub your throat." Janet tried moving her arms, but she seemed to be having difficulty. "I'm having trouble," she huffed after several attempts to get her hands anywhere near her throat. I bit my lip, knowing how what I would say next would sound. "Uhhh, okay. I might need to climb up and help." My girlfriend stared at me for a second, then looked around and shrugged, with an "oh well" kind of grin, "Okay, but hurry; I don't know how long we'll go unnoticed." I nodded. Taking a breath, I approached my girlfriend's swollen belly. I put one hand up and gently gripped her side. I started to pull up, but when I went for a foothold, I felt her flinch. "Something wrong?" I asked.

"Your shoes are digging into my side," she said.

"Oh, sorry." Quickly, I yanked off my shoes and proceeded to scale Janet's stomach barefoot. I reached the top and threw my leg over her stomach. Janet gave me a sultry glance. "Your getting a kick out of this, aren't you?" I decided not to answer. Some girls can look seductive any time, know what I mean? Finally, I was sitting next to Janet's head. "You know it's strange," she said thoughtfully, "but this is actually kind of fun. Not that I'd want to do it in public like this over and over."

"Yeah, I know what you....." I started before I realized what I was saying. My girlfriend stared at me with raised eyebrows. "Mike, you mean you've ballooned?" I rolled my eyes and shrugged; I couldn't lie to her. "Well.....I was curious.....so just one time." She giggled, causing her bloated belly to shake. "My friends always told me you were nuts." I rubbed the back of my neck self-consciously. Then, instructing Janet to open her mouth and tilt back her head, I stroked her throat. Like flipping a switch, quickly the air began rushing out and soon left us both laying in the street; actually, left her laying in the street and ME laying on top of her. My girlfriend gave me another of her sultry looks. "I'm sorry, am I in your way?" she said coyly, batting her eyelashes in a way that always made me feel sappy.

I helped her to her feet. “Well,” I mused, looking at the torn piece of shirt I still had in my hand, “I think we’ve got a big clue.” On the piece of cloth was a patch in the shape of a square red flag with a white line running diagonally from the upper left corner to the lower right; the international symbol for scuba divers. Divers always have buoys with this flag sticking out of them floating over wherever they’re diving to warn boats “don’t drive over them and stir up the water or hit them with their props”.

“I’ve got another one for you.” Said Janet, slipping her sandals back on. “When that creep ran off, I yelled at him, ‘how long do you think you can get away with this?’ He said ‘I’ve been doing it for five months and haven’t been stopped yet!’” My ears shot up and I went wide-eyed in surprise. Janet nodded, silently agreeing with what I was thinking.

“Wait you can’t go in there!” said the dragon secretary outside of Trimble’s office. I turned and grinned sarcastically at her. “Oh, please, that’s been done to death.” I said before slamming the door open. Arthur Trimble was a politician’s politician. A slim gray wolf of average height and executive-style hair, he could placate the public and suck up to any minority group with the best of them, then drop them like a ton of bricks the moment they became unpopular. He had a reputation for being able to say anything and get away with it scot free.

“Not this time,” I thought, grinning mischievously as I approached Trimble’s desk. The slime was running his mouth on the phone, but stopped the moment he caught sight of me, which was about a second after I yanked the receiver out of his hand and hung it up. “Fang! You’ve got nerve barging in here like you own the.....”

“Save the speeches for the press, Arthur,” I hissed through my teeth. I narrowed my eyes at him, “Your gonna need it.” Trimble blinked once, then regained his composure. Leaning back in his chair, he insolently fumbled in the pocket of his obscenely expensive suit for a cigarette. “Look, you sorry excuse for a junkyard dog, if you’re here to ask for more leeway in the case, forget it. Just say you can’t do your job, and drag your sorry Doberman butt out of here.” I chuckled, leaning on his desk so close I my nose was an inch from his. “I’m not the one who can’t do his job, Art. I’ve just been to the police records hall.” The smug grin dropped from the wolf’s face. “You’ll never guess what I found out.” I snickered, rubbing my nails on my shirt. Trimble gulped. “I found out that this wasn’t the first time a case of forced inflation was reported!” I snapped, slamming my fist into his desk. The wolf was now visibly shaken. He could see his career going down the toilet. “It seems,” I growled, fuming over the fact that he lied to me, “that there were about SIX cases of this kind of crime already. The only reason the police haven’t put two and two together, besides the fact that most of them are pea-brained nitwits, is that the crimes have been spaced out so much, no one’s given them much thought.”

“Now,” I said, coming around the side of Trimble’s desk and putting my hands on the arms of his chair so I was staring down at him, “I’ve had to ask myself, why hasn’t

the case been opened as a serial crime? All the papers are calling it one. Answer: SOMEBODY doesn't want the police to have the authority to pull the manpower necessary to catch this sicko." I slapped my head in feigned amusement, tilting my fedora back in the process, "Hey, wait a minute! Why on Earth would someone NOT want the police to catch a criminal?" As fast as I could, I grabbed Trimble by the lapels of his jacket just as he opened his mouth to give one of his famous 'accusation denial' speeches.

"Because the elections are coming up," I snarled, "And nothing makes a better campaign for mayor than extorting a city to elect you to get rid of a threat to their well being, eh Trimble?" I shoved the slimy bureaucrat back into his chair. He just stared at me in helpless anger. I, meanwhile, was wondering if shooting the selfish dirt bag would have been a misdemeanor or a community service.

"What do you want?" Trimble sighed through clenched teeth. I readjusted my hat. "I want you to give me the locations of the six previous crimes. I can't get at them without authorization, but you knew that didn't you?" The wolf shot me a venomous look as he brought up files on his computer. His printer/fax machine beeped as it spat out a list of locations. I grabbed up the paper, nodded, and stuck it under my trench coat. Just as I reached the door, I shot Trimble one last look. "One other thing." He stared at me, angry but beaten. "My fee?" I said. He nodded. "Double it." His eyes widened in surprise, but seeing that I was serious, he put his head in one hand and nodded. He knew that all I had to do was place one phone call to the press and he'd be done for. On the way back to my car, I waited until I was out of the building before jumping in the air and clicking my heels.

I chewed on a slice of pizza in my office as I went over the evidence. I had set up my map of the city on my desk and, after ordering my lunch, started locating the crime scenes with pins. Trying not to drip tomato sauce on the map, I worked while I ate, and soon was rewarded with a large cluster of pins that looked slightly like a pentagram. They circled around an area of about ten blocks near the coast. I tapped a finger on my desk in thought; there were condos as well as stores in the area, so while I was looking for somebody that was a scuba diver, they didn't have to work at a diving shop.

Then an idea hit me. I sat down at my computer and hooked up to the internet. It was slow that day. "C'mon c'mon," I muttered, drumming my fingers on the keyboard. Finally, I was in. I went to the city's scuba diving registration site. "It's amazing what you can find on the net," I chuckled, pulling up a listing of all the registered divers in the city, myself included. Narrowing down the search by address, I pulled up a list of about five names. One was a priest, he was out, another had moved out of the city but they hadn't updated her address yet, she was out. Then the third name came up. It was a guy named Vincent Yale, a seven and a half foot tall shark that owned a dive shop. I remembered how my hand had been cut when I belted the inflator. Staring at a picture of Vincent, I focused in on his long rows of teeth. "Bull's-eye."

It was about mid-afternoon as I cruised down the boardwalk. It was a bright day, people were out on the beach, surfing, jogging, all the usual spring and summer beach stuff. I whistled the tune from that song "Summer in the city," as I looked for the shop. There were numerous places where someone could get surf boards, sunglasses, swimming goggles, and scuba diving supplies. Finally, I spotted it in between a Jamaican restaurant and a deep sea fishing tackle store; Water Explorer's Trading Post.

A bell rang as I pushed the glass door open. The shop wasn't very neat; stacks of scuba tanks cluttered the corners, piles of BCD's (buoyancy control devices, vests that diver's wear to keep themselves from sinking to the bottom under the weight of their tanks) filled mesh bins, and rows of diving weights on shelves looked ready to fall on your head. Behind the counter in the back was Vincent. Whistling to himself, he was polishing a diving knife. I had called the police, and they said they'd send a car around to pick up Vincent, but wouldn't be there for about a half an hour. I decided to try and trick him into coming with me to the police station; the less I had to fight the hulking tooth machine, the better. I kept an eye on his weapon as I approached him. Fortunately, it looked like he didn't recognize me from last night; it must have been too dark.

"Hey mon!" he said with a Rastafarian accent and a toothy grin that shook my nerves, "Welcome to the Trading Post. What can I do for ya?" I showed him my business card. "Mike Fang, Private Eye. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions?" The shark stared at my card for a minute, looked back up to me, and then shrugged like it didn't make any difference to him. "Sure 'ting, what you need to know?" I decided to act like he wasn't a suspect.

"I'm working on a case I think you might have been a witness to."

"Don't know what your talking about. I haven't seen any crimes lately, 'cept what the taxes are these days."

"Well, that's strange. You see, there was an assault a few nights ago near here, and someone fitting your description was seen nearby. I was just wondering if you saw anything."

Now Vince was starting to get edgy. He stared at me hard. "I'm not sure. Where we talking 'bout?"

I returned the stare. "The city park," I said, hoping he wouldn't figure me for the guy that almost caught him. He scratched his chin. "Hmmm, I don't 'tink so. I was walking there one night, but I don't 'tink I saw anything."

I decided to try and set the hook on this guy. "Well, If you don't mind, I'd like to talk with you about that down at the police station." Oops, too early. Vince suddenly slashed at me with the knife. I ducked it and bashed him in the nose, making him drop the knife. He snarled and dove over the counter, dragging me to the floor. I thrust a knee in his stomach and scrambled to my feet. The shark was up in a second, baring his teeth

at me. “Why’d you do it, Vince?” I growled as we circled like two crabs fighting. “Bunch of loony kooks,” The shark spat at me, “I figured I’d make them look bad, then they’d have to ship outta town.” He swung a fist. I ducked it again, and rammed my fist into his side. “Yeah? Well I’m not that fond of the military, but you don’t see me going around framing marines for crimes.”

Vince started to swing at me again. I ducked, but he was feigning. My vision exploded with stars as a roundhouse punch sent me into the wall. Suddenly, the shark had me by the shoulders, and was opening his mouth, displaying his four rows of razor-sharp teeth. I stared in horror at the gaping maw for about a second, then turned away, getting ready to say goodbye to Janet and my entire life. Then, I spotted one of they air tanks piled in the corner. I snatched it. “If it was good enough for ‘Jaws’.....” I said, and rammed it down Vince’s throat. The shark staggered back, gagging and coughing. I grabbed a second tank and swung it like a club, connecting with his mouth. The shark staggered back a few more steps, but then started coming at me menacingly. I just grinned and pointed down.

Confused, Vince glanced down, and noticed his gut starting to swell. The tank must have sprung a leak, and it was getting bigger, judging by the fact that the shark was blowing up faster and faster. I snickered as his stomach bulged and swelled, stretching his scaly hide like rubber. His tail started to disappear into his bulging body, along with his limbs. Strange, I guess he was one of those people that balloons funny. It looked as if his stomach was swallowing the rest of him as he bloated an inch a second. Finally, the tank must have emptied and Vince stopped growing. His skin was a grey and white ball with two feet, two hands, and part of a tail sticking out. His head had disappeared under two folds of bloated scales. I chuckled and shook my head at the sight of the infamous serial inflator getting a taste of his own medicine. Just then, two cops came in the shop. They stared at me, then at the living beach ball that was Vince. “Just roll him down to the station,” I said, picking my hat up off the floor. Brushing some sand off my coat, I left the cleanup to the cops.

Later that day, I threw my coat and hat in my closet and breathed a sigh of exhaustion. The reporters had been asking me questions for hours, and I felt that I’d been too obliging when I said I’d get to everyone. I walked in the living room, and was greeted by a slap on the back. “Alright dude!” yelled Jason, “You got that loser!” Janet, who was also there, ran up, threw her arms around my neck, and planted a kiss on my cheek. Forget my pay, I’d solve a crime for THAT any time. “Look, it’s on the tube!” Said Jason, pointing at the news. They had been watching the news coverage of the arrest. “..This shark,” said the anchor lizard, “Vincent Yale, was arrested for the numerous assaults that have been plaguing the city.” A video clip of Vince being rolled down the street, surrounded by a jeering thong popped up. Jason burst out laughing at the sight. “The investigation was performed by this Doberman,” A picture of yours truly scrolled onto the screen. “Private detective Michael Fang at a press conference said that his success was partly on the support of his friends and of the city authorities. Arthur Trimble, the head of the city council that hired Mr. Fang, wasn’t available for comment.”

Janet looked at me in surprise. I gave her a sly grin. "My little way of rubbing Trimble's nose in it." She grinned and shook her head.

"Well this calls for a celebration!" said Jason, pulling out one of his tanks. He looked my way with a mischievous grin. "You gonna join in?" I put on a thoughtful expression. Janet raised her eyebrows at me. "Well, I've been thinking about that. And I've decided that I'll do it about as much as I drink; every now and again, and at celebrations." I threw a quick look in my fridge. "And wouldn't you know it, I'm out of booze." Jason tossed me a tank. I started to pull off my shoes and put on a T-shirt when Janet snaked her arm under mine from behind me and took a hold of the tank. "You know," she giggled coyly, "The more I see it, the more this looks like fun. Maybe I'll give it a try."