

# Four Billion to One

By : Algonquinprod

There's a new face of criminal investigation on the scene, personified in the charming, intelligent and obscenely wealthy Connor Phelps. When you have all recorded information at the tip of your fingertips, what chance does the average criminal have? Approximately...four billion to one.

Published on  
**Booksie**

[booksie.com/Algonquinprod](http://booksie.com/Algonquinprod)

Copyright © Algonquinprod, 2015  
**Publish your writing on Booksie.com.**

# Four Billion to One

## FOUR BILLION TO ONE

By Tony Sportiello

Another dreary Monday morning in Manhattan; the sort of rainy, dark day that makes you wonder why you were still in Manhattan when you could be anywhere else. New York is a terrific city; a great place to be if you have the money to enjoy it. The shows, the museums, the restaurants are all ideal for those good people making six figures or more. Since I was short of that number by a couple of zeroes, it was a challenge.

I walked into my waiting room and saw the usual assortment of dirty faces, dirty hands and dirty clothes, all looking up to me as if I could help. I smiled good morning as best I could and made my way to the front desk. Gloria, my actress slash receptionist, was drinking her Starbucks chocolate foam double latte and shaking her head at me.

"Oh, we've got a winner today," she said under her breath. "Three missing husbands, two repossessed cars, a stolen lottery ticket and the guy in the corner claims to be the rightful owner of the missing Hilton fortune."

"I didn't know the Hilton fortune was missing."

"It's not. Which might make the case a bit harder." Gloria sighed as she handed me their names on a scrap piece of paper. "By the way, I have an audition at three o'clock."

"What for this time?" I asked.

"The Lion King," she said. "If I'm lucky, I get to play a zebra."

My mind immediately went to how a zebra would look if they had a size 42 inch chest but I shook it off and glanced at the first name on the list.

"Mrs. Romano?" I called out. I watched as two women slowly made their way out of the chairs. One of them, the younger one, looked strong and stoic, in her early thirties, with dark raven hair. Very serious. One could imagine her being quite the beauty if she would only smile. The other was of similar type, dark hair and robust, but older. She looked like she'd been crying for the better part of a week. I led them back to my office, a small rectangle with yellowish wallpaper just big enough to fit me, my desk, a couple of chairs, a tall filing cabinet and a liquor closet. I gestured for them to sit down and tell me their story.

Lilly Romano was the younger one and started speaking, clearly and in an even voice. She'd met an older man and gotten married at a young age. They had three children in the span of a dozen

years. Then suddenly last week in the middle of the night the father up and disappears, taking nothing but his wallet, his checkbook, not leaving a note. In her mind he was the victim of foul play; a kidnapping, or possibly worse. I had another theory. In my mind he was the latest in a long line of deadbeat dads who found the responsibilities of raising a family in the big city more work than he counted on. So he split. This is rarely what my clients wanted to hear.

“Mrs. Romano,” I began, “I will be happy to make some inquiries and look into this for you. But I feel obligated to tell you I don’t have much hope. I know it’s difficult, but I think you need to consider that your husband is not coming back and how best you can get on with your life, for the children’s sake. Now, I have some forms I can help you fill out.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. “Do you think he is dead?”

“No, I’m not saying he’s dead. But I also don’t believe he is coming home.”

“You’re wrong,” the other one said sharply.

“And you are!?”

“I am Diego’s sister. He would not do that. Not to his wife, not to his children. He loved them. Let me show you pictures.”

I watched as she pulled out a small wallet sized picture book and put it on my desk. It was full of photos of the family. The children looked to be happy enough. If the pictures were current the oldest girl could not be more than twelve. The youngest around six or seven. The father looked considerably older than Mrs. Romano, but still very vital for a man his age and in good health. The pictures showed a happy, content family. Having been in the business for fifteen years now, however, I knew that pictures can lie.

“Look, I know how you both feel, and I’ll be happy to make inquiries, but really! I never got any further than that.”

A tremendous roar came from my waiting room, a combination of loud yelling and somewhat hysterical crying. I quickly moved to the door and opened it. What had been a full waiting room was now occupied by only Gloria and a tall, thin, well dressed man wearing an Armani suit, a pair of Italian loafers, a gold watch worth more than my car and a huge smile. Gloria was putting on her coat and thanking him profusely.

“I’ll see you in a few hours,” she called to me as she ran out the door. “Thank you!”

“What the hell!?”

“Forgive me,” the man said. I watched in amazement as he strode past me to Lilly Romano. He whispered some sentences in her ear, handed her what looked to be money, and escorted both women past me and out the office door. Mrs. Romano looked confused. She spoke softly to her sister in law and showed her the money. They looked at the man as if he were crazy but then looked back at the money. Lilly Romano nodded, just once. He waved merrily to her and locked the door behind her.

“That’s better,” he said.

“Who the hell are you and what do you think you’re doing? Where did Mrs. Romano go? Where did all my clients go?”

“All reasonable questions. Simply put, I told them that we needed some alone time and that they could all come back tomorrow. To make up for the inconvenience I gave them each a thousand dollars. Apparently, that was the right sum.”

The man walked into my office and sat behind my desk, making himself quite at home. He was about six foot two, early forties, premature grey hair, looked to be in excellent shape.

“Well, that’s terrific for them,” I said. “But the question still remains. Who the hell are you?”

“The name is Connor. Connor Phelps. Perhaps you’ve heard of me?”

“Connor Phelps, the millionaire?” I asked.

He shook his head good naturedly. “Jack, a little lesson in arithmetic. A million seconds is just under twelve days. A billion seconds is just over thirty-two years. I am a billionaire.”

Connor Phelps. Of course, I’d heard of him. The Phelps family was one of the most affluent and influential names in New York history over the past century. Their fortune began in plastics and manufacturing automobiles but as the years evolved so did they, always staying on the forefront of new technology. The last thing I read about them was a few months back in the Sunday section of the Times, how they were re-inventing digital technology.

Of course, now that I knew who he was, that made it even more bewildering as to what he was doing in my office.

He saw the look of confusion on my face and smiled. “Jack, relax. I’m going to tell you all about it. Have a seat. Or better yet, pour us a drink if you have some. Scotch for me, please.”

“It’s nine a.m.,” I reminded him.

“Here in New York, yes,” he said. “But if you just flew in from Switzerland, as I have, it’s just after 3 p.m. Granted, that’s still a little early, but I can take it if you can.”

I went to the liquor closet and poured us both a glass of Dewars. The last time I’d had Scotch in the morning was, well, not that long ago, sadly enough, but given the circumstances I thought it made sense. I handed him his glass. We both took a long drink.

“So, what shall it be?” Connor asked. “Your questions, or my answers?”

“My questions,” I said.

“Excellent. I do like an inquisitive man. Proceed.”

“You’re obviously not here because you need my help,” I said.

“Technically, that’s a statement, not a question, but you’re right. Thankfully, I am not currently in the position of requiring the aid of a private investigator.”

â And if you were, I doubt seriously you would choose me.â

â No offense, I hope,â he smiled.

â None at all,â I answered. â So youâ re here for another reason. What is it?â

â Itâ s very simple. Iâ m dying.â

Iâ m not sure what I was expecting Connor Phelps to say, but it wasnâ t that. The look on my face must have registered shock. He burst out laughing.

â Well, donâ t look so sad,â he said. â Iâ m not dying anytime soon, God willing. But eventually, at some point, I am going to die.â

â Okay,â I said. â And youâ re just now coming to this realization?â

He sat up. â Believe it or not, yes. You have to understand, we Phelpsâ are, by and large, a shallow lot. Weâ ve had everything handed to us from the time we could walk, taught from early on that the only value in life was the kind you could spend. Mind you, in the grander scheme of things weâ re monumentally important. We build cities, create jobs, support the arts, all that stuff. Hell, compared to others in our tax bracket weâ re downright philanthropic. But we do all this from afar. We never get our hands dirty, do anything to help individuals. So there I was, sitting on a yacht in the middle of the Mediterranean, drinking a bottle of 1997 Salon Blanc de Blancs Le Mesnil-surâ Oger champagne, staring up at the stars and I suddenly had an epiphany. From out of absolutely nowhere, I realized something. Do you know what that was, Jack?â

â That some champagnes have absurdly long names?â

â I realized that I would never be remembered. That everything I was doing was eventually going to be for naught. Fifty years, a hundred years, a thousand yearsâ .what difference does it make? What difference does any of it make? Whatever we build, whatever we create, time will eventually destroy. I realize this is common knowledge to most people but for me, it sort of came as a jolt. At that moment I decided my life was going to change.â

â And somehow that led you here?â

He grinned and took another sip. â In a way, yes. I mean, what I decided was I was going to start helping people. Individual people. People with faces I could see, hands I could touch, faces I could remember. People who needed my help. I want to be a private investigator. Help those who canâ t help themselves, use the resources at my disposal to touch lives. That way, when I die, perhaps Iâ ll have something more to remember than a couple of profit sheets.â

I took another sip of the scotch. I decided that drinking at 9 a.m. really wasnâ t that much different from drinking at 9 p.m., so long as you had someone to drink with.

â Why donâ t you just give them money?â I asked. â The people you want to help. Thatâ s the traditional way itâ s done, isnâ t it?â

Connor sighed. â Because, as cliché as it sounds, itâ s true. Money does not buy happiness.â

“ I have an empty waiting room which says otherwise.”

He scoffed and tossed his hand. “ That. That is temporary. A band aid, at most. They’ll be back. Take my word for it.”

“ You still haven’t said why me specifically,” I pointed out.

“ Well, one has to start somewhere. Why not you? Besides, your office is right around the corner from our main headquarters. One thing you should know about me, Jack. Deep down, I am a lazy man.”

“ Noted. Although for the record, I don’t believe you. But let’s move on. Why you? Why do I need you?”

Connor looked surprised. “ Because I’m enormously wealthy, of course.”

“ And don’t think that’s not a huge point in your favor. But while I’m every bit as greedy as the next guy, what I don’t need is to babysit a spoiled rich kid while he pretends to be Sherlock Holmes. I’m not going to lie, I like the money aspect of this, but what else do you bring to the table?”

Connor sat for a moment, thinking. He nodded his head. “ Stand up,” he said.

I stood. He rose from the chair and walked around me, inspecting me from head to toe.

“ You’re thirty eight years old,” he said, finally. “ You have a gym membership but you don’t use it more than twice a month. You were once married, but now you’re not. You’re not divorced, she passed away. My condolences. You have two brothers and a sister, same as I do. You have a cat. You don’t own a car, probably don’t even have a driver’s license. Live in Brooklyn, in an apartment, on an upper floor with no elevator. You have no interest in sleeping with your incredibly busty receptionist, although she certainly has a strong romantic attachment to you. But since your last affair with a receptionist ended badly, you have no intention of going through THAT again. I don’t blame you. You play chess, and you’re not bad. You like Scotch, obviously, but you prefer vodka martinis. You buy your shoes at Payless, your socks at K Mart, your pants at Jack’s, but for some reason you splurge on your shirts. The one you’re wearing was bought on sale from Italsuit, somewhere around \$49, which is a great price. Have I missed anything?”

I stood there in shock. “ You did not get all that just by looking at me.”

He burst out laughing. “ Of course, not! I knew it all before I stepped in your office. But that’s what I bring to the table. Information. The strongest weapon in any arsenal. Access to any information at the drop of a hat. Credit card receipts, loan applications, driver’s licenses, arrest records, school transcripts!..I have a thousand employees at my disposal, from all over the world, including the smartest people on the planet. We figure out what we need, they give it to us. Immediately. Tell me another agency that can do that, at any price.”

I had to admit, Connor Phelps was a very persuasive man. He continued.

“ Now, as to our financial arrangement. You, of course, will keep all the fees that come in, I will cover all expenses. I had toyed with the idea of paying you a phenomenal sum of money for the

privilege of working side by side with you, but of course, I realized you would never accept it.

"I wouldn't? That doesn't sound like me. Why wouldn't I?"

His eyes actually twinkled. "Well, because then you would be my employee, and this isn't about employer/employee, this is about partnership. Equals. You want to be able to tell me to go to hell if I deserve it, and you can't very well do that if you're on my payroll. In this capacity, you're the master, I'm the student. But don't worry, there will be plenty of perks that will act as compensation."

The impulse to test his theory was strong but I refrained. Deep down I knew he was right.

"So where do we start?" he asked, finishing his scotch. "That woman who was just in here, she seemed like a good candidate. Attractive, even beautiful if you subtract the black outfit, but somewhat distraught. Wedding ring still on, I assume it had to do with the husband?"

"You assume correctly, except for the part about her being a good candidate," I said, lifting her sheet. "I'll dig around but odds are all I'll come up with is a man who got bored with being a husband and father and left for greener pastures. It happens all the time."

Connor picked up her small photo book and went through it, his eyes narrowing. "You've seen these pictures?"

"I've seen them."

"The man in these photos wouldn't leave these kids, not voluntarily."

I shrugged. "People are not always what they seem."

"Well, yes, I know, but look at him and look at her. He's at least twenty years older than she is. And look at this picture on the beach. You take away the puffy eyes, the shawl, the unkempt hair, she's a downright knock out. I could maybe see her leaving him, but I can't see him leaving her."

"It's not always about looks," I explained. "You don't know what goes on behind closed doors."

"I see your point," he said. "Still, this doesn't smell right. I'll tell you what, let's make this our first test case, see how we like working with each other."

"What, you want me to drop everything I have for this?"

Connor looked out at the empty waiting room. "All tied up now, are you?"

"Hey, that's your fault. And yes, I do have other cases, my life did not begin when Connor Phelps walked into my life."

"Didn't it?" he smiled. "Come on. Indulge me. Where does Mrs. Lilly Romano reside?"

“ Brooklyn,” I answered. “ East Flatbush, to be specific. The best way to get there is the number 2 train, and then a bus or cab.”

Connor stood and fairly sprinted towards the door. “ Well, yes, we could do that, or we could simply jump in the limo parked across the street. I’ll have the driver program the address into her gps. I’ll meet you outside.”

I went to the window and looked at the long, black limousine sitting outside. I could get used to perks, I decided.

## CHAPTER TWO

The driver turned out to be a stunning Spanish girl in her early twenties named Rosa, wearing a white shirt, black pants and a thin tie that shouldn’t have looked as sexy as it did. She smiled at me and opened the back door. I got in and sat across from a giant of a man with a thick neck and arms the size of small tree trunks, reading the New York Post. He nodded pleasantly at me. Connor Phelps was already working on his iPhone, typing in the information on our client.

“ How ya doing?” I asked the giant as the car pulled away from Lexington Avenue.

“ Could be better,” he shrugged. “ Damn Giants cost me ten g’s this weekend. Can’t believe they lost to the Jaguars.”

“ Life is full of disappointments,” I said. He grunted and went back to his paper.

“ Who is that?” I whispered to Connor.

He looked up, confused. “ Hmmm? Oh. That’s just Max. Max is my bodyguard.”

“ You need a bodyguard?”

“ My dear boy, I am worth more than four billion dollars. Of course, I have a bodyguard. Max comes to me courtesy the CIA, for whom he performed numerous tasks in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait.”

“ But not Brooklyn,” I said.

Connor laughed. “ Good point. Perhaps we should call for backup, Max.”

“ I think we can handle it,” Max responded, turning to the sports section of the Post.

The trip to East Flatbush started slow, with traffic backed up on the FDR. Rosa was aggressive, but not reckless, changing lanes far less often than most cabbies would and never going above the speed limit. Meanwhile, Connor had his team forward us just about everything we needed to know about the missing Diego Romano.

“ James Louie Peter Romano,” Connor read off. “ More commonly known as Diego. Age 52. Born in Juncos, Puerto Rico. Father passed away when he was six, his mother came to New York to live with her sister shortly thereafter. Good student, but nothing spectacular. Two years at a



community college. Became a mechanic. Owns a small shop now. Married Lilly Sanchez. She was 19, he was 39. They have three children. Currently residing in East Flatbush.â

He sat back and pressed a button on the left side of the seat. A bottle of vodka and two glasses came up from below. He poured one for himself and stared out the window, thinking.

â Thatâ s it?â I said. â All the information in the world at the tip of your fingertips and thatâ s what you come up with? I could have gotten that with one phone call to the local police department.â

Connor smiled and took a quick drink. He lifted his Ipod again. â Forgive me. Diego Peter Romano, born in Cartagena, Spain, September 12th, 1961, at three twenty-two in the morning. Son of Arturo and Magdalena Romano. Social security number 149-23-2206. Blood type 0. Shoe size 11 and a half, waist 40 inches, length of trousers 42. Brown hair, hazel eyes. Arrived in New York, April 11th, 1980, four fifteen in the afternoon. The day was sunny. Studied at New York University. Number of times hospitalized, three; once for tonsils, once for an appendectomy, once for a broken leg experienced when hiking Franconia Ridge, located in Lincoln, New Hampshire. His closest friend was Alexander Mijoto, who married and moved to Los Angeles in 1993. Favorite sports team â the Knicks. Favorite color â red. Favorite book â The Sun Also Rises, the Spanish translation. Loves boxing, especially the heavyweights. Allergic to shellfish. He has one sister, named Sarah, age 42, living a few doors down from him. The rest of the family is still in Spain. Had a tattoo on his back with the name Marisol, the name of his first sexual encounter. His first job was as a house painter but he had to quit because he experienced acute acrophobia. Became a mechanic on June 22nd, 1982, under the apprenticeship of one Harvey Peterson of Petersonâ s Body Shop, located on 1352 Elm Street in Newark, New Jersey. Thatâ s since been converted into a movie theater. Drank Miller Lite as a rule, Corona on occasion, but tequila is his real beverage of choice. Owns pet snakes. Amateur magician.â

He looked up at me. â We can go on if you like.â

â No, thatâ s ok.â

â You see, Jack, the problem is not the accumulation of information,â Connor said. â Itâ s knowing what to do with it once you have it. Separating the wheat from the chaff, as it were. The first compact disc was invented in 1979 but the materials needed to create it existed long before that. It just took someone with patience to put it all together. Thatâ s whatâ s needed here. Now if you donâ t mind I have a great deal to go through before we speak with the family. Feel free to engage Max in a discussion on the local sports headlines, youâ d be amazed as to how much knowledge he has in that area.â

I could feel Max smile behind his Post. He folded the paper and placed it beside him. â So. How about that Mets bullpen?â he asked.

It took us exactly forty three minutes to get to the Romano home in East Flatbush. It was a two story house in a row of similar two story houses, with a bit of yard up front. It was painted red and white. The door was a bright yellow and had a sign over it which read â Bienvenidos a todos los que entran.â Welcome to all who enter.

There was no room on the street to park a full size limousine, so Connor told Rosa to circle around for a bit while he, Max and I stepped out on to the curb. Connor was still studying his Iphone. Finally, he closed it and put it in his pocket. He stared at the house for a few seconds, then looked at the houses to the left and right of it. He put his foot on the grass of the front yard and pressed in slightly, leaving an indentation. He nodded.

â Well, one thing is for sure,â he said. â Diego Romano did not leave his wife and kids voluntarily.â

â How the hell do you get that?â I asked. â By putting a toe on the lawn?â

He smiled at me in that annoyingly condescending manner and gestured towards the house. We made our way to the front door while Max stayed behind. His body was still but his eyes were searching.

I knocked on the door. It was open by a dark haired woman in her mid forties. A look of hope quickly turned to one of suspicion when she saw who we were.

â Yes?â she asked sharply.

â My name is Jack Tanner,â I said. â You came to see me this morning.â

â Youâ re the detective person?â

â I am,â I said. â And this is myâ !,partnerâ !.Connor Phelps.â

She opened the door to let us in. â I remember you,â she said to Connor. â Youâ re the crazy one with the money.â

â Thatâ s me,â he answered pleasantly.

â I am Diegoâ s sister, Sarah. Lilly is upstairs, sheâ ll be down in a moment.â

Sarah led us into the living room. It was nicely decorated in a warm, Spanish style. It featured a burgundy rug on the floor with a comfortable sofa and several colorful chairs. There were glass cabinets filled with assorted pictures of what I presumed were generations of family. She was dressed in a dark button down blouse, a straight yellow skirt and heels. She asked us to sit on the sofa.

â You must understand this,â she said, sitting across from us, her dark eyes penetrating. â Diego would never leave his family. He would not commit suicide, he would not cheat on his wife, he loved them all passionately.â

â When was the last time you saw your brother?â Connor asked.

â Monday,â she answered. â The day before he disappeared. I came over for dinner, as I do every Monday night.â

â How did he seem? Was he bothered by anything?â

Sarah thought for a second, and shook her head. â He was perfectly normal. We talked about the kidâ s school, how their classes went. We talked about my work, and his work. Nothing

abnormal. We talked a little about the boxing match that night, someone from our home town would be fighting in Las Vegas for the title, so that was exciting.â

â So he never appeared agitated?â Connor asked.

Sarah sighed. â Just once. But he was not agitated, simply disappointed.â

â Why was that?â

She stood up, wringing her hands. â It has nothing to do with his disappearance. Itâ s a common fight we have, itâ s been going on forever. Heâ s worried because I am not yet married. He keeps pressuring me to date one of the men who works for him, insisting I should go out to dinner with him. I finally told him that was never going to happen. He was upset but it was nothing major. He just wants me to be happy.â

â Your brother doesnâ t know youâ re a lesbian?â Connor asked calmly.

She stared at him in shock. Her face turned bright red and for just a second I thought she was going to throw something at us.

â Relax,â Connor said softly. â Itâ s none of our business. Itâ s also none of your brotherâ s business. Weâ re just here to gather information.â

Sarah looked quickly to make sure we were alone. â How did you know that?â

â Itâ s not important,â Connor replied. â But I presume Diego did not know.â

â No one knows,â Sarah said. â It is not done in our culture. You think we live in a modern age, in a modern city, but ours is still a very judgmental family. Heâ l.they would not understand. My parents would disown me.â

â Do they know about Diegoâ s disappearance?â I asked, eager to bypass the whole lesbian tangent.

â We finally had to tell them,â Sarah said. â Itâ s been almost a week now. We could not keep it secret forever.â

We heard multiple footsteps on the stairs. Three children appeared, obviously siblings. The oldest was a girl, with long dark hair down to her waist. She appeared to be around twelve. Her look was sullen and a bit defiant. Clinging to her was a boy, a few years younger. His eyes were red and swollen and he stayed very close to his sister. The youngest appeared to be about six. She had big black eyes and bright smile, obviously oblivious to what was going on around her.

â Who are you?â the eldest demanded.

â Mind your manners, Elysa.â Sarah said sharply. â This is a bad time for everyone, but that is no reason for rudeness.â

â Youâ re not my mother,â Elysa answered and from the tone you knew this was a conversation theyâ ve been having for a while. Sarah shook her head and stepped away.

“Are you the police?” the girl asked. Her brother held tightly to her hand, looking down at the floor.

“Not exactly,” I said softly. “But we’re here to help.”

“My father did not commit suicide. And he didn’t run away. I know that’s what you think, it’s what everyone thinks. That’s all they talk about in school. They leave notes on my locker. They whisper behind my back. But he didn’t. My father would never do that. He loved us.”

Tears formed in the girl’s eyes and her voice faltered. The boy sniffled. Suddenly, the six year old sprang forward and threw herself on the couch next to Connor. She smiled up at him.

“You’re nice,” she said to him. “You have a nice face.”

Connor sat back, surprised. She put her small hand on his face and stroked his chin.

“Does this have anything to do with the man and the suitcase?” she asked.

Connor’s eyes narrowed. “What man and the suitcase, sweetheart?”

“The night Daddy went away. There was a man carrying a suitcase. I saw him from my window.”

“Really?” Connor asked. “What time was this?”

“It was late. Everyone else was asleep. The moon was out. He had on a funny hat.”

“That’s enough, Maria.” Lilly Romano was standing in the doorway, wearing the same black dress she had on at the office. “These men have to talk to Mommy. Please go upstairs to your rooms until we’re finished.”

All three children turned from us and went back up the stairs. Maria stopped at the top and waved good-bye to Connor.

“My apologies, gentlemen,” Lilly Romano said, coming into the room. “Maria has told that story a half dozen times now. Sometimes the man is big, sometimes he is small, sometimes he has a hat, sometimes he doesn’t. You know how children are. Sarah, have you asked them if anyone wanted coffee or tea?”

“No,” Sarah answered. “I didn’t know how long they would be staying.”

“Please don’t trouble yourselves. We’re fine,” Connor said.

Lilly studied Connor for a few moments. Even dressed all in black, when she had her hair down and loose she was an extraordinarily attractive woman. “You’re the man in the office. The one who gave me the money.”

Connor nodded.

“Did you come to get the money back?” It wasn’t asked as an accusation, simply as a point of information. Connor smiled.

“The money is yours. At the time I needed to speak with Mr. Tanner alone. But your case intrigued me. Intrigued us. We were wondering if you could tell us what happened.”

“The facts are very simple,” Lilly began. “Last Monday night everything seemed perfectly normal. Diego kissed the children good night around ten o’clock. We sat watching television until eleven thirty. That’s when I went to bed. I woke the next morning and discovered that my husband was gone. He’d never come to bed that night. There was no note, no phone call. I was surprised, but not alarmed. I thought perhaps he fell asleep on the sofa, as he sometimes does, and then went out in the morning for some coffee. As the morning went on, however, I realized that something was wrong. I called his office, I called his parents, I called his friends. No one had heard from him. That’s when I called the police.”

“Was this your usual routine?” I asked.

“Not really,” she answered. “Usually I was the one who stayed up late while Diego went to bed around eleven. He has to be up by six. But he was taking the next day off to be at a parent’s teacher conference for Elysa.”

“Was anything else missing?”

Lilly Romano hesitated and then nodded. “An old suitcase. And some clothes.”

I glanced quickly at Connor, but not quickly enough. The wife saw it.

“I know what you suspect. What the police suspect. He took his wallet, his credit cards, some clothes. Obviously, he went off with another woman.”

Sarah Romano shook her head vigorously. “The hell with their suspicions! He would never ever do that. My brother loved his family.”

Lilly raised her hand and Sarah stopped. “Sarah is right. The man I knew would not desert us.”

I sighed. “Mrs. Romano, please don’t be offended, but I need to ask. To your knowledge, has your husband ever cheated on you?”

“To my knowledge, no.”

“Was there any woman outside of you and your sister that he spent any time with? A neighbor, a colleague?”

“No one.”

“Did you ever fight? Have an argument?”

“What couple doesn’t argue?” Sarah asked from her corner.

â Yes, of course we had some disagreements,â Lilly answered. â In twelve years of marriage such things are bound to happen. But never anything violent. He never hit me.â

â Did he seem nervous about anything? Agitated? Something at work maybe?â

Lilly Romano shrugged her shoulders. â Nothing that I know of. Diego did not always discuss what happened at the office. He never wanted me or the children to worry.â

â Was there something to worry about?â Connor asked. â Your husbandâ s businessâ !.what was it again?â

â Diego was a mechanic. He owned a small shop a few miles from the house.â

â Successful?â

â We were not wealthy, if thatâ s what you mean,â Lilly Romano said evenly. â But there was always money for food, rent and clothes. Diego never believed in wasting money on frivolous things, and so we managed to save.â

Connor nodded and wrote something on a pad. I could see it from where I was sitting. Far be it from me to question the mind of a billionaire, but it sure looked like an elaborate series of doodles. He smiled up at her.

â The day of your husbandâ s disappearance. Monday. Did you feel as if there was anything at all unusual about the day? I mean, in general.â

She looked at him, confused. He tried again.

â What I mean is, sometimes people have sort of premonitions that something bad is going to happen. My mother used to swear by it. Did you feel nervous about anything? Anxious?â

She shook her head. â So far as I can remember, it was a perfectly ordinary day.â

I cleared my throat loudly. â Again, my apologies, Mrs. Romano. But I have to ask. Was your husband insured?â

â Are you referring to life insurance?â she asked.

â I was.â

â We both had very modest life insurance policies, less than one hundred thousand dollars. It was one of the points on which we disagreed. As you know, my husband is considerably older than me. I was concerned that if he passed unexpectedly it would be difficult for me to maintain our life style, simple as it is. Now it looks as if those concerns were valid.â

â Who is Jonathan Parker?â Connor asked from out of the blue. I noticed Sarah give a quick start.

â Jonathan is the man I was talking about,â Sarah said, coming closer to us. â The one Diego wanted me to go out with. Who told you about him?â

Lilly put her hand on her sister in law's arm to calm her. Jonathan works for Diego. We've known him for years. They're very good friends. I am sure he has nothing to do with this.

Even so, we'd like to talk with him, Connor said.

He lives a few doors down. But you'll have to go to him. He's sustained some sort of back injury and has trouble getting about.

Is he an old man? Connor asked.

No, he just turned thirty-five. He and Diego play racquet ball at the gym. I believe he hurt it there.

I see, Connor rose. Well, I think we're done here. Jack, do you have any further questions?

I did, a lot of them, but not for Lilly Romano. I stood up and thanked the women and told them we'd be in touch.

Lilly stopped us at the door. I have told the children that their father was on a trip. But that won't hold them for very long. Elysa already knows the truth. Do you think I should maintain that fiction or do you believe we will see Diego again?

Connor turned to her. The good news is, your husband did not leave you for another woman, or commit suicide. You are right about that. Let's see where that takes us.

Lilly Romano stood frozen at the door, unsure as to whether or not to believe him. Connor nodded politely and we walked away.

We caught up to Max and walked a few paces from the house when I fairly exploded.

Connor, what the hell was that?! How did you know Sarah Romano was a lesbian? Who is Jonathan Parker? Most importantly, how could you tell the woman that her husband did not have an affair when all the evidence so far points to him doing exactly that?

Patience, Jack, he said. We'll discuss it at Il Buco's. Max, make a reservation for two tonight at 7, please. You do like Italian, I trust? Of course, you do. Everyone likes Italian. Now give me two minutes to authorize the sale of a ship in Hong Kong and we'll go visit Mr. Parker.

Part of me wanted to grab the next subway out of East Flatbush and go back to my nice, cozy if undistinguished, life. Either Connor Phelps was the smartest man I ever knew or he was a raving lunatic. Or both. But there was something about his confidence, his demeanor. He seemed so damn sure of everything, I knew I had to at least see it through.

Plus I had never eaten at Il Buco's.

We walked five houses down and knocked on Jonathan Parker's door. I was not even going to ask Connor how he knew where Parker lived, I assumed that would be one of the things discussed over dinner. It took a long time for Parker to open the door. He was obviously in a great deal of pain, although his smile was pleasant. He asked us to come in.

"Sorry about this," he said as he hobbled to the nearest chair. "I hurt it playing against Diego last week. It's actually an old football injury, just flares up every now and then. The doctors say to just let it rest for a while and I should be good as new. Can I get you guys anything?"

Jonathan Parker was in his early thirties, attractive, and despite his hobbling, appeared to be in good shape. He had blonde hair and the look of someone who spent a lot of time in the sun. His house was modestly decorated compared to the Romanos, but for a bachelor it was very clean. Certainly a lot cleaner than my place.

"Mr. Parker, we won't keep you long," Connor said as he pulled up a chair. "My friend and I are looking into the disappearance of Diego Romano. I believe you knew him."

"I worked for him," Parker said. "I've been working for him for about six years now. But we were friends as well. We both love sports, so we saw a lot of games together. I know his wife, and his kids. We went to the park, to the zoo. They were a terrific family."

"We heard that Mr. Romano wanted to have you date his sister. Did he ever mention that to you?"

Parker laughed and blew it off. "Oh, sure, he kept pushing and pushing it but Sarah wasn't interested in me. Hard to believe, catch that I am, but for whatever reason she never warmed up to me. Perhaps it's because I'm not Spanish."

"Do you have any idea why Mr. Romano would leave his family, those whom he loved?" Connor asked.

Parker shrugged. "No idea at all. On the surface, they seemed very happy. He certainly talked about them a lot. It was all about the kids, how smart they were, bringing in their latest art work. He worked extra hours to make sure they had everything they needed. But..."



Four Billion to One

Created from Booksie.com

Generated: 2015-01-26 22:43:03