

WHIZ TANNER
and the
Uncommitted
Crime

A Tanner-Dent Mystery

Fred Rexroad

Cover Design/Illustration: Alexander T. Lee



Awesome Quest Mysteries

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To:

Dad

For showing me it's possible to pursue my dreams

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**TANNER-DENT DETECTIVE
AGENCY**

“We solve crimes, mysteries, problems...”

Wilson “Whiz” Tanner
Chief Investigator

www.TannerDent.com



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“We solve crimes, mysteries, problems...”

Joseph “Joey” Dent
Director, Field Operations

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CHAPTER 1

The Break-in

“**S**omething is quite wrong!” Whiz yelled to me.

He stared toward Hudson Street when he should’ve had his mind on the game. And I, as the second half of the Tanner-Dent Detective Agency, wasn’t the only one around to hear his yell. We were in the middle of a soccer match.

Thorny Rose yelled back. “Of course, something’s wrong! You just missed an easy pass. Get your head back in the game, Whiz! We’re lucky Terry was backing you up.”

It was a nice springtime Saturday and we were playing in the big field in front of the Public Works building. My dad, Tom Dent, and his workers mowed the field yesterday for the first time this year so it was in perfect condition for playing. Terry Mulligan was on our side and saved the ball from going out of bounds,

but that didn't help much when one of our players wasn't paying attention. Whiz missed an easy goal opportunity. It wasn't his first miss of the day.

"Oh, leave him alone," called Chuck Boyles. "If he wants to help our side it's okay by us."

Whiz wasn't listening to any of this and nobody seemed to catch on to the concern in his voice. Jill Turnberry—one half of the Jack and Jill twins, but don't call them that—was closest to me and the two of us looked at where Whiz was staring. We followed his gaze over to Mr. Pyle's house at the end of Hudson Street as a loud screeching noise caught everyone's attention. The whole gang turned toward Hudson in time to see a black SUV pull out of Mr. Pyle's driveway. It chirped its tires as it headed down the street.

"That does look suspicious," Jill said. "Ya think Whiz is right?"

Before I could answer that Whiz was always right—almost—he started running toward Mr. Pyle's house. The rest of us followed. Now, Whiz isn't the fastest kid in school but nobody passed him on the way. Whatever was happening, we didn't want to get there before he did. He ran up on the carport and stopped in front of the side door to the house. The screen door was closed, but the main door wasn't.

"Mr. Pyle?" Whiz called through the opened door. No answer.

"His car's not here," Chuck announced. "Look, the carport's empty."

Whiz tried to see as much of the inside as he could through the door opening. I turned my attention to the carport. At the Tanner-Dent Detective Agency we often split up the investigative tasks like that.

There was no car, as Chuck observed, but the carport was far from empty—there was actually not much room for a car. A lawnmower sat in one corner and the wall had other yard tools piled against it. The side away from the house had several boards, held up by fifty-five-gallon drums, forming a makeshift workbench with parts from an outboard motor, maybe a winch, pieces of several skateboards—which Mr. Pyle gives away when they're finished—and a toaster oven scattered all over it. He was a tinkerer.

“The house appears empty,” Whiz declared. But I think we knew that already.

And to emphasize the point, Jill called out, “Mr. Pyle’s coming down the street.”

The kids took off running back to the soccer pitch leaving me and Whiz in the carport as Mr. Pyle pulled into the driveway. I’m sure we looked guilty of something, but Mr. Pyle was a nice man so I wasn’t too concerned.

He got out of his car. It was a slow process since he used his hands to help swing his bad leg out of the car—he’s had a bad leg ever since I’ve known him and even uses a cane sometimes—also, he was kinda big for his small compact car. He limped up to us, slowly. He must’ve been sizing us up and trying to figure out why two kids were in his carport.

“Joey, Whiz.” He was friends with our parents so he knew us. “Can I help you with something?”

“Mr. Pyle,” Whiz began as Mr. Pyle got closer. “We just witnessed a breaking and entering of your house. A suspect driving a black, full-sized—”

“Inside. Quickly.” He checked down the street and pointed to his carport door. “We don’t want to draw attention.”

I didn't really know what I was expecting Mr. Pyle to do, but it wasn't that. As he held the door and motioned us inside, he looked up and down the street, then stepped in and closed the door.

"Sir," Whiz continued. "We observed a black Chevrolet Suburban with dark tinted windows. Just a few minutes ago, the driver exited your—"

"You were mistaken, son." He examined the lock on his door as he spoke and wrinkled his forehead and squinted his eyes into a look that sure didn't match the relaxed tone of his voice.

"No, sir, Mr. Pyle," I added. "We saw a guy leave your house in a hurry and take off. He screeched the tires as he left."

"Well, if you saw that, it's best you forget it."

"I didn't actually see him in your house, but Whiz did. That caused him to miss a couple of—"

"Sir, breaking into your house is a crime," Whiz cut me off, but Mr. Pyle cut him off twice in a row, so I guess it was his turn to do the cutting. "Any crime should be reported to the local authorities."

Mr. Pyle turned to glance around the kitchen and then headed into the living room. Whiz followed without missing a beat, even though he didn't invite us to join him. I hesitated. My gaze shifted between the now-shut carport door and the living room. We had obviously seen something strange and Mr. Pyle was telling us it didn't happen. He was hiding something. Maybe he was part of a gang and we stumbled onto a robbery by a rival gang and he couldn't tell the police because what they took was already stolen. Or, we saw his own gang delivering stolen property and now he had to get rid of us! And I thought Mr. Pyle was such a nice man—my thoughts ran wild.

I looked around for an escape route or protective weapon. Out the window, I saw the other kids playing soccer—a safe distance away. I could run out of the house and save myself. There’s no way Mr. Pyle could catch me with that limp of his—unless it was a decoy, a fake limp to throw us off. But Mr. Pyle had Whiz trapped in the other room—deep inside his hideout. I had to help. Reluctantly, I went into the living room. And there was Whiz ... handing Mr. Pyle a business card.



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“That’s mighty nice of you, Whiz, but as you can see, nothing seems to have been disturbed. What you probably saw was someone looking for me. He knocked on my side door, maybe opened the door and called for me. When I didn’t answer, he left—simple as that.” He took the card, but his gaze was not on it.

Mr. Pyle’s gaze focused beyond the card at something on his coffee table—something that caused his face to go blank. The only thing on the table was a small object my mom—or Whiz—would call a tchotchke. It was a carving of a right hand about eight inches tall. The hand was life-sized and the fingers had carvings that looked like rings and maybe some strange writing. The wood was nearly black, almost the color of

Mr. Pyle's own hands, and on one side the open hand was flat—it reminded me of a bookend, but there was only one of them.

Whatever it was, Mr. Pyle seemed startled that it was there, and if it was possible, the expression he was trying to hide became even more worried looking—maybe, even with fear. His whole body seemed to stiffen and he looked around the room as if he lost something. His eyes stopped on the mantle and then moved back and forth between the hand carving and the fireplace mantle—and us. Whiz's eyes went back and forth between Mr. Pyle and the mantle—they both were thinking deeply. I was just thinking that there was still a game going on outside.

Mr. Pyle picked up the carving, which appeared to be heavy. He glanced quickly at me and Whiz. I thought he was going to put the carving back down on the coffee table, but he didn't.

“Oh ... I guess I forgot to put this back after I dusted the mantle.” He placed it in the center of the mantle between a couple of other strange objects. “These are souvenirs from my travels around the world. I've been just about everywhere. I did a lot of traveling for my work before I retired.” He seemed to relax a little as he spoke, but he still looked as though something bothered him—something big.

“May I ask where you procured this particular souvenir?” Whiz asked.

Mr. Pyle paused for a moment and then replied. “I found this about twenty years ago in a small curio shop in ... the town of Leiden, in the Netherlands. A few years before I retired.”

“This does not look to be of Dutch origin,” observed Whiz.

I didn't know how Whiz knew these things, but come to think of it, everything I'd seen that someone told me was Dutch, was blue and white, and usually had a windmill ... or a little boy sticking his finger in a hole in a wall. This thing had fingers, but they weren't stuck in anything. Mr. Pyle added a slight drop of his jaw to the narrowed-eyed expression that came back to his face. I guess he didn't know how Whiz knew that either.

"You've got a sharp eye. It was originally from South Africa. The Dutch have had a long history with African colonies—though not quite what England and France had."

"There must be an interesting backstory to that little hand sculpture," said Whiz.

"Oh, they all have interesting stories. This one, for instance ..." He picked up a metal boxy object and turned it over in his hands, but his attention wandered back to the sculpture he'd placed on the mantle. "Actually, I'm a little busy right now. If you boys will excuse me, I have a phone call to make. Perhaps we could discuss my artifacts at another time."

He nodded toward the door and I took that as our cue to leave. I pulled on Whiz's arm to get him to come along—he didn't seem to take the hint but he still followed me. We said goodbye and headed out. I ran to the backyard, toward the soccer field. Whiz halted in the carport and looked around. Something caught his eye, but he soon joined me. Once we were away from the house, Whiz grabbed my arm to stop me.

"Mr. Pyle is lying, Agent K."

Uh oh. Whenever Agent M—that's Whiz—used my Agency Code Name, it meant he saw a mystery suitable for the Tanner-Dent Detective Agency. A new case had just begun.

End Chapter ONE

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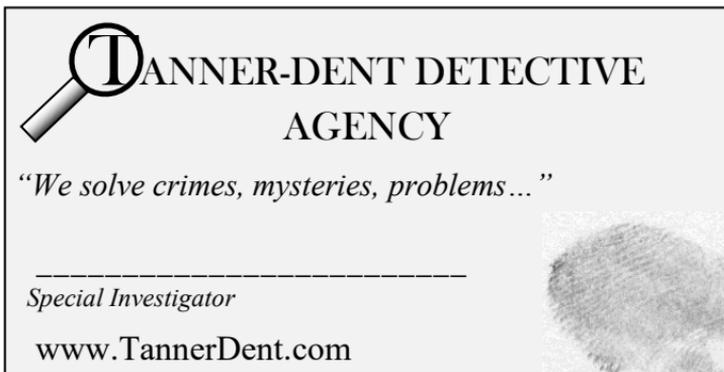
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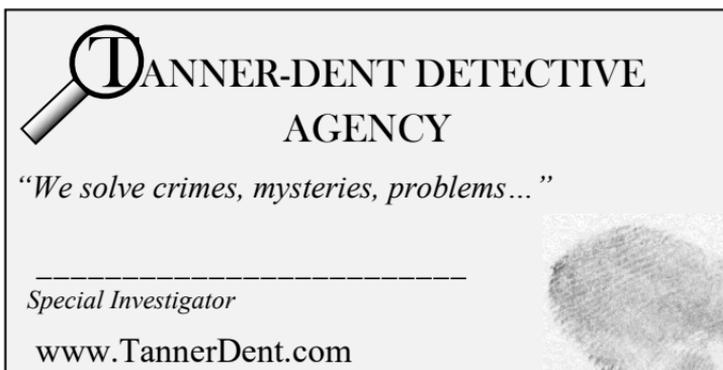


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