

**Kevin Kress —
Teen Detective
Six Case Files**

**By
David
Drake**



6 Mysteries

Kevin Kress – teen detective

**A collection of
His first six cases**

By

David Drake

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At The Outset

Hi! I'm Kevin – Kevin Kress. This book contains my first-person accounts of my first six big cases. I figure there are things you need to know up front. As you will come to see, I'm a pretty open, up-front kind of guy.

I'm not a nerd and yet I can talk tech stuff with the best of them. I'm not a jock and yet I can hold my own in a footrace or a game of horse. I'm not Mr. Popularity and yet everyone knows me and smiles and speaks as they pass in the halls at school.

What I think I am is a top-notch teen detective. When kids lose things, they call on Kevin Kress. When things get stolen, they call on Kevin Kress. When unusual happenings cannot be explained, it is Kevin Kress who is enlisted to figure things out. It makes me feel important and I take the responsibility seriously.

I'm an only child and live with my older, less than middle class, parents in a small, simple, house at the end of Mulberry Street in Springfield, a small, Midwestern, town. My room is the attic – one I designed, built, and furnished all by myself. It never seems to really get finished. My retired parents do what they can to see that I have what I need. I can tell you that I need a whole lot less than most kids my age. I'd rather make things than buy them. I'd rather design things than use somebody else's plans. I'd rather write stories than read them, although I do read a lot, especially mysteries. I am basically very happy with myself – liked by most, disliked by few, and just as successful in my studies as I choose to be. Kevin Kress is Kevin Kress – no more, no less – and nobody

around here doubts that or would change it.

And, oh, yes. There is Anna, my very best friend* and confidant since our days in diapers. We work the cases together.

* [Editor's note: Anna privately hopes at some point soon, Kevin will wake up and begin seeing her as something more than just a lifelong pal. Boys can be more than a little, thick-headed, sometimes. – DD]

Case # 1:

THE CASE OF THE GHOSTLY GOINGS ON AT 1010 WILSON DRIVE

**A first-person account by Kevin Kress: Teen Detective
by David Drake**

Everybody knew that old Mr. Cuddlebottoms had been dead for several weeks. Everybody knew he had not liked kids – I mean had really not liked kids. Still, most of us attended his funeral and watched as his casket was closed, locked, and lowered into the grave. A few of us remained to see the hole filled with dirt. Springfield is a tiny place so we savor any sort of entertainment that comes our way in late fall – or spring or summer or winter, for that matter. Many of the kids had recently gone back to make sure the grave was still intact – undisturbed in any way. Mr. Cuddlebottoms was not to be trusted in life or in death!

Why?

Here's the story, and I can tell you it would be pretty much the same no matter who told it – boys, girls, young, old, newcomer, or old timer. That gave it credibility, I believe. I personally witnessed the goings on at 1010 Wilson Drive and you know you can trust me. Now, whether they would turn out to be ghostly goings on was a whole different matter. I was never personally inclined to put stock in the shenanigans of recently departed souls. You need to know that up front since it will undoubtedly influence the nature of my investigation and this report. I have always tried to base my life on facts not lore

or opinion or gossip – especially not gossip,

After the tale had first been related by Guy and Winston in homeroom last Monday morning, everybody turned and looked at me: I'm Kevin Kress, Teen Detective.

It seemed the two of them had been nosing around the big old house on the hill at the end of Wilson Street – 1010 Wilson Street. It had been in the Cuddlebottoms' family for more than a hundred years. His grandfather started the factory that still employed most of the men in town. Although they were rich (the Cuddlebottoms, not most of the men in town), except for the big house and nice car, no one would have ever suspected that. They tended to stay to themselves and once old Clifford – the recently deceased – had been the only one left, he was hardly ever seen. It was reported that when kids got too close to his front porch he would open the door and yell and shake his fist at them from behind the screen. His house was therefore not where kids went to sell cookies, magazine subscriptions, or tickets to games or school plays. I had no firsthand information about that – the yelling and fist shaking. I figured if he didn't want kids around I wouldn't disturb him.

Back to the boys' story that morning. Guy had been the spokesman.

"Me and Win were scouting around, you know. It was after ten last night. We figured that since Mr. Cuddlebottoms was finally gone, we'd take a peek inside and see how he had things in there. As we walked up to the bay window on the east side, a light came on inside and then shadows began moving all around the room. The flickering light was yellow – maybe orange – and the shadows black as night. Then, there he was, Old Mr. C. walking across the room from the hall door and he took a seat in a big rocker and started rocking. Win swears he raised his arm and beckoned to us as if he wanted us to come in. I had momentarily lost my footing on the bank outside the window and was distracted while that happened. When I got back to where I could see inside again, the light was off and the floor and walls had returned to being one big, black, shadow. I'm not ashamed to admit that it was the scariest thing I've ever seen. We didn't stop runnin' 'til we were under the streetlight in front of Billy's Barbershop on

Main Street.”

Win nodded with some vigor as if to confirm the truth of every last syllable of the story. He might, in fact, have been trembling just a bit.

Several others, who had braved the dark of night at the end of Wilson Drive, said they had witnessed a similar series of events. That may have been more macho talk than reality. I went that very night, of course. Odd occurrences had always fascinated me. Some folks had suggested, in not entirely friendly manners, that was probably because in the course of human history, I myself was an odd occurrence. I didn't take offense at that. In fact, I hoped it was true. I'd certainly never want to be just like everybody else. Anyway, in general, what I saw at the old mansion matched what Guy and Win had reported.

At first, I sat back a way on the little rise just east of the house, hoping to get a broader view than just the one window. Nothing happened during those fifteen minutes so I moved in closer, taking the same position Guy had described. At once a similar series of events transpired – the light, the shadows, the moving silhouetted figure of a hunched over old man, the rocking and the beckoning hand. Within another minute the room was dark again. Had somebody been spying on me from somewhere deep in the darkness of that old mansion and given the performance as I had drawn near?

The curtains covering the window were lace – thick – more fabric than holes, actually – so I found it difficult to see things clearly. I needed to get inside and do some exploring. It may not have been strictly legal to enter a house without permission but we private eyes are given some leeway under the law. Besides, it was supposedly vacant.

The next night I would attempt to enter. My plan was to search every room if necessary – some twelve or fourteen I estimated among the three floors. I told Anna of my plan. She wanted to come along. I would let her of course. She was the very best friend I'd ever had and the best Dr. Watson (Sherlock Holmes' assistant) I could have ever asked for. She had changed some recently but I supposed we all did that. It may have been that this ghost thing had gotten to her. She had begun clinging onto me. If that made her feel better than

cling away.

I packed my detective backpack with the basic necessities: camera, mini-recorder, multi-level flash/flood lights, a lock pick set, master keys (the old kind of key with the flat blade at the end of a short metal rod, since that's the kind of locks I figured would be on the interior doors of such an old house), a sketch of the general floor plan – floor by floor (I could modify it and complete it once inside), a small tool set, and of course my big magnifying glass. There were also the other usual survival necessities: water, chewing gum, a ham salad sandwich (detective stuff always made me hungry), scotch tape for preserving fingerprints, my note pad and pen, several large trash bags, rope, wire, my cell just in case, and my Magnum 357 hand gun (just kidding about the gun. I hate them and was counting on the fact that any resident ghost at 1010 Wilson hated them, too!).

It seemed particularly dark outside – no moon. Clouds were rolling in and covered up the stars. Anna was waiting under the streetlight on the corner where Wilson jutted off to the north from Main. One of the great things about small towns was that there were never any real worries about being out alone at night. Springfield was almost too safe to be any fun.

“Hey, Anna. Ready to get scared senseless?”

“Stop that! I'm willing, not eager, about all of this.”

“Let's move out. I see you brought your backpack, too.”

“Just the necessities: water, a ham salad sandwich for when you're still hungry after you've eaten the one you've brought, and Butterfingers for dessert. You always like something sweet after you eat and you always forget to bring anything.”

“Very considerate. I'll share my magnifying glass with you.”

I smiled into the darkness. She understood my attempt at humor and took my arm as we began the trek up Wilson Street. It was part of the original, smaller, old town. Several of the old houses had been abandoned and fallen into disrepair. 1010 was at the far end – three blocks up a slight incline, just steep enough to break a sweat running up it, but not steep enough coming down to be any fun with a sled in the winter snow.

There were no streetlights on the final block. That had been how Clifford's reclusive grandfather wanted it. The darkness, darkened (can I say that?). The bay window sat to the right of center on the ground floor as we approached the house. It was as wide as three of the other windows combined. I had always admired it and imagined it provided a grand view looking down on the rest of Springfield. The windows were dark. That is how I expected it would be. The lights only seemed to come on when someone moved in very close as if someone inside was keeping watch for spectators. That thought sent a chill up my back, since my plan for the evening was to enter and search the house from bottom to top. Where's that Magnum when I needed it? Ha. Ha.

I made a quick visual check of the upstairs windows – looking for faces staring down from behind curtains. I saw none. I pointed and we moved around the left side of the house into the back yard. Some ten yards behind the back door was a low stone wall. Beyond it was a sheer drop off of thirty yards or more down to Rocky Creek below. Summers, I spent time swimming down there. I've tried scaling the cliff from below, but without specialized climbing gear it can't be done. Having to depend on such paraphernalia would spoil the adventure for me. I've been called a pretty independent, self-sufficient type and wouldn't have it anyway other way.

"There's the back door. Come on," I said, pointing.

We moved toward it more cautiously than we probably needed to. I took out the largest flashlight and handed it to Anna.

"Light up the key hole."

It turned out to be a modern lock.

"I'll use my set of picks and get this baby open."

I tried. I tried again. I tried a third time. There was something different – unfamiliar – about the tumblers and I couldn't get them to align. I gave up, slipped the pick set back into my hoodie pocket, and looked around.

"There. A cellardoor. Like the one at home we used to wax and slide down as little kids."

It was a single door slanting out from the foundation down to the ground at a thirty-five-degree angle. I tried the handle and was surprised when I could open it so easily. I laid

it back, revealing the crumbling cement steps below.

“Come on down,” I said, motioning Anna to follow.

I used my penlight to light the way as I descended the stairs. Anna followed with the bigger light and soon the door in front of me was fully illuminated. It was constructed of well weathered, wooden planks set vertically. I figured them to be an inch and a half or so thick.

“Odd. There is no door knob,” I said scratching my head.

It had been one of my frequent think out loud moments.

I put my shoulder to it and shoved. Nothing. It was solid and didn't give so much as a millimeter.

“Hinges on the inside. A good design to keep out trespassers, says one wannabe trespasser into the wind.”

“Looks like it was made to allow folks to come out of the basement but not to get into it,” Anna said.

It had been an interesting observation. Though I doubted its accuracy, I didn't say anything. Sometimes Anna could set up a pout over what I deemed to be a fully insignificant comment. I suspected that was associated with her being a girl.

“What do you see here that seems odd?” I asked, providing a clue by moving the beam of my penlight back and forth between two apparently purposeless metal bolt heads about six inches apart, which stared back at us at eye level.

“The bolts I guess you want me to say. What about them?”

“Three quarter of an inch-wide, flush heads with scratches all over their surfaces. Why would an apparently useless bolt head have sustained so many shallow scratches?”

“I see. Interesting. Any ideas, Kevy?”

My relatives call me Kevin. The kids at school call me Kev. Only Anna, in the entire universe, calls me Kevy. I liked it. I'd return the favor but, face it, what can you do with Anna? Annie, maybe, but she was just not an Annie.

But, I got distracted and I did have an idea.

I lowered my backpack onto a step and took out a short strand of copper wire most often used to short circuit alarm systems but in this case – if my hunch was right – it would

gain us entrance. I held each end of the wire against a bolt. It would complete an electrical circuit if there was, as I suspected, a circuit to be completed.

“Click, click!”

I pushed on the door. It swung open. The force of a feather could have accomplished it. It was locked by a solenoid, which, when electrified, sucked in the lock bolt and allowed entry. I had read about one similar to it in a mystery, *The Case of the Restless Crossbow*, I believe. I picked up my backpack and stepped inside.

“Light the room with your broad beam,” I asked. (Well, I suppose it was more of an ‘order’ than an ‘ask’ – let’s call it an ‘instruction’. I hated being a boss. In my experience, everybody ended up hating you.)

It was a run of the mill basement – damp and dirty and musty smelling. Round, rusted, heating ducts hung from the rafters above, and dripping, mineral covered, iron water pipes clung to the rock walls. Something hit my ankle. It provided quite a start and I reacted out loud.

“What the!”

I shook my leg and refocused my little light toward the floor. It was not the time for us to run into a herd of alligators or boa constrictors, I told myself. (It made me think that ‘herd’ was probably not the correct term. I’d have to look it up in the morning.)

“Eeek! A frog,” Anna said, also directing her light downward as she put her arm tightly around my waist. It had careened off her leg as well. In truth, it was a toad, but I’d not bicker over such a thing at that point. Anna was not usually squeamish about such things. I figured it was just a startle response for her like it had been for me.

“Better a frog than a croc,” I said, trying to lighten the moment. Anna wasn’t in any mood to have the moment lightened.

“We need to find the stairs that lead up to the first floor,” I said, stating the obvious.

“They’re over there,” Anna said lighting the area.

We made our way toward them. The floor was littered with junk – pipes, boards, cans, bottles, wooden crates and sheets of metal. We had to pick our way carefully. Opposite

the open, wooden, stairway was a closed door. I had to know what was behind it and was surprised to find it unlocked. I turned the knob and opened it to find a small workshop every bit as neat and well-ordered as the other part of the basement was in a state of full disorder. I searched for a wall switch. Because the room contained no windows the light would not give us away to anyone looking at the outside of the house. Not only was the switch right where it would be expected to be, but it worked, flooding the room with light from several overhead florescent fixtures. I wondered why the electricity would still be on in the abandoned old structure.

“Old Clifford was a tinkerer,” I said moving to examine the work benches and several gizmos sitting here and there. I had no idea what most of them were, but clearly, they had been constructed to carry out some unique function. My room at home was full of such contraptions that worked to make my life easier and more productive. Think of that. Old Cliff and I had something in common. It helped explain the electrical entry system I’d just breached. There were no cobwebs or dust on things. He had been using the room recently.

I stored that information away for future reference. We left the room and climbed the stairs. I was concerned that the door at the top might be locked. It wasn’t.

“We need to be quiet and cautious up here,” I whispered. “If there is anybody in the house he will be up here somewhere. The living room should be off to our left at the end of this hall toward the front of the house.”

Anna secured a death grip around the rear of my belt. It was her thing to do in such potentially scary situations. We walked toward the front of the house, keeping the beams of the flashlights aimed at the floor in front of us – again, so as to not alert anybody who might be in range to see it through the windows. The old house squeaked and groaned the way they do when cooling down at night. At least I hoped it was a natural occurrence, which could be easily explained by the laws of physics and thermodynamics rather than . . . well, just rather than.

“That must be the entrance to the living room,” I said as we came upon double, oversized, wooden doors designed to slide back into the wall on each side of the opening – pocket

doors, I believe they're called. They were closed. The key holes were exactly what I expected – the old-fashioned kind. I took out my four master keys – there were only ever four basic styles of blade keys made. The purpose of locking a door was really not one of safety or security in the old days. More likely just privacy.

There was a problem. The keys slipped into the keyhole just fine but they would only enter half way. I knelt down and lit the inside of the keyhole with my penlight.

“Not good news, Anna. A key has been slid into the hole from the other side and it is turned half way, securing it so that I can't just push it out from this side. An interesting development. It's like the locked door murder mysteries. A person is murdered inside a room that is locked from the inside and yet the perpetrator is nowhere to be found. Those are always a good read.”

“So, how do they get solved? How was the murderer able to escape?”

“Every story has its own special twist. Sometimes secret passages in the walls. Sometimes trapdoors in the floor or ceiling. Sometimes specially constructed windows that lock automatically once they are closed – like in *The Case of the Smiling Corpse*. The problem for us is that we have no way of getting inside to discover that method here, the way the mystery book detectives always do. We can't just break down the door or saw a hole in it to gain entry. We have to reconfigure the whole deductive process.”

“That was a pun, you know,” she said.

“What was a pun?”

“The whole process of discovering the hole.”

“Ahh! And not really too bad. Wish it had been my intent. Since we can't explore the room from the inside, we'll have to go back outside and conduct our initial investigation through the windows – the big bay window in front and the smaller one on the side opposite from where we are right now. We can search the other rooms later if we feel that's necessary.”

“So, we just fought off cob webs, small crocodiles, and risked our necks walking on slippery, slimy, cement floors and now we have to go through all of that again to get back

outside where we started from?”

“That’s the size of it. I’ve been thinking we don’t want to risk setting off an alarm by using the back door. But, at least, we now know how to get in here next time we come.”

“Next time?”

It had probably been more of an exclamation (!) than a question (?). Punctuation is not one of my best things.

Before we left, I took a few minutes to feel all around the trim and casings of the pocket doors just on the off chance there might be some hidden trigger mechanism that would open them. I found none, so we retraced our steps and were soon again in the backyard.

As we rounded the far side of the house to study the interior through the bay window, we heard a voice – perhaps voices. We hunkered down and eased forward in the darkness to see if we could determine the source. (Do you know how difficult it is to hunker down when somebody is maintaining a death grip on the back of your pants?) Peeking around the corner we spotted the figures of two people approaching the window. As if they had been expected, the ‘ghost’ began its show. The eerie, orange light was visible to us from our vantage point. We couldn’t see inside, however.

Most would have bet some ghostly something was inside putting on the show, Anna included. I reserved judgment until the facts came out. I am known for not jumping to conclusions. I’ve always figured that’s a very dangerous way to live your life.

A girl’s voice screamed and one of the figures ran back down the hill into the darkness. The other took one last look inside and then joined her. High School or Jr. High School kids, I imagined. Neither of us recognized the forms, the voices, or the scream, but the nature of all three of those things pointed to teenagers, who, in the end found themselves to be less macho than they had planned on being.

We gave them some time to move far enough away that they couldn’t see us. Then we approached the big window. I held Anna back at a distance of six feet. The show was over and the room was dark.

“Let’s begin by looking in the side window,” I suggested. “I want us to illuminate the room with our lights

instead of by whatever is in there.”

We were soon at the smaller window and had the flood light revved up on high. It lit the entire room except for the corners near the floor and ceiling. We studied the setting carefully.

“What are we looking for,” Anna asked.

I gave her the crime scene investigator’s stock response:

“We’ll know it when we see it.”

“That was lots of help, detective boy.”

“I’m not a boy, I’m . . . forget it.”

Her response had been delivered as intentionally low level sarcasm, but I’d given her the best I had. No need to prolong the exchange over petty pride, so I shut up.

Several things caught my eye.

“Look at that small braided rug between the couch and the long, low coffee table in front of it. What’s wrong with it?”

“Horrible color choice?” Anna said, stumped by my question but moved to provide some response. I like that about her. It brightens my life.

“Look how it lays,” I said. “It isn’t lined up straight with the front of the couch. It’s on a diagonal, see? One end even juts clear back underneath the couch.”

“Yes, but so what? Maybe Clifford wasn’t a neat sort of guy.”

“Think back to his workshop.”

Anna nodded that she understood.

“A place for everything and everything in its place, you mean.”

“Right. And now look around this room.”

“Same thing. So, old Cliff was a neat freak. And you’re saying that since the rug is out of place that tells us something important.”

“My guess is that there is a trapdoor under it. The rug’s sole purpose is to conceal it. As you noted, its color doesn’t jive with the room’s color scheme. It’s a recent, rather reckless, addition.”

“So why wasn’t it put back in place properly?”

“The locked door mystery thing. I’ll bet it was because whoever locked the pocket doors from the inside used the

trapdoor to exit the room, and being underneath the trapdoor he couldn't replace the rug in its proper position.

"Interesting," Anna said still a bit puzzled. "But why the locked door in the first place? What does that have to do with ghosts?"

"Nothing, I'm thinking. I believe this may all be the work of a mere mortal."

"Who? Why? I really don't understand."

"Neither do I. Isn't that great? A mystery! Don't you love a good mystery?"

She nodded for my benefit even though I had really offered the question rhetorically.

"Back to the basement, my dear."

(Goodness! Where did that 'my dear' thing come from? Who calls their best buddy, my dear? I shivered, as if to shake it out of my being.)

On our way back around the house, I paced it off from front to back and estimated where the rear wall of the living room would be. I would use that information to locate the area beneath it. Our previous adventure in the basement hadn't taken us to the front corner.

Once back down there, it didn't take us long to find what we were searching for. The trapdoor was exactly where I had suspected and no attempt had been made to disguise it. There was a permanently installed ladder leading to it. The ladder had been constructed from new, unpainted lumber, still shiny and bright, with that wonderful new-wood smell.

"Look, down here," Anna said pointing her light at the floor at the foot of the ladder. "Isn't that sawdust?"

I squatted to examine it.

"It is. Good eye. Interesting though. It's not from the new lumber used to make the ladder. It's dark in color – from old, aged, dry wood. I'll bet it's from the saw line in the old floorboards up there – around the trapdoor. And look what else. It's still soft and separates easily into the individual grains. That means it hasn't been here all that long otherwise the dampness would have clumped it and it would have absorbed more of the grimy wetness from the cement floor."

"I still don't get it. What's going on?"

Before I could venture a hypothesis – which would have

been the best I could have offered at that moment – we heard movement up above us in the living room. Someone or at least something was moving across the room from our right – approximately where the locked doors were – to our left – toward the side window. Then began the unmistakable squeaking of the floorboards beneath the rocking chair.

Anna reached for my hand. I redirected it to the rear of my belt. I needed my hands free in case I climbed the first few steps of the ladder, not intending to open the trapdoor but just to get close enough to use the light from above to follow the saw line with my eyes. As I suspected, one edge of the saw line was not fully covered by the braided rug. I could see a tiny slit of orange light peeking down at me. The light turned off and again there was that room-crossing sound from the floor above. That time it moved in reverse – from the outside wall back toward the doors. The ghostly object had not moved in that direction during the times I observed it. From my position, there up close to the basement ceiling (or the underside of the living room floor, depending on your perspective) I determined that the final sounds came not from the middle of that wall where the doors were, but from the front of the room just to the outside edge of the room – the front, inside, corner.

I moved the beam of my light to that corner of the basement ceiling, wondering if there might be another opening of some sort. Anna automatically followed mine with her brighter beam. Nothing but more wires and pipes. The floor (ceiling?) looked to be as solid as the day it had been laid. I was interested in the fact that I felt relieved. I supposed that having someone – or worse yet, someone's ghost – slide down a pole behind us just might have undone that feeling in an instant.

While having my ear close to the floor above during the activity, I had detected a whirring sound. I couldn't describe it more definitively than that. I couldn't place the sound. But it had been more than a whir. Also, a scraping sound or maybe a sliding or dragging sound.

It hit me then that we hadn't heard anything resembling footsteps throughout the sequence. I didn't mention that to Anna for fear she'd take it as proof it had to be a ghost –

which, of course, would supposedly not have made audible footstep noises. Another chill zigzagged its way up my spine. I loved that! What a rush!

I pushed up on the trapdoor. It was heavy. I should have assumed that it would be, considering it was cut from the thick, original, inch thick, floor planking. I only wanted a peek at the windows. As I had hoped, both were flanked by heavy drapes that could be pulled closed so no one could see inside. I whispered down to Anna.

"I'm going up into the living room so I can pull the drapes closed. Then we can work without the threat of being detected from outside. I'll go up first and tend to them."

"Oh, no, Kevy. Where you go, I go."

"Okay, then. I'm going to open the trapdoor."

I pushed up on left the edge, which I had determined was not hinged, and soon had it laid back against the floor to our right. I entered the area and reached down to help Anna up. It was still pitch dark. We swept the floor with our lights. I pulled the drapes closed as Anna lit my way. I turned back into the room. I was particularly interested in the inside front corner. There was a closet there. Close inspection soon revealed that like the ladder below, it was of recent construction, although it had been stained to more or less match the other woodwork. The door was smaller and the trim was a very poor match to the rest in the room. It had been added, but when? Why?

"Sniff the closet," I said to Anna.

"What?"

"Please, just sniff it. I need your female nose."

After raised eyebrows and an exaggerated sigh, Anna complied.

"Now do the same at the double doors."

"Again, she complied."

"Oh. I see. The doors really have no odor but the paneling covering the closet does. It smells like varnish – I'd say pretty fresh varnish."

"It's stain, actually, but that's an unimportant technicality. It tells us this closet was constructed very recently."

"And what does that tell us?"

“We’ll know very shortly. What is the purpose of a closet?”

“To hold things?”

I was not sure why her inflection indicated a question. It seemed pretty straight forward to me – closets were for holding things.

“Exactly. I believe it holds the basic secret to all of this. Now, look down here at the carpet.”

“Okay, I’m looking.”

“See this line?”

“Yes. Looks like a poor job of carpet laying if you ask me. You can see where the two pieces meet and they meet in a hump – a low ridge-like hump running most of the way across the floor.”

“And they also meet on the diagonal. Have you ever seen a room where the carpet sections didn’t meet in a clean line parallel to a wall?”

“No. I suppose not.”

I knelt down and opened my pocket knife. I slipped the long blade into the slit and pulled up one edge of the carpet. Under it was a metal track or rather a long narrow strip of aluminum curved up and then back toward the center along both edges leaving a half inch opening between them. Something slid along that opening – its surface was scratched up in almost continuous lines following its length.

“And it starts at the closet door and ends at the rocker,” Anna added moving her light, tracing the line from end to end.

I moved to the closet door. Its knob spun when I tried to turn it and pull the door open – a fake. I pushed. Nothing. Again, I felt for some triggering device. Again, nothing.

I needed to think. I was hungry. It always happened. I motioned to the couch and placed my back pack on the coffee table. We sat. I offered half of my sandwich. Anna wasn’t interested. She never was but I always offered. Perhaps I offered because I knew that she’d not accept. I’ve been told that we teen boys tend to be selfish where food is concerned – well, to hear Anna on the topic, where lots of things are concerned, actually. I continued to move the beam of my light around the room to determine if there were other things out of place. None jumped out at me. (Thank goodness!!!)

As we sat there, the bay window was directly across the room in front of us. The rocker was near the end of the sofa to our left, fairly close to the smaller window. The closet and double doors were up front to our right. I had closed the trapdoor before we sat down and our feet rested on it. I noticed that it hadn't closed all the way and I pressed down on it. It seated into its proper position.

It was at that moment that the show of our life began and, at least in the beginning, it sure seemed to be authentic ghost all the way.

"Hear that whirring?" I asked. "It's coming from the closet. My gut tells me we need to head for the corner behind us to our right."

I stood, reached out for her hand, and pulled Anna with me, dragging my backpack along the floor. We knelt against the wall. I turned off our lights without providing an explanation. The closet door slid open, slowly – all by itself. I heard Anna inhale. She gripped my hand, tightly, cutting off the circulation to my fingers I was sure. Something that had been on the floor behind the sofa flipped up standing just a bit higher than its back. Had it been monitoring our activities, I wondered, not really able to make out its form or substance? It seemed content to remain where it was. Perhaps it hadn't sensed our movement – we had been quick and quiet.

It turned out to be the source of the eerie orange light – an apparently hinged, wooden, 2 X 4 bar that held a single, yellow, incandescent bulb behind a slowly rotating fan blade. It set an unnatural mood – creating flickering light and odd shadows cast by the moving blades. Then, from the direction of the closet came a scratching noise and a low-level screech – perhaps like a very small child's fingernails running across a chalkboard.

It then emerged from the closet. A man-sized figure, clad in a light gray sheet or blanket. It moved – glided, really – from the closet to the rocker where it apparently took a seat, rocked, and eventually raised its left hand. Clifford had been left handed – I had come across left-hander's scissors in his workshop. Even being that close, I couldn't make out details. The dim, colored, flickering light, feathered the edges of things. It was clearly intended to enhance the silhouette as

viewed from the window rather than really illuminating well from the rear. One thing was certain. What or whoever it was had not walked – it had ... well ... floated through the air in what even I could only describe as a ghostly fashion. If it had 'seen' us, it had ignored us.

Sixty – maybe seventy-five – seconds into the event the light went off. The whir of the blade stopped and from the soft noise behind the couch I assumed the light bar had returned to its resting place out of sight on the floor. That time I could track the direction of the screech with my ears. It made the return trip back to the closet.

I rescued my hand from Anna's death grip and patted hers. For some reason, it seemed the thing to do.

"Stay here," I whispered.

I took her flashlight and quickly made my way toward the closet arriving just in time to see the door begin sliding closed. I placed the flashlight across its path at the floor, which held it from being able to close. We had our means of entry.

I assumed that some other adventurous person had come to the window and their approach had somehow triggered the performance. If it had been started by someone in the house they were not in that room with us. Where, I wondered? With the drapes closed the visitors would not have been able to see anything except perhaps some seepage of the orange light. I was sure they must have been disappointed. (Later I determined it had actually been triggered by my fully re-seating the trapdoor down into the floor opening – it had been planned that way – it will become clear later.)

I forced the closet door open, where it remained without incident. Anna recovered her flashlight. Things became clear in an instant.

Clifford's ghost was a manikin on wheels. It was draped in fairly loose flowing, white cloth and was secured into the track at the floor by an upside-down T bracket. A small, flat-link, chain was set in place beneath the slit inside the metal track. It was drawn through the track by a small electric motor located on the floor of the closet. Clearly, it made a continuous loop back beneath the slit that we could not see.

When the motor turned in one direction it pulled the manikin to the chair. It was designed to collapse when it contacted the rocker and take a sitting position. A motor within it was rigged to raise the arm and move a pendulum inside the torso, which initiated the rocking motion. On a timer, that motor then also pulled the manikin back into an upright position once the light had gone off. The motor in the closet pulled it back, secreting it, out of sight behind the door, which was then closed by another small motor. Ingenious. Simple. Masterfully planned and executed. But why?

There came a voice out of the darkness. An unsteady, old man's, voice. I recognized it as that of an old man who I often talked with as he sat on a bench in the park. Since I had been nine I had stopped to chat with him on my morning jog each day. He fed the pigeons and read his paper. I think he looked forward to our few minutes together each day. Toms, that was what he called himself – Mr. Toms. An odd name, I thought, but who am I to determine what are regular and what are odd names? He enjoyed hearing about the progress I was making on the construction and continual renovation of my room, and always asked about my father. I related to him my progress on whatever case I was investigating. He always smiled and after a few minutes would reach for my hand and pat it gently. Ah! He was left handed as well. I would then run on my way. He was never there when I made my second lap around the park. Had he been a ghost? I had to stop such silly, factless, mental, prattle!

I was suddenly confused. The voice repeated its message several times – either a very insistent ghost or a recording. It was quiet – too low to be heard outside I was sure. We listened intently. I held my pocket recorder high hoping to capture every word. The sound seemed to come from several places around the room – a series of hidden speakers I figured, preferring that explanation to some everywhere-present, ghostly . . . thingy. I had no idea how to refer to something like that.

“Kevin Kress,” it began as if it somehow knew I would be there. “First, let me thank you for your many hours of kindnesses to me. Remember me to you Father, Jake. I want you to have something to remember me by, Kevin – me, Mr.

Toms from the park. Most folks knew me as Mr. Cuddlebottoms. I always hated that name so in my mind I just shortened it. That was very much like something you'd do, now, wasn't it, Kevin?"

He chuckled.

"It's true I never really liked being around kids – that didn't mean I hated them; they just made me uncomfortable. I never had any of my own, you see, and I figured I'd probably break them if I handled them, so I kept them at bay – except for you. You never knew it, of course, but you were my best friend – like the grandson I never had. Your father, Jake, had been my best friend back in grade school before my parents sent me off to the boarding school out east. Never let that happen to you, by the way. Jake never wanted anything from me other than my friendship – like you. But, about that 'something' from me to you. First, you must never share this with a soul – well, I assume that it will be impossible to keep it from Anna. We should all have such a devoted companion. I trust her if you do. And perhaps a lawyer, somewhere down the road."

At that point I was really confused. A secret? A lawyer? Devoted companion?

Then the words became strange.

"It almost rhymes with rocks. If you're patient it will give you a hand in your time of need. It moves like your laps around the park. Although it may appear to get, how do you young folks say it – get ticked off at you sometimes, it will always be yours and mine - ours. What you find is yours to use as you see fit. You are a wise lad. You may want to defer ultimate decisions about it until later when you are an even wiser man. Thank you for being my friend."

The message ended and began to replay. It recycled three times before stopping. I checked my recorder. It had picked it all up. My head was swirling. Anna began breathing again. I walked to the closet needing to know details – I always needed to know the details. It was from that examination of the various items that I obtained the information I relayed above as to how it all worked. In the closet was a relay switch with wires running through the floor into the basement and then outside. We had actually seen

them there in the corner down stairs. I was sure they led to a motion detector in the vicinity of the bay window. One had to get up close and personal with it before the show was activated. It was why I got nothing at first when I sat back on the rise away from the building, but was given the whole show once I moved up close.

“Find the wall switch and let’s turn on the lights in here,” I said to Anna.

It was quickly accomplished. We had to shield our eyes at first from the brightness.

“You said you had another sandwich,” I stated more than asked.

We returned to the couch. We ate and quenched our thirst. She had been right. I really do get a sweet tooth after I eat.

“So, let me get this straight,” Anna said scooting closer to me than I thought was necessary. “Old Mr. Toms, who you’ve liked so much and talked about for years – the one who seemed to love kids – was really Old Mr Cuddlebottoms – the one who ran kids off by screaming and shaking his fist after them.”

“It would seem so. I said I found him likeable, not that I certified him as having all his marbles. And it makes some sense. Mr. Toms hasn’t been in the park since . . . well, since Mr. C. died.”

“And he left you something but instead of just telling you where to look for it he disguised it all in a set of abstract clues - riddles. Why?”

“I can only guess, of course, but I imagine it was done in case someone else actually entered here before me. He knew me well enough to know I’d not be satisfied with staying outside. In fact, thinking back on it, he staged this whole thing just to get my attention, to get me in here so he could give me whatever it is he wanted to give me. He knew that eventually some kid would show up to take a look through the window. I’d be told about it and from there things would follow the course he had set in motion.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier just to mail it to you?”

“It would have, but he and I are game players – mystery lovers. Did you see the authors in his book case over there?”

Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Joan Hess, Erle Stanley Gardner, Garrison Flint – all the big names in mystery writing. It's like our final game – our final chat together.”

Again, Anna raised her eyebrows thinking it was going a long way to really get nowhere.

“So, now what? Decode the clues, I suppose,” she continued.

“Right. He started by saying it almost rhymes with rocks. Let's see: box, blocks, socks . . .”

“No, Kevy. Those all do rhyme with rocks.”

“You're right. Something close; rock, sock, clock, flock, dock.”

“Let's settle for clock to begin with and see how that plays out,” Anna said. “The others don't seem relevant.”

“Okay. Good take on it, I think. Clock. If it's something of size it would need to be a big clock like a grandfather clock. If it's something small, it could be a small stand up or wall clock. Let's examine some more clues.”

It was Anna who continued.

“Next, I think he said, ‘If you're patient it will give you a hand in your time of need.’”

“That pretty well confirms your clock idea, Anna. Hand and time. Then the thing about getting ticked off – also a clear clock reference. And his mention of my two laps around the park each day like the circular A.M. and P.M. routes of the clock hands.”

“And finally the ‘yours and mine’ – ours – phrase.”

Anna was all over it.

“Change o-u-r-s to its heterograph, h-o-u-r-s, and it seems to be a wrap.”

“I thought those sound alike words were called homophones.”

“You're right. I think it's ‘graph’ when it's written and ‘phone’ when it's spoken. Does that really matter?”

I shrugged. It did matter to me and I'd look it up later but was content to get on with the mystery at hand.

“So we need to go on a search for a clock,” I said – a grandfather clock.”

“How can you be sure, a grandfather?”

“How did he refer to me?”

“I get it. Like the grandson, he’d never had. Very good.”

She squeezed my hand. What was with her?

“Well, none in here. Ready for a scavenger hunt?”

“Let’s go.”

Before we left, I cut the wires leading from the motion sensor to the mechanism in the closet and unplugged the two small motors. That would put an end to the ghostly goings on at 1010 Wilson Drive.

We turned off the light in the living room and went back to our flashlights so as to not make anybody suspicious in case they would see room lights going on and off. We didn’t need Officer Hoffer banging down a door and finding us. Using the key already set in the keyhole, I unlocked the sliding doors and we entered the hall.

The dining room, though beautiful and filled with elegant furnishings, held no grandfather clock. Neither did the kitchen, the pantry, nor the maid’s quarters at the rear of the first floor.

“Ready for a flight of stairs?” I asked.

I felt her hand grasp my belt and had my answer. It was a large, ornate, winding staircase leading from the wide entry hall to a central atrium on the second floor. Actually, it continued on up to the third but we stopped at two. The open central area was surrounded by six rooms – two across the front and back and one on each side. I tried the door of the one at the head of the stairs. It was a bedroom – clearly a woman’s bedroom. To our astonishment, it had been kept in pristine condition – clean, neat, linens washed and pressed. The closets were bare. There was no clock. The hall door slammed behind us.

Our reactions suggested we had let our guard down and had not been expecting anything else of a frightening or menacing nature.

“The draft, probably,” I said, walking back to the door, not entirely satisfied with my explanation.

I tried the knob. It turned and I opened it just a crack. There was nothing to be seen in the pitch darkness of the atrium although a rush of air washed about my head. I hesitated. Should we continue as if everything were okay?

Would that be foolishly risking our safety or wellbeing? I figured it would be just as dark for an adversary as it was for us so I moved slowly through the door, Anna at my rear – literally!

We stood quietly, listening into the darkness. The cool draft met us face to face. I figured it was what had made the door close, though I had no idea about its source. I did know that old houses were supposedly drafty – at least that what I'd read. We had, however, encountered no such thing on the first floor or in the basement. Still, I felt more confident and we moved to the next door – the one to our right. Our footsteps against the wooden floors echoed through the large open area. That door was standing ajar. I didn't like that. No detective in any book I'd ever read just entered through a door that was standing ajar. They usually pulled their sidearm and sent in the SWAT team ahead.

Having neither of those, I threw the back of my outstretched arm against Anna's stomach, I flattened us back against the wall and inched sideways toward the opening. I reached out and slowly pushed the door open – just a bit at first and eventually all the way. It was black as the night sky inside. I wasn't sure what I had expected to see. I took the risk and turned on my flashlight – holding it at arm's length to my right side in case anybody decided to take a shot at it. Nobody did. I led Anna inside and we turned on her light. It was the den. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of books lined the shelves along the walls. A large World globe in a beautifully carved wooden floor stand sat beside a velvet upholstered wing back chair. There was a matching settee – both red or burgundy; it was difficult to make out exact hues in such low illumination. Anna moved the beam of her flashlight around the walls. There it was! A massive grandfather clock, eight feet tall and three feet wide at its spread, ornate, base. Its pendulum was stopped. The hands read 10:10 and the indicator read p.m. I looked at my watch. 10:10. How could that be? I forced my mind to move on.

Standing back gawking at it would get us nowhere so I – we – approached it. Cautiously, I opened the glass door behind which hung the pendulum and the shiny, bronze weights and chains. I searched the sides and bottom and top

with my hands, lighting it with my pen light. Smooth, dust free, and empty. It would have been easier if we had known what we were searching for. I closed the door and took a step backwards to survey the massive piece of furniture. The bottom of the mechanism cavity, which I had just examined, sat two feet above the floor. Supporting it was the wide, ornate, wooden, base.

I – we – knelt and examined it. I ran my hands along every piece of molding and around every elaborate carving.

“Bingo, Anna,” I said at last.

My finger had located a lever on the bottom of a wide section of molding. I pressed it gently and the front panel of the base popped open – just an inch. It was enough for me to slip in my fingers and pull the drawer forward. It was a good eighteen inches high and twenty-four wide, going back the depth of the clock – perhaps another eighteen inches.

Again, the breeze. Stronger that time. It was enough to rustle the drapes and rattle the shade on the near-by floor lamp. Instinctively I turned toward the door. It closed. I heard the distinctive click of its lock. I figured that effectively locked anybody else outside so we were safe. I could tell Anna harbored some less reassuring take on it. I returned my attention to the drawer and its contents, part of my mind still engaged with the door and the fluctuating breeze. Inside we found dozens of small packages wrapped in brown paper and sealed with brown, paper, tape. Each was perhaps two and a half inches wide, six or so inches long and four inches deep. That allowed six packages across the drawer and three from front to back. After lifting several from their resting place, I determined there were four deep. That would be 72 in all. I hoped it wasn't drugs. That would cause both legal and moral issues for me and my memory of Mr. Toms. One was marked with a large, red, X. I took it out.

“I suppose we need to look and see what's inside,” I said.

Anna nodded, releasing her grip on my belt so she could move to a spot where she could better watch what I was doing. Holding my penlight between my teeth, I proceeded carefully with the smaller blade of my pocketknife. I cut the tape not the wrapping paper. The first package was soon

ready to be opened. I placed the flat bottom of the package on Anna's outstretched palms and folded back the paper. I didn't believe what I saw. Anna didn't believe what she saw. (You probably do believe being one step ahead of us as you are.)

There on top was a one-hundred-dollar bill – fresh and green and smelling ever-so-much like money. After the initial shock, I peeled off several more and then removed them all from the wrapper. All hundreds – some old, some new, non-sequential numbers. It felt like being a part of a ransom drop on a true crime TV show.

I opened another package from the opposite corner of the top tier. The contents were identical. I had once read that in a one foot tall stack of U.S. currency there would be approximately 3,000 bills. A four-inch pack would be one third of that or 1,000. One thousand bills times one hundred dollars each equals \$100,000.00. Multiply that by the 72 packages and . . . my, oh, my! Over seven million dollars. So many questions raced through my mind.

Anna pointed to a slip of white paper on the bottom of the first package. I unfolded it and we read it together, silently. It had been set down in ink by a shaky hand.

“Kevin. I know it's only money but money is really all I have. Understand that I have prepaid the taxes on it so you are under no liability that way. (See the documents in the envelope on the bottom of the drawer.) I will give you no instructions on how to use it other than to remind you that the two of us often spoke of the many unmet needs of good folks in this world. I know I have placed it in good hands. God bless you.”

We sat back on our heels and stared at each other through the darkness, overwhelmed and mystified.

“You'll need a safe,” Anna said.

“Got one,” I answered.

“I've been in your room a thousand times and I've never seen it,” she said.

“I know. It's well hidden. Do you really want to know where all this will be stashed?”

She shook her head, 'no'. She wasn't ready for that kind of responsibility although she related that she had no

doubt I was. I wished that I had her confidence.

We loaded the packages into two trash bags, closed the drawer, and approached the door to the atrium. I turned and lit the clock with a beam from my flashlight one final time.

“10:10,” I said out loud and shook my head.

Sometimes mysteries remain mysteries.

As I had suspected, the door had locked from being jarred upon slamming shut but was easily opened. We were soon down the stairs, outside, and headed back toward Main Street. I walked her to her front porch. She kissed me gently on my cheek, then entered her house. Girls. I sincerely doubt if I will ever understand them.

After stashing the packages in my well-disguised, fireproof, safe, I got ready for bed and laid down on my back, looking up at the ceiling. I thought I was tired, but after a few minutes I found myself still awake and restless so I pulled on my sweats and tennies, and donned a light jacket against the growing Autumn chill. I slipped out my window, down the tree trunk, and went for a walk. (I had done that thousands of times.) I had so many things to think about. I figured my path that night had been aimless but my legs had taken me to the cemetery. I stopped some thirty yards from Clifford’s – Mr. Toms’ – grave and took a seat, cross-legged, on the soft grass to think.

Fog – bluish, transparent, and beautiful – began to roll in. The moon peeked through a sudden window in the clouds. Its beam provided a gently swirling, haze-filled spotlight aimed directly at that newest grave. For some reason, it made me feel good inside. I was momentarily startled by an indistinct, shadowy, human-sized form that passed through the mist not fifteen feet from me, off to my right. It made straight for the grave site. Once there it stopped, turned, waved in my direction, and faded into nothingness. The clouds engulfed the moon and the world fell dark again.

Perhaps I hadn't gone for a walk. Perhaps it had been a dream. . . perhaps!

Yours in mystery,
Kevin Kress, Teen Detective

Case #2

THE CASE OF THE WRONG NUMBER

A first-person account by Kevin Kress – Teen Detective

by David Drake

A week after Anna and I solved the Ghostly Goings on at 1010 Wilson Drive, I got a call from the recently deceased old man's lawyer asking if he could be of any help with the money I'd been given. He knew about it and offered to set up an interest drawing savings account all quite anonymously through his office. I agreed and within several days the arrangements had been made. Anna was put on the account as an alternative owner but only with the power of withdrawal in case of my death or incapacitation. That's how she preferred it. We both felt a good deal of relief once the money was safe and available as needed. The amount it would earn in interest each year staggered our imaginations. I kept one pack of the money in my safe to use for incidental expenses – as if 'Kevin Kress' would ever need \$100,000.00 for incidental expenses! Sometimes I just took it out and smelled it!

On Friday night as I walked in the door after the football game, I heard the house phone ringing – a land line. Apparently, my folks hadn't yet returned from bingo night at the senior center. I answered as I shed my jacket and kicked off my shoes.

"Hello. Kress residence."

"Kriss?"

"Yes."

“You sound different.”

“Sorry!”

It had for some reason tickled me so I decided to play along rather than really try to clarify anything. I didn't recognize the voice. It was adult, raspy, and its command of the English language turned out to be less than stellar. At first I figured it was a prank from one of the kids.

“Never mind,” the voice went on. “The hit is set for Sunday night. We's gonna' case the place tomorrow mornin' – ten a.m. Since none a us knows how any a us looks, I suggest that while we's all there, ya don't talk to nobody about nothin'. Got it?”

“I got it. And by place of course you mean . . .”

“The bank, of course.”

“Of course, the bank. What's that address again?”

“The only bank in Springfield. What's wrong wit ya? You okay? You been boozin' again?”

“Oh, no. No. I'm fine. Just a little woozy. Phone woke me up ya know?”

“Well, no more drinkin' that woozy tonight. Need ta be sharp in the mornin'. At noon, we'll meet at the usual place. Wear your ski mask like we always do. If nobody knows nobody, then nobody kin finger nobody.”

My mind spun, only partly because I was sure I'd never before heard the word 'nobody' used that often and incorrectly within a nine-word phrase. In the larger picture, this was just too good to ignore. But how would I find the meeting place? I had an idea. I put on my best mobster talk that I'd heard on the old, black and white late night crime shows on TV.

“Ya gotta stop callin' me at this number. Too many nosy folks at this end. Call me at 555-5432. Nobody answers that one but me. Got it.”

“Yeah. 555-5432.”

“Call me right back after we hang up so's I kin be sure yous got it.”

“I got it.”

“Call me!”

“Okay. Okay. Hang up.”

I thought it had been a stroke of genius – one of many I'd had during my lifetime, but definitely one of my best. My

small-time criminal English came off pretty well, too, I thought. The caller hung up. I followed suit. I waited but not for long.

“Hello. Kress here.”

“This is Mike. Yous new number works. I told ya I had it. Git some sleep and no more booze.”

CLICK!

The number I had supplied was my cell phone – the el cheap-o, prepaid, kind I bought at Walgreens. Only Anna and my parents had the number. It was untraceable and it did have caller ID. Our home phone service was Plain Jane – no such extra features. I saved the mysterious caller’s number to my phone book and assigned a ring tone to it – the old Dagnet Theme Song, “Dum da dum dum!” I laughed out loud.

I’m Kevin Kress, teen detective.

I went up to my room in the attic, slipped out of my shirt (it was always ten degrees hotter up there than down stairs), and turned on my computer. The screen was soon displaying the reverse look up page. I entered the phone number that I’d just captured.

“Elsa Evans?” I said aloud, surprised.

That was the old, old, lady who lived alone on that small acreage at the north edge of town. I’d known it for years. A one-story house. Out back sits a covered well, a wood-house, and a broken-down barn. Fences were in a sad state of disrepair. She was my Dad’s grade school principal. How old must she be? Rumor had it she’s doing poorly recently. Lived on a tiny teacher’s pension I hear. I supposed it was difficult for her keep the place up. After whatever this was, was over, maybe Anna and I could see what we might be able to do for her.

It most certainly hadn’t been Elsa on the phone. It was an unpleasant, deep, gravelly, voice. He referred to himself as Mike during his call-back. That probably suggested he was not too bright – covered his face at meetings but gave out his name on the phone. Somehow, he seemed to be taking advantage of the old lady.

I called Anna.

“Got us a new case. You up to it?”

“Always. More ghosts, killers, kidnappers, what?”

“Bank robbery, I think, maybe, perhaps.”

“I’ve seldom heard you so confident, Kevy,” she said laughing.

I deserved that. I hadn’t had time to really get my head around it yet.

“Can you come over?”

“Now?”

“Now! Come in the front door. My parents should be back by the time you get here.”

“Since when have we worried about having your parents there?”

“Well, I don’t want to taint your clean-as-a-whistle reputation. You may actually want to attract a boyfriend sometime in the near future.”

I thought she’d laugh again. Instead, she sighed. Girls! The next time I’m three years old and looking to choose a best buddy for life I’m going to make sure it’s a guy. I wonder if three-year-old kids even know the difference between guys and gals. Hmmm.

[It was a question Anna often asked herself about Kevin at 17!]

I heard my parents arrive and I called down to them so they’d know I was home.

“Your jacket on the floor and shoes on the couch led us to that conclusion, Son,” my dad called back.

He was a good-natured sort and a great dad – even if almost five times my age. So was mom – well, not the great dad part – you understand, right?

“Anna’s coming over.”

“She knows her way in. We’re on our way to bed.”

Was I the only one in the world concerned about Anna’s reputation?

I went over to my bed and sat back against the headboard, knees up, yellow pad in hand, to begin making notes. I had a phone number, the name ‘Mike’, the Springfield bank to be robbed, Sunday evening as the hit time, ski masks, a Saturday morning bank casing, a noon meeting the whereabouts of which I still didn’t know, and Elsa Evans, the kind old lady north of town. What else? Oh, the name Kress – it’s who Mike thought he was calling. Thinking back on it he

may have called me Kriss or Chris. Hard to tell an 'e' sound from an 'i' sound over a cheap phone. I'd bet on Chris, actually. We were the only Kress's within a hundred miles or more. I wondered who he thought he was calling. Since it is the Springfield bank I think I can assume Chris is somebody local.

Chris? Chris? A local Chris, probably with an unsavory reputation. Nobody came to mind and I probably knew everybody within a country mile of Springfield. Hmm? Maybe not local, then.

Anna stuck her head up through the hole in my floor at the top of the ladder that served as the steps to the attic.

"Hey, pal." I said putting the pad aside and turning to sit on the edge of my bed, facing her.

"Hey, late, I'd say," she said putting on her fake disgruntled act.

She stepped onto the floor. She was wearing jeans and a school sweat shirt – not a fashion statement but then neither was I. Why would I have even been interested in how she was dressed? I moved on and slipped down onto the floor, back against the bed. She sat up against the window seat just to my right. It's where we always sat. I shared with her all I knew.

"So this Mike guy just called you up – a wrong number – and began chatting about pulling a bank robbery Sunday afternoon?"

"That's about it, I guess."

"I declare. The darndest things just fall out of the sky and right into your lap."

"Always been that way."

She nodded and raised her eyebrows in typical Anna fashion.

"So. Where do we begin?"

"We need to go out to Mrs. Evan's place and snoop around. If Mike is calling from her phone, something may have happened to her. If she's okay, then he still has some way of using that phone. We just need to check it out, first thing."

"Let's go, then," Anna said, getting to her feet.

"I'm hungry."

“Of course, you are, Kevy. You’re always hungry.”

She opened her backpack and removed a sandwich bag. Peanut butter and raspberry jelly. One of my many favorites – well, two of my favorites, I suppose. Just food, itself, I guess, is really my favorite. Most any kind. Anna had always taken care of my hungrinesses. (Is that a word?)

I filled a small plastic bottle with milk from my little fridge, put on my boots, a sweat top, and jacket. Then we left through my window, down the tree.

“Walk or jog?” she asked.

“I’m eating here. Let’s walk.”

It was a great night. A big moon, bright enough to cast shadows, and just enough breeze to blow the occasional falling leaves into our faces. It was only a ten-minute walk. By then the sandwich and milk were gone, the bottle was stowed in my backpack, and Anna broke out the Butterfingers. As sleuths’ assistants went, she ranked near the top.

The old farm house was dark. Oddly, I thought, light showed from the cracks between the boards on the old barn – upstairs – hayloft, I assumed.

I whispered.

“I want to get a look at her phone line, first. Looks like it enters the house over there, front corner, south side.”

The phone box was at eye level – gray metal, decades old. The small padlock, which secured it shut, had long ago rusted through. I removed it and opened the door to the box. I should have noticed it before but used the darkness as my excuse. It had a line running to the top of the house and from there out to the barn. Most farms in the area had a similar arrangement. My sudden hunch was that Mike had called from the barn and that he’d called so late because he waited until after the old lady went to bed and wouldn’t be using the line.

We let the wire be our guide and stopped ten yards from the barn. From there we could see that it was the south-western corner of the loft that was lit most brightly. We moved to the wall of the barn to see if we could hear anything. There was at least one muffled, male, voice but we couldn’t make out what was being said.

“I need to get picture of whoever’s up there,” I

whispered. "I imagine vehicles are parked inside, out of view. I'll make my way upstairs and get some snapshots. You stay on the first floor and record any license numbers you find, along with makes, models, and so on."

Anna never liked going our separate ways in situations like that so I anticipated some resistance. There was none. She probably didn't want to climb up into the loft and figured feet to the ground was the better alternative. We found a side door open. It squeaked when moved. I wet the hinge with the last dribbles of milk from my bottle. It silenced the noise. We pulled it open slowly, just far enough so we could slide through, sideways. The bottom floor was lit, dimly, by light filtering down through the cracks in the floor above. As I had suspected there were vehicles – one old 1940s pickup and one new sedan.

Anna went left, toward them. I spied the ladder to the loft and began my ascent. I stopped before my head broke the plane of the floor and readied my camera. I inched up far enough so I could see the lay of the land. The sound turned out to be just one voice. A large man in coveralls was facing away from me talking on a phone – a corded phone – surely the one hooked to Mrs. Evans' main line.

I positioned my camera, disengaged the flash, and moved up one more step. I adjusted the setting to low light and zoomed in on the man's head. What I had was mostly a side view, some front face. I took three shots of him and got several random pictures of the open area. I gave it a final once over, and returned to terra firma (the ground. Sometimes I get carried away.).

Anna was there waiting. She nodded and I understood she had completed her mission. As we turned to leave, a cat wailed – I mean really wailed. I had stepped on its tail. The man upstairs reacted. Heavy footsteps approached the loft opening by the ladder.

"What's going on down there?"

Anna lifted the cat to the ladder and encouraged it to climb.

It did. I was amazed – more impressed, I supposed. I tugged on Anna's shirt and we moved back into the shadows. Six feet from the ladder we backed into a floor-to-ceiling stack

of hay. There was no way around it.

The beam of a flashlight danced about from the hole above. I hoped he'd be content with discovering the cat but he wasn't. He started down the ladder. His considerable bulk made the task difficult for him. It gave us time to bury ourselves in the hay. I hoped Anna's childhood allergies to everything rural had cleared up. She gripped my hand. I slid my arm around her waist. We breathed shallowly, through open mouths to reduce the sound it made. He reached the ground. Several times we saw his light as it was directed right at where we sat some ten feet away, covered by no more than a foot of hay.

He growled something I didn't understand and then climbed back up the ladder. If I had that much weight to move around, I'd have probably growled, too. We waited a few minutes and then I peeled the hay away from my face. We seemed to be alone. I urged Anna to unwrap herself from the hay and we were soon standing there in the semidarkness, snatching the last bits of hay from each other's hair and clothing. I pointed and we exited the way we'd entered. The light went off upstairs. I figured it meant one of two things. He was done for the night and he would get in his car and leave or if he was living up there, he'd go to sleep.

The latter seemed to be the case. Bending low, we ran back to the shadows of the house where we slid our backs down the wall to the ground and sat back against the foundation to catch our breath and regain our cool.

"What about the vehicles?" I asked.

The older one isn't licensed – a beat up old Ford pickup. You saw it. I got the plate number of the newer one – a red Ford Taurus. The first two letters tell us it's from this county. The front, driver's side window was rolled down. I stuck my head inside. It had that brand-new car smell and it was spick-and-span clean. The seat was moved back as far as it could go. I figure it belongs to the big guy up in the loft."

"Sometimes you amaze me. Great sleuthing. I'd like to make sure Mrs. Evans is okay but I don't want to break in or scare her."

I stood up and faced the house, thinking. Things were going our way. The cat whose tail I had mangled trotted up

and nuzzled Anna – clearly and wisely avoiding me. Anna picked it up. It smelled of a perfume not to my liking. They purred together, nose to nose, for a moment. It then jumped down and headed for the back porch where it entered the house through a cat door near the bottom of the people door. Several moments later a light came on in what we assumed was the front bedroom. The shadows against the blinds suggested a woman’s form bending down and picking up the cat. I was satisfied she was okay and we left.

Early the next morning I stopped at the Ford dealership. I knew Ben, a kid who got there early, swept up, and did odd jobs for the owner. He was fourteen, really smart, and nearly as poor as I was. I didn’t know him well but everybody in Springfield sort of knew everybody else.

“I need your help, old man. You know somebody who might have bought a bright red, Taurus, recently. He would have been a big man, bulky.”

“You mean fat?”

“Yeah. That’s what I mean.”

“Sure. The girls in accounting call him ‘perfume man’. The cashier’s check he used reeked of a scent they called lavender. Bubble bath, I figure. His actual name is Mike Overton. About three weeks ago – no, not quite two, actually.”

“I don’t know any Mike Overton.”

“New to the area I think. Lives out north of town somewhere. Came in with a pencil of a man – skinny as Mike is ... well, not skinny.”

“Get a name for the pencil guy?”

“Yeah but it probably won’t help you much.”

I just looked at him, puzzled I suppose. He filled me in.

“Slim.”

We grinned into each other’s faces.

“I see what you mean and yet who knows. It may be just what I need to crack the case.”

“A new case, huh? I won’t say a word, Kev, but let me know how it turns out.”

“You got it, man. Thanks. I owe you.”

Ben had been helpful. It almost seemed that he was eager to provide the information. Perhaps he needed a friend. I would look into that later.

Most of the stores didn't open until nine, but I've known all the owners since I was a tot and, therefore, how to get in through the back doors. I headed for Jed's Place. He sold all kinds of stuff, sort of like a very cluttered general store right out of the old west. He lived in the back room.

"I need a ski mask, Jed. Make that two."

"Gonna rob a bank?" he said chuckling at his little joke. "Got what ya need. Red, blue, or black?"

"Two in black."

"Three bucks will handle it."

It would be the first money I had spent from the trust fund Mr. Toms had set up for me. For some reason, I didn't want to part with it, but I did. My plan was to just use the money for detective related expenses and to meet the needs of certain needy, worthy, folks I came across in the course of things. I figured Mr. Toms had entrusted me to do good things with it and I would be true to that. The lawyer mentioned that Mr. Toms hoped I would use some of the interest for my college expenses. I'd have to think about that – not the going to college part. That was my dream. It was the using that money for myself thing that was still up in the air.

The money from Mr. Toms was in that bank – well, probably not physically there anymore but, still, I now felt like I had a personal stake in the bank's safety. It was the one establishment in town to which I didn't have the privilege of early morning access. I had to chuckle. Nobody in little Springfield locked their doors. Momentarily, I wondered if the bank did. I was sure it must. There were just too many 'Mikes' in the world. What a shame.

As I stood on the sidewalk in front of Jed's Place, Anna came down the street toward me jogging at a fairly fast clip. I walked to meet her.

"What's up?"

"That red Ford. It's parked in front of Bertha's Café. I peeked inside and there is one blimp of a man sitting at the table by the window."

"The window that provides a clear view of the bank across the street?"

"That's the one."

"Had breakfast yet, Anna?"

“Yes.”

“The correct answer would have been, ‘No, kind sir.’ And my response would have been, ‘Please let me treat you before you waste away to a mere sprig of ginger.’”

“I don’t think ginger comes in sprigs, does it?”

“Did you get my point? We need to be in that café so we can study Big Mike.”

“And I know you’ll make the sacrifice and finish anything I’m not able to eat.”

“By George, I think you’ve got it.”

I offered her my arm and we crossed the street toward the café.

What I hadn’t shared with Anna was that when I was looking around in the hayloft the night before I counted five handguns and a much longer semi-automatic-looking-something-or-other laid out on hay bales. For a detective, I really know very little about guns. I hate them. I didn’t want to worry her.

We entered. I put my finger to my lips hoping Bertha would take my lead and not make the big deal over us that she usually did. Her running joke with us was that she was going to give us our wedding reception free right there in her café. Where did she come up with such ridiculous ideas? I always smiled and nodded and changed the subject. Anna always wanted details – flowers, band, cake, and on and on adnausium. They seemed to enjoy making me uncomfortable. That time Bertha got my meaning. We made our way to a rear table.

Bertha approached us.

“Sittin’ or eatin’ this mornin’”

“Eating,” I said.

We ordered; then I asked:

“You know everybody around here. Mrs. Evans, north of town. She have any relatives you know of?”

“Funny you should ask – well, knowing you, probably not. Her grandson, Mike, is the big guy at the front table. Nine pancakes so far. Waltzed into town a few days ago – maybe ten. Bought a fancy new car. Says he’ll soon be leaving for California. He gives me the creeps.”

“You know any of his friends?”

“Don’t know that he has any. Though, come to think of it, I did see him with a skinny guy yesterday. A stranger to me. All ears and greased back hair.”

She did the shiver thing.

“I’ll get your cakes and sausage goin’.”

“Suppose he’s just going to sit there ‘til ten o’clock – the time he said he’d be casing the bank?” Anna asked.

“No idea. We’ll stay for a while then probably should stop over at the police station and alert Officer Hoffer about what we suspect.”

“And by ‘a while’ you mean as long as it takes you to woof down your breakfast and mine.”

I suppose I grinned. Anna had a way of putting things into perspective. I was still growing. I needed food.

Twenty minutes later, Big Mike still hadn’t moved – well, except for scratching himself in places better left unmentioned. I left a ten on the table. It included a tip. She always gave me what she called her ‘young detective’ discount. I knew it was really because she knew I didn’t have much money to spend. She was a sweetheart.

The more I thought about Mike the more I wondered. Could he really be all that stupid? Buy a new red car, rob a bank, and make it known he was leaving for California.

The bank would be closed, of course, on Sunday – starting at noon on Saturday, actually. They wouldn’t go in from the front door. That left the back door or perhaps a second-floor window or skylight – I wasn’t sure if the old building had a skylight but it seemed to work well in many mysteries.

I took us on a detour from our route to see Hoffer. We ended up in the alley behind the bank. One door. Metal. Iron crossbars over the five windows – two down, two up on the second floor, and a smaller one in the foundation – basement, I assumed. I needed to get a look at the roof. The buildings on Main Street were built wall to wall – no space between them. The roofs were fairly continuous with only a few feet of difference in height from one to another. There was an old metal ladder attached to the back of the hardware store three buildings north. It led to the roof (or to the ground depending on one’s direction of travel, I suppose). I hitched my head and

Anna followed me.

“I’m going up on top to look around. If any unsavory types drop by, you leave at once – you hear me?”

She nodded. Anna wasn’t one who liked to be bossed but she saw the wisdom in what I’d said. I climbed. Anna loitered, befriending a puppy – ears flapping, tongue panting, tail wagging. (The puppy, not Anna!)

It was a more difficult climb than I had anticipated. Straight up. Most ladders sit at an angle. A huge difference in the amount of effort required, I found. On top I moved to the roof over the bank where I found three ancient skylights. They had long ago been covered with metal sheeting and layer upon layer of tar. I examined the one near the rear. I noticed the tar which overlapped the top had separated from the tar that covered the sides of the little, foot high, structure on which the window lay. I knelt to examine it more closely. It was clear that a line had been recently cut all around the base of the old window as it lay flat atop the low riser. I looked the cut around its entire circumference. On the south side a good sized clump of tar had been cut away. It revealed a hand hold. I assumed that if I were to insert my fingers and pull, the old window would open, probably hinged on the opposite side.

No way Big Mike was going to use it as an entrance – or as an escape route. Perhaps, slim would enter by climbing down a rope, gather the money, tie the end of the rope to a basket or some such thing that carried the loot, climb the rope, pull up the basket, and exit down the ladder. Maybe I should consider becoming a thief. I think I’d be good at it. The very idea made me shiver.

I looked around the roof one final time. There it was – a coil of new rope – half inch – in the corner. I walked to it. It had been modified. I counted three small loops that had been tied near one end about eighteen inches apart. Maybe they were foot loops to be used in climbing. I tried to put my hand through one. Too small for a foot. Climbing rope is usually at least an inch in diameter. I’d have to think on it. I took pictures and stowed my camera in my backpack.

I returned to the ladder and made my way down to the alley and Anna. They still had to have some way of getting into the safe. It sat at the rear of the first floor. I remembered

from a tour when I was in fourth grade being told it was an iron-sided safe plastered with a foot of reinforced concrete all around. I wondered if that included the floor.

As noted, the foundation had a window in it, which was also covered with iron bars. I lay down beside it and looked inside. The area was lit, though clearly it was not a part of the building that was regularly used. As I grasped the window bars to help me get up I noticed the bars were loose. So did Anna. We examined the setup further. The bars, welded as one unit, were easily removed and set aside. They had been cut free from the foundation.

“Won’t the alarm go off?” Anna asked. “Being caught breaking into a bank might not look so good on our college applications, you know.”

That time I know I smiled. I pointed to the silver metal strips that adhered to the inside of the glass – part of the electrical alarm system. If the window was shattered and the strips severed, the circuit would be broken, and the alarm would sound. The bare end of a copper wire was duct taped to the strip at the lower left of the window pane. It shouldn’t have been there. I was sure it was part of a system that bypassed the alarm so the window could be pushed open from the bottom. I tried it – somewhat foolishly. I was right, however. The old black metal alarm bell above the back door did not ring. I was in.

“I’d tell you that I think it’s a really dumb idea to go in there, but you’d just ignore me,” Anna said, looking up and down the alley, nervously.

“Not ignore. I’d give it careful consideration and then dismiss it as girly fright.”

No sooner than I was inside, Anna stuck her head in after me.

“I think the pencil guy just entered the ally from the south.”

“Set the bars back and then get out of here,” I said. “I’ll close the window, do my reconnaissance, and take care in case he comes in. Keep watch from a safe distance. If I need you to go get Hoffer, I’ll toss something out the window.”

“I don’t like it.”

“You seldom do.”

There was a single, lit, low wattage, bulb hanging from the ceiling. I turned on my flashlight to help flesh out the still dark corners. I was mostly interested in the ceiling below the safe. Two step-ladders stood there with a plank stretching between them, up four rungs. I searched the ceiling with my light. A two-foot circle of the wooden floor had been cut and removed. I climbed to a place where I could examine the hole. Above it was a layer of metal – I assumed it was the thick iron plate on the floor of the vault that I had learned about when I was nine. The walls and ceiling of the safe had been concrete reinforced but apparently not the floor. I'd read about such things especially back in the old days – and it would have been in those old days when that safe had been installed. I jumped back to the floor and began looking around. If Slim were on his way, I only had moments before he'd arrive.

In the corner were two tall, slender, tanks – welder's tanks – and hoses and nozzles and a hood. Somebody was planning to cut through that metal plate – most likely after the bank closed on Saturday. Up against the wall, next to them, was a piece of cardboard – maybe three feet square – painted black on one side. A roll of duct tape lay on a near-by crate. Were they stored there from an earlier time, or had they some purpose connected to the robbery? They weren't dusty. I took a picture just in case then let it go. Inside a small open wooden crate were three burlap sacks with draw strings. They were empty and not tied shut. Sitting just to one side of the stairway were several dozen boxes, still broken down flat, never having been folded out and put together. It was perhaps a reasonable find in a business basement – for the storage of papers and such. I tucked those several pieces of information away for later. It may all have just been stored there, unrelated to the robbery. I snapped another picture. Cardboard usually deteriorated rapidly in such a damp basement. Hmm?

With more caution than Anna would have believed, I returned to the window. Slim was there. I quickly moved to a spot behind some crates in a dark corner. He entered feet first, belly toward the wall. His purpose seemed not to begin working but just to make sure things were still in place. He did

climb a ladder and examined the metal plate with his hand. He tapped on it in several spots with the heavy end of a pocketknife. He nodded. Apparently, that gave him some information – perhaps the thickness of the plate.

A shadow was suddenly cast across the window. Was it Anna or had she called the cops? I moved my head to get a better view. It was the red car. Mike really was dumb, parking his new car in the alley behind the bank he was going to rob. Then dumb became dumber. He honked. Slim returned to the window and climbed out. I heard a car door open and shut and daylight returned.

I had seen what I had come to see. I climbed out the window, replaced the bars, and walked south. Anna stepped out of a recessed doorway.

“So?” she asked.

I filled her in.

“Then we just need to tell Hoffer and be done with it,” she said.

We looked at each other, face to face, and broke into laughter. Like Kevin Kress – Teen Detective – would just walk away from such a grand opportunity. Dumb as Mike was, everything we had was either hearsay or circumstantial. All I could come close to proving was that it seemed somebody was planning to rob the bank or had planned to at some time in the past and abandoned the project. (Sometimes, in my mind, I load the evidence in such a way as to make it seem like I might be needed longer than I really was.)

Hoffer was hardly any smarter than Big Mike. He became one of the town’s three policemen when his uncle was elected mayor. The sum total of his training for the position had been cub scouts – unless Sunday School counts. Over the years, he and I had developed what might be termed an adversarial relationship – always on different sides of every issue. He thought of me as a bothersome, snot-nosed, kid. I thought of him as an incompetent human being let alone a cop. He’d just laugh at the evidence I had and pat me on my head as he escorted me to the door.

We walked to the park. My stomach growled. Anna offered jerky. I nodded appreciatively.

“Does it seem to you that they are making this thing

way too complicated?" I asked.

"Like how?"

"Like, with a window not ten feet away from the hole they'll have in the safe floor, they could easily remove the loot through it into the alley and escape. Why the arrangement up on the roof? The loot would have to be carried up the stairs to the first floor and then up a second flight of stairs to the second in order to get it pulled out through the roof."

Anna nodded and added another thought.

"And, why gather to case the bank when all the plans seem to have been made already?"

"Hmm. Good point. My head hadn't arrived there yet. And if Slim and Mike can handle it – like it seems they can – why enlist the help of all the nameless other guys it seems are involved?"

"And who is the Chris guy Mike has you confused with?"

"I need to be at that noon meeting at the hayloft."

"How do you know it will be there?"

"Why not? Secluded. We know Mike is staying there. Close to town."

"I suppose so. Do you think Mrs. Evans is involved?"

"Best scenario is that she's being used. Too old to know what's going on. She may not even know her grandson is around. Something to keep in mind, though."

"And the bank casing party at ten? You'll be there, too?"

"I thought both of us should attend. We really need to keep an eye on all our money in there, you know."

"Yeah. Like the way I really needed breakfast."

"Don't mention food."

I checked my watch.

"Wow! Ten 'til ten. We need to get back to the bank."

It was a two-minute walk. We lingered across the street seeing who (that's probably whom) we could see. The red car was parked two blocks south to our right – perhaps the only smart thing Mike had done up to that point. He was walking down the sidewalk in our direction. Slime, I mean, Slim, shadowed him from across the street, soon to be upon us as we sat on the curb.

We counted three other young men that neither of us knew – all moving in the general direction of the bank. I took pictures.

“Let’s go,” I said helping Anna to her feet.

She didn't really need help but for some reason seemed to like it.

We crossed the street and entered ahead of the others. We went to the worktable at the rear, in front of the big round door to the vault. I had forgotten how massive it was. I messed with deposit slips and such trying to look legitimately occupied. I wondered if one of the strangers was actually the Chris who I seemed to be impersonating. There had been five handguns in the hayloft. I wondered if that implied five members to the team. Perhaps six if the one carrying the automatic gizmo didn’t also warrant a handgun. And why guns at all? The operation looked to be a gun-free activity. Was there to be intentional gun play for some reason? To hurt somebody? Hopefully not Chris!

If Chris were among the group of three men that we’d IDed outside, it would total five counting Mike and Slim. If Chris had drunk himself senseless the night before so he couldn’t show up then he might make six.

They roamed around aimlessly. It would have been hard to make themselves more conspicuous. A guard approach one of them and they spoke in hushed tones. The man left. Within fifteen minutes they were all gone.

I wanted to get up to the second floor but the stairs were roped off. I needed a diversion.

“Go back up into that free-standing credit card sign by the front door. Make a good-sized commotion and then leave. I’ll meet you back at the park as soon as I can.”

Good old Anna didn’t question it. She put on a good act. All eyes were on her. I ducked under the rope and quickly made my way upstairs. It housed the offices but none was apparently occupied on Saturday morning. The bank closed at noon. There was a wide hall that separated the rooms into rows along each side. The inside of the skylights still contained the amber and green stained glass from years before though the sunlight had long since been blocked. There were water droplets on the floor under the one furthest

to the rear of the building. I suspected a bit of cold air had seeped in through the crack cut through the tar and had condensed the more humid interior air, which dropped to the floor. It sort of confirmed what I couldn't really confirm without having lifted the skylight when up on the roof – it could be opened. It was twenty feet from floor to ceiling.

I had counted ten coils in the rope on the roof and my photo verified that. Each one was about two feet in diameter. Two feet times a rounded off 3 – the pi in 'pi d' – the formula for finding the distance around the circumference of a circle would be – 3 times the 2-foot diameter equals 6. Take that times 10, the number of coils, and we got a rope that was about 60 feet long. That was nearly three times the length needed to reach from the roof down to the floor of the second story. Hmm.

I started back down the stairs. Henry, a guard, saw me as I approached the first floor. He was the one who had conversed with the bad guy who had left early. I'd smooze him as my dad called it. It was a relative of 'sweet talking', or 'brown nosing' but involved more out and out distraction than anything.

"Hey, Henry. How's your good wife? Haven't heard Mom speak about seeing you two at bingo, lately. Everything okay?"

I ducked under the rope. Henry raised it up for me.

"Everything's okay. Fall colds, you know. Both of us. Tell your Mom we plan to be back next Friday."

I nodded, smiled, and set a leisurely, though direct, path for the front door and was soon outside. Perhaps smoozing was genetic. Dad and I had both always seemed to be good at it.

Ten thirty. We had an hour and a half until the meeting at the hayloft – or at least that's where I hoped it was to be. When I reached the park bench, I opened Anna's back pack.

"No food in there, sorry."

"Looking for the mini recorder and the lapel mike."

"In the pocket under the front right zipper. I gather you're planning on taping the noon meeting."

"You gather correctly."

"Find anything of interest upstairs."

“It all fits my suppositions (‘theories’ in real people talk). One thing still baffles me. The coil of rope up on the roof is three times as long as it needs to be.”

“Needs to be to do what?”

“To reach the floor of the second story in order to pull the money bags out of the building. I suddenly understand about the loops. The containers filled with the money will be hooked to them for the ride up to the roof. Seems to be better planning than I had suspected Big Mike was capable of.”

“Maybe, he’s not the brains – just the communicator – the one that passes on the info from the main guy.”

“Interesting. Like a buffer,” I said. “That would make it six or seven guys instead of five or six.”

“Not if the big guy is actually one of the others,” she said.

“Another gold star. Great. It would be funny if I got to the meeting and found out it was Chris – me – who was supposed to be in charge.”

“Perhaps ironic is the better word.”

“Ironic, yes, probably. After this is all sewed up I may just let you write about it.”

“No thanks. One time through an adventure with you is always enough, Teen Detective Kress, or is that Chris, now.”

She giggled her wonderful giggle. It was contagious. I chuckled.

With the recorder in my hip pocket and the mike wire up my back under my shirt, over my shoulder, and the mike clipped under my collar, I felt ready for the meeting. I practiced hitting the record button through the denim covering the pocket. I soon had it down cold.

We returned to my place for lunch. Knowing my irregular but rather constant eating pattern, Mom kept the fridge well stocked. She and dad had gone shopping according to the note on the table. I gathered my feast: bread pudding, ham sandwich with lettuce and mayo, dip for a sack of potato chips, and a quart of milk. That should keep me ‘til . . . ‘til later, anyway. Anna took a spoon and nibbled at my bread pudding as we talked. Sometimes I worried about how little she ate. She was petite but still got the looks from the boys.

I had no clue relative to the purpose of the casing of the bank. It made no sense, but then good clues often don't until ... well, until they do. I got the guys' pictures so that helped me. Ah ha! So did the bank get their pictures on their surveillance cameras. I'll bet somebody, most likely the real Mr. Big, turned that event into a set up so later, if caught, they could be identified as the perpetrators of the robbery and he'd go Scott free. Interesting. Reasonable. If true, it meant I still hadn't met the real brains of the operation since everybody else was in those videos. And another thing, that dumb idea Mike had to buy a new red car may have really been Mr. Big's to make Mike appear to be the ring leader.

We looked through the pictures I'd taken. Good shots of everybody but Slim – at least the skinniest of the lot so I supposed it was Slim. It had been too dark in the basement to get a really good look. He seemed more interested in looking over the front door than the big open room. Perhaps that would come to mean something later. Often things worked that way. In fact, boing! Something just had.

“Anna. The skinny guy that almost caught me in the basement earlier, didn't wear gloves.”

“It's really not all that cold today. So what?”

“He touched the ladders and left his prints all over the metal plate. They'll also be all over the basement window.”

“So, will yours, by the way.”

“Oh. Yes. Oh. My. Oh. Well. I doubt if I'd ever be considered a suspect. I'd sure like to go back and capture some prints but I need to get to the meeting at the barn now and right after that I imagine whoever is working the metal torch will get at it. That plating is thick. That could explain the large piece of cardboard leaning against the wall as well as the duct tape.”

“I don't follow.”

“To cover the window so the light from the torch won't be visible outside during the night.”

“Makes sense. So, you're still going to that meeting.”

It hadn't been a question. Anna knew when I made up my mind I seldom changed it.

“It's about time to leave. You up to coming along and remaining hidden someplace?”

“Sure. And what will the purpose of that be?”

“Never know when I may need a quick-thinking assistant. Be sure you have your cell phone in case things get out of hand.”

“Out of hand! You expect things to get out of hand!”

“I don’t expect that at all. One just needs to prepare for all possible contingencies.”

“Contingencies like getting thrown out of the hay loft door when they figure out you shouldn’t be there?”

“That would not be high on my list. You worry too much.”

“And you don’t worry at all.”

“So, I guess the two of us strike a good balance then.”

“You can be impossible, you know?”

“So, you’ve told me from time to time to time to time. Let’s head out. I think we should take Mission Road – it’s a bit longer but it will let us come in from the back. I want to get there early so we can see the others arrive.”

“And count them – see them and count them. I’m still worried about there being too many masked bodies at the meeting and that they will discover the ‘too’ in ‘too many’ is you.”

“I have my escape plan in mind, just in case. Remember that wooden beam that juts out above the loft door in the peek? It’s used with a pulley to lift up the bales. There is a rope tied to it that dandles almost all the way down to the ground. If I need to beat a quick retreat, I’ll push the door open and slide down the rope. If that should happen you call Hoffer.”

We arrived fifteen minutes later – at eleven forty-seven if anyone is keeping track of such things. We moved to the north edge of a stand of tall grass and took seats to wait. Well hidden, we had a clear view of the front of the barn, the back of the house and the graveled entry area from the main road to the barn and outbuilding.

“A car pulled in and parked. One masked man got out and entered the barn. I took a picture. I assumed that Big Mike was already inside so that made two. A minute later a second vehicle – a white pickup pulled in beside the car and stopped. Another masked man walked to the barn.”

“I guess this validates your assumption that the meeting would be held here,” Anna said gripping my arm a bit tighter than before. I patted her hand. What had gotten into me with this patting thing?”

The third arrived and then no more. Assuming we hadn't missed one who had come on foot earlier, the count would be four plus me. At 11:58 I donned a ski mask and had Anna do the same to keep her anonymous in case anybody spotted her. I stood up, bent over, and stayed under cover of the tall grass as I moved toward the front road. I didn't want to give away Anna's position if I were spotted. I walked to the barn and entered the door at 11:59. At exactly noon I stepped off the ladder onto the loft floor. I looked around, casually. I wanted to be sure I knew where that big hay door was in case I needed it.

That immediately presented a problem. It was boarded closed from the inside with 2 X 4s nailed across the opening. In movies, I had seen sailors on ships slide down ladders keeping their feet clinging to the outside of the uprights. I hoped that would work for me. If need be, I'd have to try that method and exit the way I had arrived.

There were hay bales here and there for us to sit on. We all faced the large masked man who, without stretching the point, I assumed was Big Mike. We sat. He stood. I counted. One too many! I shivered a bit as I clicked on my recorder. The big guy started talking.

“Here's the final details. At 4:15 in the morning you will climb the ladder to the roof at the hardware store and make your way to the bank roof. Proceed to the rear skylight and lift it open. There is a coil of rope near-by. Let it down, looped end first, until it hits the floor below. Wait. The loot will be there soon, all cinched up in small bags, which will be attached to the rope. When you feel a tug, pull it up. Do not take time to close the skylight. Remove the bags, one for each of you to carry. Tie your bag to your belt. Then, and this is important, tie the other end of the rope around the front chimney and toss the loose end over the front of the building. Climb down the ladder to the alley. Go directly to your cars, which you will have left in the church parking lot. Use the route showed on the diagram I will give you and meet back

here. Each route is different. We will divvy up the take and each one leave for where ever he wants to leave for. One rule. Don't spend none a the money in this state. Nod if you got that."

We all nodded. Apparently, he had not recognized that there were too many of us. I figured I was home free. Not so.

Mike looked around and pointed at us as if counting.

"There's too many here."

(Oops!)

"There should be four of yous and there is five."

I gulped hard and stood up – perhaps that was called thinking on my feet.

"No. You counted yourself twice. See, I said."

I proceeded to point at everybody counting them aloud as I went. Intentionally, I failed to point to or count myself. I was amazed when Big Mike nodded and accepted the ruse. If he wasn't the true leader and if that leader was here, just keeping quiet, and if he was smart enough to see through what I'd just done, I would be in deep doo doo later on. He probably wouldn't reveal himself at that point, however, so I just needed to get out of there and beat a quick path to safety.

"Okay, then. Pick up a gun. They's loaded. And git out. Be quiet. Yous routes is on the sheets on the bale there by the ladder. Don't matter which one ya takes."

I bent down and retied my shoelace hoping to buy time and be the last to leave. While in that position, I looked around at the other's shoes. Mine were the only ones not a name brand. It would be a way I could be identified if anyone was of a mind to really search for me. Slim didn't leave so I had to, or establish an awkward moment. I turned slightly putting my body between the guns and the remaining two men who were, by then, chatting in low tones. I bent down as if picking one up, stuffed my hand into my jacket, and walked off toward the stairs. I had taken no gun, needing to be sure there was one for each of them so the count would seem right. I did take the last route sheet figuring it was no big deal – and Mike was watching me so I felt obligated to pick one up. I could see why Ben had referred to him as Perfume Man. Even the paper he had drawn on smelled of perfume.

The good news was that I got out with my skin. The

bad news was ... gee... think of that. For a change, there wasn't any bad news. Amazing! I met Anna and we waited in the grass until Slim had left. Anna greeted me with a quick peck to my cheek. What was with that? Later I'd have to sit her down and get some things straight with her.

We returned to my room to review what we thought we knew for sure and complete the plan for making certain the bad guys got caught red-handed. I was pretty sure I had it figured out, all except who was really running the operation. We may not have even met him yet. He could have been an insider at the bank – somebody who suddenly needed extra money. I printed out the most incriminating pictures from my cameras and Anna made a step-by-step list of how it was all going to come down. I made a copy of the recording of the hayloft meeting. We went to see Hoffer.

Anna was better with him than I was so she handled the meeting. He finally agreed to our plan. He would have one man hidden on the bank roof to witness the exit process and make arrests before they were able to make it down the ladder. Another man in the alley would be near the basement window to nab anyone trying to leave that way – it is how I expected the guy working things on the inside would make his exit.

If it didn't come down the way we said it would, I would owe Hoffer breakfast. If it did, he got all the credit for foiling the attempted robbery. Seemed fair to me. Anyone who needed to know the facts about the investigation would know how to get them. Anyone who knew Hoffer would know that he . . . well, you got the idea.

At four AM, binoculars in hand, Anna and I were perched across the alley on the roof of a three-story building. We could look down on the whole scene. We saw a policeman, on foot, back into a recessed alley doorway ten yards north of the bank. I assumed the officer on the bank roof had been in place for some time. Searching the roof with our binoculars we thought we saw him hunkered down in the far, front, corner. His dark blue uniform blended into the darkness.

Things progressed the way I expected they would – well, mostly. The three men wearing ski masks climbed the

ladder and crossed the roofs to the skylight. They opened it. One got the rope and fed it down through the opening. They stood around waiting for longer than I had figured it should have taken. While that was going on, the basement window opened. At least a dozen, foot square, cardboard boxes were set out into the alley. It hadn't been something I had anticipated but suddenly it brought several things into focus, including the empty, flat, unassembled boxes I had discovered in there earlier.

I must say I was surprised when the old truck from the farm drove up and stopped near the window. Big Mike got out – of the passenger side. He loaded the boxes into the back of the pickup. More were set out. In all there were nineteen. That would hold great gobs of money. Think how much I received in just one drawer full, which was more or less equivalent to each of those boxes.

Something else came to mind. Monday was payday at the plant where most of the men in town worked, so the bank would have a huge supply of currency on hand to cash their checks. Again, too well planned to be Mike.

Anna nudged me and directed my attention back to the roof. The men were pulling up the rope. As instructed they removed the three bags and tied them to their belts. They proceeded to the chimney and secured the rope around it, tossing the free end over the front of the building.

"They're like trained chimps," I said, mostly for my own benefit, although Anna nodded.

They turned and started to cross the roofs back to the ladder in the alley. At that moment, the officer showed himself, weapon drawn, and the three were soon face down, spread eagle and separated from their guns.

I returned my attention to the old truck. I couldn't see the driver from the angle I had, but assumed it was the leader – the brains behind the operation. With the boxes loaded, Slim, who had been inside the basement, crawled out. He walked south and Mike walked north. The truck jerked into motion. Perhaps a new driver – a youngster. Hmm!

"The cop better make his move, now," I whispered to Anna.

He did. He stepped in front of the truck, weapon aimed

at the driver's side of the windshield. The truck, barely underway, whimpered to a stop. Anna and I were quickly down the ladder on our building and into the alley. Hoeffr arrived in his squad car at about the same moment. The first officer opened the driver's door. A slim figure dressed in coveralls and ski mask stepped out. The officer removed the mask. You'll never guess who it was (well, maybe you will!). Old, old, Mrs. Evans.

Could she have been the brains behind the scheme or was Mike or Mr. Big forcing her to participate? I still didn't believe Mike was smart enough. I pointed out the escaping Mike and Slim to Hoeffr who waddled off to round them up.

Later, in my room, Anna and I made our final case notes.

Most of my theories had been correct. The whole point of casing the bank had been to assure that the cameras would get good photos of the five members of the crew – Mike, Slim, and the other three, one of whom did indeed turn out to be Chris – Chris Brooks, formerly of Springfield but living up at Buckingham for the past ten years. Our phone number at the house was the same as his except for the new area code which Mike clearly had forgotten to dial the night he got me in error. The other two were acquaintances of Mike from out of town who he had arranged to have join the group - anonymously. They had been the only out of towners in the bank that morning.

The bags drawn up to the roof had just enough bank cash in them to incriminate the three men when caught, the hope being to throw all of the suspicion onto them. The idea of the rope over the front of the building was merely a signal to the public that something was wrong at the bank. At the proper moment, the leader called the police saying he had spotted the rope and officers would close in. Again, ingenious!

Mike and his new car had been designed as an attention getter, as I had suspected. He was to leave immediately after the robbery thus making him a prime suspect – he had a shady past with a long record of petty this and that. Think about it; a new red car, heading to California, new license plates – he wouldn't have gotten far.

Why the guns? It had puzzled us all along. It would later be determined that each one had earlier been used in the commission of another serious crime. By supplying them, the leader had driven one more spike into each guy's coffin – having him be caught with a certified criminal weapon.

So, the bungling and apparent poor planning was actually a rather masterful plan. It heaped up evidence against a bunch of known losers so the head guy would be home free – with a truck load of money, so to speak. But still, who was Mr. Big??

It left only Slim, most thought. Slim was a welder by trade, up in Buckingham. He was down on his luck, had been in a few scrapes with the law, but not basically a bad guy. Neither was he smart enough to have planned such a caper.

Not allowing members to know each other had been a stroke of genius. Only Mike and Slim were aware of one another. Clearly, for some reason, that hadn't mattered. Or, perhaps another set up so they could finger each other if caught. Nobody knew the leader.

The moment I stuck my head inside the old truck in the alley, I had it solved. The cat at the farm had smelled of lavender perfume. The direction sheets had smelled of lavender perfume. The check for the car had smelled of lavender perfume. The inside of the old truck smelled of lavender perfume.

Mrs. Evans was "Mr." Big. As it turned out the bank was soon to foreclose on her farm. It was all she had. She was a bright person as attested to by the fact she had a college education and had been a school principal. She knew that her ne'er-do-well grandson, Mike, had the necessary contacts to recruit the men and obtain the specific type of guns she wanted. Since Mike had the intelligence of a flea, she manipulated him anonymously without him ever suspecting she was involved. And the cashier's check (they are not signed by the bearer) used to purchase the car, had reeked of lavender when received by the Ford dealer. It represented the exact amount Mrs. Evans had withdrawn from her account on the day the check was dated. It had been her most incriminating mistake, yet, except for some high-powered sleuthing, would never have mattered.

Why involve the extras? In her confession, she indicated it had been her pay back to the town for the robbery – incriminating a half dozen known criminals so they would be taken off the streets forever in exchange for the money. Laudable, perhaps, if perverted.

Alone in my room that evening, I went to open the window. There on the tree branch sat the well-perfumed cat, stalking me, lips turned up at the edges, eyes glowing in the dark. It screamed and leaped in my direction, claws and teeth at the ready. I closed the window without a nanosecond to spare. Who would have expected that kind of loyalty (or intelligence) from a cat? I'd have to find it a home and quickly before Anna got the urge to adopt.

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Case # 3

The Old Man with the White Beard

A first-person account by Kevin Kress – Teen Detective

By David Drake

I nodded to the old man with the white beard as I entered our town's one Café – Bertha's – after school. He was leaving and made no move to recognize my presence or the fact that I had held the door for him.

"Who's the old stranger with the white beard?" I asked Bertha.

"He didn't say. Got a burger and fries and a chocolate shake. Savored 'em like he'd never had 'em before. Sat at the front table like he was lookin' everybody over who passed out front. He left this on the table. Pretty clever I think."

He had used a napkin to fold a dragon – Japanese origami. It was very good complete with little wings off the shoulders and a spiked forehead. I wanted to take it apart and see how it was folded. I didn't want to destroy the work of art. A dilemma. I often faced such dilemmas. I opted to wait. Bertha really hadn't given it into my care anyway. She noted my interest.

"You can have it if you want."

Okay, so she did give it into my care. I sat it on the counter and slid onto a stool.

"Eatin', sittin', waitin', or talkin'?" she asked as she lifted several dripping glasses from the dishwater to the drain board behind the counter.

“Just the last three this afternoon, I guess. Sittin’ and waitin’ for Anna and talkin’ to you for old time’s sake.”

“We do go back a ways, don’t we?”

“Had my first milk shake right here on this stool.”

“I remember. You tried to pick it up and drink it and the straw hit you in the eye.”

“And to this day I’m terrified of milk shakes.”

“At the rate you can put ‘em away, you must face your fears pretty good.”

She cut a slice of apple pie and set it down in front of me.

“New recipe. Need your expert opinion.”

I knew it wasn’t a new recipe and she knew I knew it wasn’t a new recipe, but I played along. Bertha was a good woman. She knew my family didn’t have money for me to spend on after school treats so she found ways of providing them. She’d have been offended if I had refused. She made fantastic pie!

“Any ideas about the old gentleman?” I asked.”

“Probably close to your dad’s age – hard to tell behind that scraggly brush he wears. He did ask if I knew where he could find Stony Adit. I had to tell him I didn’t. You know anybody by that name, Kevin?”

“Know anybody by what name?” Anna asked as she entered, lowered her backpack to the floor, and took a seat beside me at the counter.

I took a fork from the glass where they were kept on the counter and handed it to her as I pushed my pie to a spot half way between us. She took a bite – probably the smallest bite of apple pie to ever cross a human’s lips. She nodded her approval in Bertha’s direction and raised her eyebrows. How she could have even tasted that tiny speck escaped me.

“So, anybody by what name?” she repeated.

“Stony Adit,” I said.

“I’ve never heard of any Adit family around here,” she said, having neatly gained access to the conversation. “There’s Stony Winters, but he’s off at college.”

“We came up blank as well.”

“Why the interest?” she asked, that time chipping away a larger piece of MY pie. You’d think I’d learn to restrain my

generosity around her.

“A stranger – older gentleman with a white beard – asked Bertha about him.

“I just passed him on the sidewalk (old man, not Stony). I smiled at him but he looked right through me.”

“See what he made while he was here,” Bertha said picking up the dragon from in front of me and moving it to Anna.”

She takes my pie, then my dragon. What’s next? I smiled. She was my best friend.

“A work of art.”

She turned it one way and the other, examining it from several angles.

“Remember that story about the flying dragon your dad used to tell us when we were little kids?”

“Oh. Yeah. Donald the Dragon.”

“Didn’t he have something pretty much like this that he’d fly around as he acted out the story?”

She picked it up and directed it through a series of swooping motions.

“He did and he’d never let us touch it. Said it was precious gift. Wonder whatever happened to that. I wonder if . . . (light bulb time!)”

I hurried through the last leavings of the pie, thanked Bertha, and pulled Anna out the door with me.

My name is Kevin Kress, teen detective.

“What’s gotten into you? You were almost rude back there.”

“Bertha understands my good-natured impulsiveness. I’ll explain to her later.”

“How about explaining to me right now?”

“The old man with the beard is about my dad’s age. He makes paper dragons. Dad was given a gift of a paper dragon. Want to bet both dragon makers are the same guy?”

“You know I never bet with you – you only bet on sure things. So, we’re on our way to ask your dad about it, right?”

“Right. Got a jog in you this late on a Friday afternoon?”

“I can run you into the ground, backpack and all,” she said taking off to achieve a head start.

She couldn't beat me and I never just let her beat me but I'd jog along beside her until time for me to bypass the porch steps and leap up to the door. The door had always been like home plate or the string across a finish line. Anna was always a good sport and always gave things her best effort. It had been said that we were alike in those ways.

Dad and mom were sitting in the living room watching some afternoon talk show.

"Got a minute, Dad?"

"Always. You know that."

Mom spoke.

"If this is a father and son thing Anna and I can go into the kitchen and share secrets about you two."

It produced similes all around.

"No. Open forum. You may have some input for us, too."

I took the dragon from behind my back and presented it to him. He glanced from it, to me, to it, again then reached for it. I placed it in his open palms.

"This is Willy's work. How did you come by it?"

I told the story – short version.

"So, Willy may be back in town? I'd sure like to see him. He and Clarence and I were the Three Musketeers when we were in Junior high school."

His face changed to one of deep sadness.

"What?" I asked.

"Sit down. It's quite a story."

We sat on the floor, our backs against the sofa facing his recliner. Mom turned off the TV.

"After graduation, Willy went to live with his Uncle in Decatur. He'd been offered a job at better pay than he made here at the plant. I came close to going with him but some certain young lady turned my head and I got married. Willy came back for our fifteen-year high school reunion – had it in December, I remember. It was a good time, catching up and all. He'd never married. Mother and I still hadn't been able to have children at that point. We had a lot to share.

"The night before he was to return to Decatur the jewelry store was robbed. It was loaded with inventory to meet the anticipated Christmas season sales. Mr. Reed, the

new owner, had invested his life's savings in that inventory. Back then insurance still wasn't a staple of business procedure. He and his wife lost everything. The jewelry was never recovered – except for one special-order necklace that was found in Willy's hotel room. A silver dinner knife was left at the scene. It had been used to jimmy the store's back door lock and it had Willy's fingerprints on it. He was convicted and given an extraordinarily long sentence, which the judge said he would reduce only when Willy gave up the location of the stolen jewelry. Those of us who knew Willy knew he'd been set up but all our efforts to prove that failed. We put up a six-thousand-dollar reward – a huge amount of money back then. We never stepped back from that offer. It's still valid. The money sits in a trust fund at the bank.

"I tried to keep in contact but he wouldn't answer my letters so eventually I stopped writing. Thinking back on it, I imagine this is about the time his sentence would be finished. He couldn't reduce it by telling where to find the jewels because he didn't know where they were."

"Why wouldn't he contact you right away as tight as you'd been?"

"Not sure. Maybe ashamed of where he's been all these years or how prison life has changed him. Maybe not sure what I thought about him even though I certainly let him know in my letters. I don't know. I just hope his visit isn't motivated by vengeance. He may know or have a good idea who framed him and he's come back to take revenge."

"Shall I let him know who I am in case I run into him again?" I asked, knowing full well that I would 'run' into him again.

"No. Not yet. Let it play out a while. I hope he'll come to me. It would be okay if you two nosed around a bit, I suppose."

I saw him wink at mom. I didn't know for sure if that meant he'd just given us his permission or he knew there was really nothing he could have done to stop me from looking into it. Well, if he had outright prohibited me, of course, I'd have let it drop. I respect my father more than anybody in the world. Anna and I got up to leave and headed for my room.

"By the way, son, I had lots of phone conversations with

the chaplain at the prison where Willy spent his time. Rev. Ashley – Richard Ashley. He may be a starting place if he's still there.”

Having a starting place was always a good thing. I turned back to him at the door.

“Does the name Stony Adit mean anything to either of you?”

My parents looked at each other, then at me, shaking their heads.

Five minutes later I was speaking to Rev Ashley from my bedroom in the attic. The story became immediately complicated. He knew Willy well and disclosed that he had been released from prison several weeks earlier after serving his full, forty year, sentence. Under the terms of his sentence getting out early for good behavior or any such thing was not allowed – only if he gave up the jewels. The judge that tried the case was long dead so it wouldn't be he who Willy would be gunning for.

There had been another jewelry store robbery the same week up in Burlington. In that one the owner had died as a result of complications from being knocked out. The robber was caught several weeks later and was serving his time in the same prison as Willy when he had a heart attack and died. His name was Benny Caldwell also a local man. Before he died he had reportedly confessed to his cellmate, Lucky Dupree, that it had been he who had pulled the heist in Springfield – not Willy. Dupree had passed it on to another prisoner who told Rev Ashley a few days after Willy had been released. Ashley had been trying to get in contact with Willy. Being hear-say after hear-say the information probably wouldn't work to clear Willy's name but the chaplain thought he should know, just the same.

“Does the name Stony Adit mean anything to you?” I asked the chaplain.

“It does, in a way. A few moments before Caldwell, the real thief, died, he asked his cellmate to tell Willy to find a Stony Adit in Springfield. That's also hear-say based on what Lucky told another prisoner. There has never been a Stony Adit in this prison and I have no further information about it.”

“You've been a big help, Sir. Thanks.”

“Let me know if there is anything further I can do and tell your father hello. I’ll say just one more thing. The longer Willy remained here, the sadder and bitterer he became. He was a complete loner – well, he and any book he could find to read.”

“I’ll certainly give you a call if I have any more questions. Thanks again.”

That had produced lots of new information in just a few minutes. Anna had to restate it all to be sure she understood. I always expected that she would. I listened patiently.

“So, Willy was framed and Benny Caldwell, the real thief, admitted to his cell mate that he had pulled the robbery. His dying wish that Willy know the truth was never delivered to Willy – the cellmate, this Lucky Dupree guy, kept the info to himself. I guess, actually, he did leak it to somebody who eventually told the chaplain. The name Stony Adit from here in Springfield was like some kind of a clue Caldwell wanted Willy to know about. Now, both Willy and Lucky are out of prison and at least Willy has showed up back here.”

“That’s the way I understand it. We need to find Stony Adit if we can. I’m sure that must be why Willy’s here.”

“What do you suppose Adit had to do with anything?” Anna asked.

“I have no idea. Isn’t that great! A mystery!”

“I declare you are a strange kid, Kevy Kress. Most guys get off on beating each other to a pulp. You get a rush every time an inscrutability comes along.”

“Inscrutability? Wow! You been reading Charlie Chan Mysteries again.”

“I know some big words, too.”

“I didn’t intend that to put you down.”

She knew that, of course.

“So, how do we track down this Stony guy? Bertha didn’t know about him and she knows everybody. Same with your dad and mom.”

“Let’s do an internet search. I subscribe to a locator service that can track down addresses, phone numbers, utility bills – lots of stuff. Well, you know. Let’s see what we get.”

What we got was nothing, nada, zilch, zero, zip, nil.

“We could look through the old yearbooks at school and

see if we could find him,” she suggested.

It was a good idea.

“Let’s start with dad’s and mom’s old yearbooks.”

We soon had a dusty, musty, box full of books rescued from a dank corner of our basement. There were eight. Mom was two years behind Dad and kids began getting yearbooks in Springfield in 7th grade, the first year of junior high here.

We enjoyed laughing at the hair styles and clothing they wore back then but there was no Adit let alone a Stony Adit.

As we re-boxed the books and slid them out of the way under my bed an idea hit me.

“Adit. You know what an adit is?”

“Why no, Sir, the pretty girl said, looking up at the wise young man.”

I gave her more of a smile than it deserved and got back on track.

“An adit is a mine tunnel.”

“Okay. So . . .?”

“Maybe it’s not somebody’s name but a clue for a location – a mine.”

“A stony mine – like a rock quarry?” she said.

“Not a mine but a mine tunnel or shaft. And, we both know where there’s a mine.”

“Where one used to be, you mean. The rock slide on the cliff behind Mr. Tom’s mansion covered it up a decade ago.”

“Thus, the ‘stony’ part – adit entrance covered in stones. It makes a great clue for a local boy assuming he had been kept apprised of the stone slides and such.”

“Except that local boy – Willy – was in prison when the opening got covered so he would have no knowledge of the stony part.”

“That’s where we, more knowledgeable folks, come into play,” I explained.

“So, we are about to go spelunking?”

“Technically, spelunking is the exploration of caves,” I pointed out. “I suppose it’s close enough. Where are all these big words coming from? It’s Friday. School’s out for two days.”

“Three, actually. Monday’s a teacher planning day.”

“Let’s get packed. We leave in an hour.”

“Tonight? It’ll be dark, Kevy.”

“So much the better. It will be dark inside the mine any time of day. Doing it at night saves daylight for us to use some other way.”

“For some reason that even makes sense,” she said although her forehead remained creased. “I’ll need to go home and change and repack my detective back pack.”

“It will likely be wet and cold as well as dark. Mines tend to run pretty steady at 57 degrees Fahrenheit. I’ll bring self-generating flashlights – the kind you shake to recharge. Cell phones won’t work from that far underground. We should take my little hand driven generator and the mini hotplate. You still got those packets of freeze dried survival food?”

She nodded.

“Bring a few.”

“How long are you planning for us to be in there?”

“Never know. It’s that ‘be prepared’ thing, I learned in scouts. I’ll bring some glow in the dark spray paint to mark our path. I knew that would come in handy for something other than Halloween. And matches, and candles.”

We completed our list and Anna left. It took little convincing to get mom to make sandwiches. I packed bottles of water. The backpacks were going to be heavy.

“Do we want to know where you’re going?” dad asked as I hit the floor from my attic room with my backpack strapped in place.

“Probably not. I’ve left our destination on a sheet of paper on my desk upstairs if you need to . . . well, in case . . . you know.”

“I probably don’t but I trust you to be careful and use good judgment.”

I hated it when he said that. I could feel the responsibility card dropping into place at the back of my mind. It frustrated my spontaneity and creativity. It wasn’t that I wasn’t responsible or that I didn’t use good judgment it was just that dad and I had never quite come to an agreement as to the exact meaning of either term. I figured mine was right for young guys and his was right for old guys. That never

changed the pressure in the back of my mind, however.

Although Mr. Toms' former residence (he's dead now in case you missed the Wilson Street Case) was no more than five minutes from my place, it was a good twenty-minute hike to get down to the base of the cliff behind his place. There was no climbing or descending the sheer cliff itself. I walked to Anna's place. She was coming out the door as I arrived. We headed south on Main 'till we came to Mission Road. We took it east to the valley and then began the cross-country trek along the stream.

The cliff was already in deep shadows and we had to do some first class searching to find the opening. Finally, there it was – further up the cliff than I had remembered. The rains and snows during the past thirty years or so had washed away much of the base leading up to it. We rested just a moment before beginning the climb. Getting there was the easy part, as it turned out. The rocks that covered the opening were huge. The large wooden beam across the top of the entrance was still there although the right-side timber that held it up had collapsed, leaving it at an angle. The other vertical timber was still intact. As we got up close to it we saw a small opening near the top just under the cross beam. It was black as ink inside. I removed two long, flat, rocks that lay loose in the opening. With those gone the hole was nearly a foot and a half square – plenty large enough for us to enter. I took a close-up picture.

We had been in caves and wells and root cellars, and such before and neither of us was claustrophobic – bothered by small enclosures (but then you knew that). I slid my backpack in ahead of me. Anna handed hers up to me and I did the same with it. I entered first and took a minute to examine the area with the beam of my flashlight. The roof and sides seemed solid. I extended my hand and helped Anna inside. It was immediately twenty degrees cooler. A breeze flowed in after us suggesting another opening through which it exited the mine, probably at a higher elevation. I had no idea where that was but understood it probably meant a steady supply of fresh air and maybe less dampness than I had expected.

Since the opening had collapsed before we were born

we'd never had reason to explore the mine – or even know about it until we studied local history in social studies several years before.

Sometimes Anna had a way of emphasizing the obvious.

“It’s dark in here.”

I chose not to respond but tapped on the flashlight hanging from her belt.

“So, what is it we’re looking for?”

“Not sure. It would be nice to run across the jewelry, but I assume we may, instead, only be treated to a clue as to where it is.”

“What if it is a trap designed to do in Willy Baker?”

“Well, that would not be good but the bad guy was in jail. Not sure how he’d have had time to booby trap anything from in there, and remember, it was dead Benny not live Lucky who first brought up the adit thing.”

“Unless he rigged something before he robbed the store, knowing he was going to hide it in here,” Anna said spreading her warped interpretation of hope and joy there in the darkness.”

“I doubt it. He was soon caught with the jewels from the robbery that had taken place several nights before the one Willy got framed for.”

“How did he get framed, again?”

“Dad said a one of a kind, special-order, necklace was found in his hotel room and his prints were found on a knife used to open the back door of the jewelry store. I have a theory about all that but I’ll save it for later. Let’s move out – or in as it is.”

The area extending back thirty yards from the main mine shaft was some ten yards wide – I imagine to accommodate cart storage and miner gatherings at shift changes. The floor was fairly smooth as I imagine it had needed to be while being worked all those years before. It narrowed to eight feet all quite suddenly. As we walked on we came upon areas that had been carved out much wider and higher than the basic shaft. It would have been where the ore had been located and dug out.

I had the map from social studies class. The tunnel

would soon begin branching and re-branching. It worked its way around inside that rock hill for some three miles all told.

“That’s probably not a good sign,” I said, shining my flashlight beam at a pile of rubble that looked to have recently fallen and mostly covered the entrance to the first off branch to our right.

I studied the map. It was short. Since we weren’t sure what we were looking for we needed to cover every foot of tunnels. I climbed the rubble to the opening that was left at the top. The stones made a fairly stable footing. I motioned Anna to follow and we were soon on the other side. It was damper in there and the air movement we had in the main tunnel had disappeared. It smelled musty and the air was stale and unpleasant.

As we walked, we used our flashlights to search all the surfaces hoping something important would jump out at us. We discovered why the tunnel was so short. It dead-ended into an underground pond. Water poured into it from a lazy, single stream, water fall – maybe ten feet above its surface. The water was surprisingly clear. There had to be an outlet equal to the inflow. Perhaps at the bottom or through the rear wall. Maybe it fed into the stream in the valley below. Although it was unique and interesting, neither of us thought we had discovered anything related to the goal of our search.

We heard noise coming from back the way we’d come. We worked our way back. It was necessary to keep at least one light lit or we’d be reduced to feeling our way along the damp, slimy, wall. I kept the beam low and right in front of us hoping to shield it from distant eyes.

When we reached the pile of rubble, we found that the opening at the top had been filled in with several sizable stones.

“Another rock slide?” Anna asked.

“I wish it had been. Those rocks have been slid into place. They didn’t just fall. Somebody put them there.”

“That means we aren’t alone in here,” she whispered.

“Seems that way – somebody who knows we are also here. Who do you suppose? Willy? Lucky? The ghost of Mr. Toms?”

“Stop that. I don’t believe in ghosts but the idea still

sends chills up my spine.”

“Sorry. We know Willy is in town. Maybe he figured out the stony adit thing like we did. He may think we are here to steal his treasure.”

“Shall we call to him then and explain our intentions?” Anna asked.

“We don’t really know his intentions – whoever it might be. The chaplain said Willy had grown more detached and unhappy during his last years in prison. He may have left any compassionate tendencies back behind bars. Or it might be Lucky or somebody else who heard the rumor in jail and also figured out the clue.”

“It would need to be somebody from around here, wouldn’t it,” she said thinking out loud. “Who else could make the transition from Stony Adit, the name, to stony adit, meaning the rock covered entrance to an abandoned mine?”

“You’re probably right. Benny, the real thief, could have filled his cellmate in on local stuff, I suppose.”

I was thinking out loud. I figured if somebody had put the rocks in place up there then I could take them out. My only question was how long to wait before I began working on them.

I crawled to the top of the rock heap. There were cracks large enough to see between the new stones. The area on the other side was dark so looking helped like none at all. I turned my ear to the crack and listened. It may have been footsteps. If it were, they were getting fainter – moving away. It didn’t tell me whether the person was walking further into the mine or back out to the entrance. I figured there would be no reason to barricade us that way if he had found what he had come for, so he was probably moving deeper into the tunnel system.

I conferred with Anna and we decided to see if we could pull the new rocks into our side of the opening. We hadn’t spoken of what we would do once we were free again.

It took ten or so minutes but we eventually had room to slip through. We moved to the center of the main tunnel and stood quietly, listening. There was nothing to hear. I figured if push came to shove we had the advantage by having the map. I doubted if an outsider would have that – unless of

course he had been a kid here and explored the mine on his own so he knew it by heart. It was like the rock and the hard place thing.

“I say we go on in deeper,” I suggested at last.

“I’m with you. Sure do wish we knew what we were looking for.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. What greater hiding place than an abandoned mine. Now I’m betting it’s the jewels we’ll find.”

“Okay. But where? Every yard we cover has holes in the wall where they could have been stashed.”

“If you were going to hide a crate or case or something in here, what part of the place would you choose?”

“Well. Let’s see. Not just inside the entrance. Anybody walking in could stumble on them even if the person’s purpose wasn’t to recover them. I’d probably not leave them in main tunnel or even the first side tunnel, either. I’d feel safer about it if I left them after say two or three turns – two or three tunnel changes.”

“I follow you. Good thinking. Can’t risk just having any recreational spelunker trip over them. Let’s take another look at the map.”

It appeared that such an arrangement of turns and tunnels began a few dozen yards ahead off to the left. Left, then right, then left; none of the turns were at a dead end in the tunnels. It was really the only section that had those characteristics.

I put the map away and we moved out. I had to wonder if the person in there with us had a better idea about what he was after – a trunk, a crate, a lock box, a suitcase, a . . . I didn’t know what else.

“How much stuff do you suppose he had to bring in here?” I asked

“Jewelry is pretty small. Dumped into a sack of some kind it probably wouldn’t take up much space – maybe one or two square feet.”

“I wish we knew if it had been removed from jewelry boxes or taken box and all. With boxes, would mean considerable bulk.”

“I see what you mean.”

We also saw something else – the speck of a flashlight beam heading back our way from deeper into the main tunnel.

“There’s our tunnel off to the left just ahead?” I said. “Douse the lights and we’ll make our way toward it.”

Anna held onto the back of my belt – her habit in tense situations. I felt along the wall and found the opening. The light ahead grew bigger. I sprayed a spot to mark our trail and we moved down the new tunnel. The next turn would be some twenty yards. I still didn’t feel safe about turning on a light so I continued to feel our way along the wall.

“We should have put those rocks back in place on top of that pile of rubble so whoever closed it in would think we were still on the other side,” I said, a thought coming way too late, of course.

Anna followed without comment. I glanced frequently back toward the tunnel entrance, hoping to see the light as it passed the opening. Finally, the area back there lit up. The light was brightening and drawing closer to the opening of our tunnel. My how I hoped it would pass right by. It didn’t. The beam was directed into our tunnel. We were still a good ten yards from the next turn.

I pulled Anna down with me into a squatting position up against the wall. We looked back to see what he was doing with the light. Was he just taking a look near the entrance or was he coming in to explore. He was coming in but kept his flashlight beam trained close to him as he searched the sides and ceiling and floor. He was still searching, too.

We stood and continued. It was difficult to step quietly. There were lots of stones to step on and roll off of. We reached the opening of the new tunnel. Then we had at least fifty yards to cover before the final turn. I lit my penlight – just enough to let us keep the wall in sight. We used it to guide us and were suddenly able to make much faster progress than we had in the dark.

At the final turn, we moved inside the new tunnel and stopped. I wanted to be able to peek around the corner and watch for the light. The tunnel he was in went straight ahead, past the opening, for quite a way. Again, I hoped he chose to continue moving ahead.

Again, he didn’t. One of two things, I figured. Either he

knew where he was going, which would mean we were also on the right track, or he had some way of sensing where we were – a high tech heat sensor or some such thing. I supposed there was a third. He was going about this just as aimlessly as we were and by chance made the same moves we had. The fact that he had missed the turn the first time – he'd gone past it in the main tunnel and had to come back – suggested that he probably didn't know where he was going. Or, maybe he'd run into a dead end down there – a rock slide or something.

We had some time before he would arrive and we really had no place to go. The final tunnel, which we were in, dead ended in another thirty-five yards – like being cornered in a box canyon. I unshouldered my backpack and removed my trusty sling shot. I was accurate from twenty-five yards and could get a squirrel's attention from thirty-five. He was still too far away.

"I'm going to lay down a pepper blast of tiny pebbles. Help me find them – quarter inch will be best."

"I loaded the leather ammo pouch, stepped out into the other tunnel, pulled the rubber sling back a full arm's length and let fly. I was back out of sight before he knew what had happened. I hoped he would assume the roof was falling in on him and leave.

I peeked.

He kept coming, the flashlight beam spending more time on the ceiling than before. I had him scared or at least more cautious. Our end of the tunnel was still in darkness. I repeated the process several times.

"He'll soon be close enough for a direct shot. Find me a nice round three-quarter incher."

"She found a dandy. I looked around the corner. Thirty yards. . . . Twenty-five yards. . . . At twenty I stepped out and took a solid position in the tunnel, aimed at where I estimated his head had to be and let fly."

The recitation of profanities that he spewed in our direction suggested I had hit the mark (or, more likely, Lucky or Willy!). The movement of the light stopped.

"Another stone," I whispered.

She had already collected a palm full. She was a great

assistant, well, partner, actually. I reloaded and stepped back into the tunnel. The light was positioned so that I could see the man's outline. He was a very large man. Plan 'B' popped into mind. I fired again. Again, a hit. Again, a string of unique vulgarities – perhaps prison terms. I was sorry Anna had to hear them.

I whispered to her.

"He's really bulky. We can out run him if it comes to that. Should he arrive at this corner, we will flatten ourselves against the inside wall here, and when he turns the corner we'll run like deer back toward the entrance. You with me?"

"Of course."

I peeked again. He still hadn't moved. I hesitated to shoot a third time not wanting to anger him in addition to having hurt him. I hated hurting people. We waited. I kept my eye on him. Soon he turned and the light retreated. Apparently, he hadn't made the connection between the rock and the possibility a person had been responsible for propelling it in his direction. He had no reason to think we had escaped from the dungeon he had arranged for us earlier. I watched his light until it turned back toward the entrance.

"He's gone," I said.

We both sighed. Anna hugged me. I suppose I hugged her back. I was relieved that we were both safe.

"We started out to search the end of this tunnel," I said. I suppose there's no reason not to continue."

Anna agreed and we walked on down the tunnel. It ended in a dead end, just the way it was shown on the map. There were half a dozen timbers and several picks scattered about the floor. There was a wooden wheelbarrow missing a wheel. Nothing of interest to us.

We took our time returning back through that final tunnel and used our lights to make one last search of the walls and ceiling.

Ten feet from the connecting tunnel, we were blinded by a beam of light. Apparently, the man's retreat had been a ruse. He had returned in the dark and was waiting for us.

"Plan 'B'," I shouted."

We put it into action as well as if we'd been running drills on it all afternoon. It suddenly occurred to me there just

might be one small problem. What if he had a gun? We and our flashlights would be sitting ducks. And, we couldn't outrun him if we didn't have the beams to light our way.

Too late to contemplate such a possible miscalculation. We ran side by side. The man trailed, significantly.

"Zigzag," I said to her barely above a whisper.

She obviously got my message.

"One more thing. When we get to the end of this tunnel you cut your light and run to the left. I'm going to make sure he sees my light turn right. Once out of view I'll cut mine and run back through the darkness to join you."

I hoped he would take the bait and keep moving down the tunnel to the right toward the entrance. I had no next step in mind. Once he was satisfied that he couldn't find us, I banked on his believing we had already left the mine.

We both made our maneuvers and were soon reunited some distance on down the tunnel which had been to our left. When we heard the man cursing behind us, we stopped and turned to see what was going to happen. He took the bait and we watched the light disappear in the other direction. We stood there resting and panting.

"One thing we've determined through all this," I said.

"What's that?"

"The man who's been in here with us is not the man with the white beard. This guy is much larger."

"And that should provide some sort of relief?"

"Apparently not."

I smiled into the darkness.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Well, he was coming from up here when we first saw him, which probably suggests he didn't find anything. I think it's safe to say he knows what he's looking for and if he didn't find it then there's a mighty slim chance we will – not really knowing what it is. So, maybe we better return to the entrance and think it through again."

We started back, taking care to keep our lights low and our steps quiet. I understood that he could be lurking at any point waiting for us. He had already proved he was a cagy adversary. I wasn't sure why he seemed so interested in us. Surely, he understood that if we were still searching we hadn't

found anything either – you just don't keep looking once the lost has been found. I mentioned that to Anna.

"Well," she said, "maybe he just doesn't want anybody else to have figured out this is the hiding place. With us somehow silenced then he might believe he has more time to keep looking."

"A good take on it," I said. "Terrifying, but a good take."

Within the half-hour, we were back at the entrance. We approached it with great care. I peeked out through the opening. The sun had been replaced by a bright moon, which lit the area. I spied the big man walking back toward town – well, a big man at least. We exited the mine and followed, making certain we kept out of sight. He didn't look back. Apparently, he did believe we had left ahead of him.

We stopped at the hotel – small, narrow, three stories, and the only one in town.

"Walt," I said as we approached the desk. "Need some info on your guests tonight."

"Only have three. Mrs. Michaels in 201. William Bask in 204. And E.L. Dupree in 306."

"Dupree a big guy?"

"In all dimensions," Walt said illustrating with his hands and arms. "He asked for a room on the top floor facing the street."

"And Bask – got a white beard?"

"Sure does. Hope that helps some with your case."

"Our case? How do you figure there's a case?"

"You two are always on a case. You were searching for lost puppies when you were four. Found Mary Davidson's wedding ring in the well when you were five. Don't try and tell me you're not on a case."

He was right. I grinned and thanked him for his help. We left. I stopped in the lobby to call Janet, the night desk person at the police station. I asked her to see if she could send me a picture of the silver knife in the Willy Baker case.

As we walked down Main toward my place I turned and looked back at the hotel. Someone was watching us from a second-floor window. It had to be the white bearded man – Bask/Baker. He was the only one with a front facing room on the second floor.

We crawled up the tree to my room so there wouldn't be questions to answer from Dad and Mom. I pulled the carton of year books out from under my bed to check on names. Willy Baker was technically William Baker. Bask was an alias; why he felt he needed one I didn't know. Maybe it was like dad mentioned – he was here to do harm to somebody. I figured Dupree was Dupree. Interesting that he used his real name.

"He has no reason to suspect anybody here knows his name," Anna said.

She was right. How would he have known I'd spoken with the chaplain? He felt secure in his anonymity.

"Look out the window, Kevy."

It was a white bearded man – Willy no doubt. He was standing some distance away at the back of our yard, leaning against a tree. He'd followed us. I figured if he was that interested in us, we needed to become interested in him.

"You stay here and stay visible through the window," I said. "Make him think we're both here. I'm going to go out the side door and circle around behind him to see if I can initiate a chat with the man."

"That is insane, you know. You have no idea if he's armed or what his reason is for being out there."

"He's as old as my dad. I believe I can handle him if push comes to shove. He's a felon. He can't carry a gun."

"And Miss Compton and Mr. Jacks are both teachers so they can't make out in the copy room during their planning period."

"Ok. I'll give you that. Dad said he was a decent person. I'm going with that."

"So long as you know my vote is against it."

"Acknowledged. I'll record it in any account I render of this case. (There. You are my witness.)

I circled around and came upon him from the rear.

"Good evening," I said casually not wanting to give him reason to become defensive.

"He didn't look startled, but did turn his head and look at me."

"Jake's grandson, I imagine," he said, giving me a quick once over.

“Son, actually. One of those late in life mishaps.”

“Or treasures, as I’m sure would be the view of your father.”

I had to nod. That was the case.

“You wonder what I’m doing here,” he said, not asked.

“Here here at this minute or here back in Springfield?”

“A sense of humor like Jake. Both, perhaps, but here here specifically.”

“Well, yes to wondering about the here here. I believe I know why you’re back in town.”

“Really?”

“I know about the raw deal you got in the courts and how Benny framed you. I recently learned that he had admitted to it. I’m so glad you’re free again. I also know about stony adit. At first I thought it was a name, Stony Adit, but now I figure differently.”

“Oh. You’re ahead of me, then.”

“An adit, filled with stone.”

“Adit. A mine entrance or main mine tunnel. You know about one filled with stone?”

“The only one around here. Landslides over the years.”

“You are some detective, young man.”

“So, I’ve been told. Don’t you want to talk with dad? He can hardly wait, but didn’t want to press it with you.”

“Really. I figured he’d written me off.”

“Didn’t you get all his letters?”

“Letter? No.”

“They were intercepted then because he wrote to you for years.”

The old man’s eyes filled with tears.

“I had no idea he knew I was in town.”

“Not much happens around here that Anna and I don’t know about.”

I pointed to Anna’s silhouette in the attic window.

“Come on into the house. You’ll make my dad’s . . . decade!”

As we walked toward the house I sensed another light bulb turn on above my head. Willy had said that adit meant both the mine tunnel and the entrance. I had assumed only the first meaning. It brought into meaningful focus something I

had seen as we exited the mine. I had a new idea.

Like I had known it would be, the meeting of old friends was a fantastic and tearful event. I left the older folks together. As Willy and I had approached the back door, I had seen a reflection in the window glass – Lucky lurking in the background. The bearded man who had been following Anna and me, had been followed, himself. I needed to give him the slip and get back to the mine.

I explained my theory to Anna. She didn't resist any part of my new plan – I guess that would be 'C'. The adults were enjoying old times around the kitchen table allowing us to leave, unseen, through the front door. Imagine that – sneaking out of the house through the front door. It was a first for me, I'll tell you that!

We had reduced our paraphernalia to two fanny packs so we could travel light and swiftly. Hitting a good trot it took us only a short time. I brought three black trash bags and long thumb tacks. We split the bags and tacked them to the top timber over the outside of the opening so we could light the area inside and not worry about having that be seen.

"So, where's this super-duper hiding place you think we'll find?" Anna asked as I lit the lantern.

I held it at shoulder height and approached the timbers that still valiantly held the entrance open – well, open enough.

"See!"

"No!"

"There!"

"There where?"

I pointed. Secured against the inside of the top timber, was a second timber – not nearly as aged as the others. Earlier, that disparity had entered and quickly left my mind. The rock walls on each side of the entrance had been notched to support it. It had very likely been due to the double support that had saved even the tiny entrance that was left. I felt along the top of the newer beam. As I suspected, it had been hollowed out. I figured that originally there had probably been eight to ten inches between it and the roof of the tunnel. In the blackness up there, it wasn't noticeable and, since it had been installed years after the mine closed, no one had ever had reason to see it. I imagined the plan was to stash the jewels

from both robberies there, but Benny got caught before he had a chance to bring the first take to the mine. It had been well planned in advance.

"It's full of small rocks and pebbles," I reported, referring to the hollow space in the center of the beam. "We need to remove them."

Anna kindly ignored that fact that small rocks and pebbles meant the same thing. There was just room enough for our hands and wrists to slip between the timber and the roof. It was a laborious job. Fifteen minutes later, with aching wrists and raw finger tips, Anna was the first to report a find.

"Got something here," she said.

She slowly withdrew her hand. Clapsed in her fingers was a necklace. Within the next thirty minutes we had withdrawn close to hundred separate pieces of jewelry. There was much more but I felt it was safe to leave it there in its decades old hiding place. We put our take in a sack and returned to my house.

The folks were still at it in the kitchen – probably on their third pot of coffee. We heard laughter even before we entered. How nice!

"Can you guys hold it down in here? The neighbors are complaining," I joked placing the sack on the table in front of Willy.

"What's this?" he asked, turning in his chair to look up at me, clearly puzzled.

I untied the drawstring and dumped the contents onto the table.

Even Anna and I were amazed at what we saw – diamonds, rubies, several emeralds and dozens and dozens of feet of gold and silver chains. There were rings and earrings and broaches and bracelets and watches. It was mind boggling.

"This is what you stole, Mr. Baker. Don't you recognize it?"

They all turned and looked at me, puzzled, voices stilled.

"I'm kidding, guys. I'm sure Benny's prints will be all over the stuff and prints stick to gems forever. I've heard that prints of long dead queens of England have been successfully

removed from the Crown Jewels.”

“But what about my fingerprints on the knife used to jimmy the store door?” Willy asked. “That was what really convicted me and I could never figure it.”

I took out my phone and opened the picture that had arrived from Janet at the police station. I showed it to mom first.

“This bring back any memories?” I asked.

“It certainly does. It was the pattern of flatware used by the school cafeteria when I was a girl. It was quality silverware for a school. A gift I think. I washed dishes to pay for my lunch.”

“And where was the reception held at that famous fifteen-year reunion I’ve been hearing about.”

“At the school cafeteria.”

“This is actually a picture of the knife Mr. Baker just mentioned. Here’s what undoubtedly happened. Willy, if I may call you that, used a knife at the reception like everybody else. It would have his prints on it, of course. Benny, looking for a stooge from out of town, noted his name tag and address, picked up the knife, left it at the crime scene, and planted the necklace in the hotel room of the person named on that tag. It was all strictly impersonal – wrong address at the wrong time, you might say.”

“This is some kid you’ve raised,” Willy said looking at dad and mom. “Thank you, son.”

“No problem. I need to make a quick call. Give me a minute,” I said.

Anna followed me into the living room. I called Mr. Ruskin, the bank president. His son had been my scout leader until I opted out for other, less structured, activities.

“Mr. Ruskin. Kevin Kress. Got a quick question for you. Remember the Jewelry store robbery way back when – the one that resulted in the conviction of Willy Baker? I understand there is still a reward fund sitting in your bank – drawing interest, I assume. What do you suppose that’s worth at this point?”

“I do remember, of course. Well, figuring it has doubled in value every seven or eight years – the way interest yielding investments do – and since then it would have doubled maybe

six times from its original \$6,000.00, I'd estimate something around \$350,000.00. Don't tell me you found the jewels?"

"Is that a direct order – not to tell you?" I teased.

He chuckled

"No. No. Of course, not."

"I'll get back to you in the morning."

I hung up. I had one more call to make.

"Rev. Ashley. I'm sorry for bothering you so late. But if I recall correctly, prisoners who have served time and are later shown to have been wrongly convicted, get a large sum of money from the state, is that correct?"

"You're referring to Willy, of course. Yes, you are right but since Benny's confession was strictly second level hearsay, he cannot be cleared of the charges."

"But, if his innocence could be proved, like somebody else's fingerprints were found all over the stolen property, wouldn't you think he would be acquitted?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure that would be the clincher."

"And how much would that settlement come to?"

"One hundred thousand dollars a year for time served."

"So, in Willy's case, that would be. . ."

"Well, let's see. \$100,000 times forty years – I figure that at something around four million dollars."

"Thanks. Get the wheels turning! I'll have proof of his innocence to the courts within the week."

We returned to the kitchen.

"Willy, I'd like to hit you up for a loan – about two mil for starters."

Everybody laughed. Everybody except Anna and me although we both did break smiles.

"I don't get it," Willy said.

I laid out the details. He cried. I told him that although technically he was probably also eligible to collect the \$350,000 reward from the trust fund – because without his presence the jewels would never have been found – I wondered if he would consider seeing that it went to Mrs. Reed, the widow of the Jewelry Store owner. Of course, he agreed. Sometimes bad stuff turns out okay – although not really, I suppose – considering the lifetime lost in Willy's case.

"I tell you what I want to do," Willy said looking at us

around the table. “For starters, I want to pay for these two-young people’s college education.”

“That’s very generous, Sir, but our educations have already been covered by your old friend, Clarence Toms. I’m sure the high school would see it as an honor, though, to set up the William Baker Scholarship Fund, to help needy kids further their education.”

Anna spoke.

“You know there is still one thing left to do.”

We all looked puzzled.

“We need to let Lucky Dupree, out there, know his quest for ill-gotten booty is over.”

“Ill-gotten booty?” I said breaking out in laughter.

“Yes. Are you all illiterate? I just finished a report on Robert Louis Stevenson’s book, *Treasure Island*, and there’s ill-gotten booty on virtually every page.”

“I think I’ll let you explain the phrase to Lucky,” I said.

Anna stood and marched to the back door, eager to take on the man who scared her out of her wits in the mine. Poor Lucky! Poor, poor, Lucky!

Case # 4

THE CASE OF THE MYSTERIOUS PORTRAIT **A first-person account by Kevin Kress, teen detective**

By David Drake

I love the waterfall on Stony Creek. It runs along the base of the cliff that leads up to Mr. Toms' now vacant mansion. The waterfall sets half a mile or so beyond that to the north and comes off a rise of some forty feet. It spills over an outcropping of layered gray stone into a large basin – the local swimming hole. The hill through which it cuts rises another ten feet to the east and twice that to the west. It's not a tall waterfall. It's not a short waterfall. It's just right I always figured. Like most of the guys in Springfield, I often take a cooling dip during the heat of the summer. In November, such as it is today, the water is unpleasantly chilly and I opt never to be unpleasantly chilly. It's why I traded in my light jacket for my medium jacket this morning. I'm Kevin Kress, teen detective.

I'm on a short mission to check on Zeke . . . somebody. Not sure what his last name is, come to think of it. He's always just been Zeke the skinny hermit that lives in a cabin next to the top of the waterfall on Stony Creek. It's an odd name, come to think about it ('Stony Creek' not 'Zeke'). Every creek I've ever seen is 'stony'. Oh well. The universe will continue spinning around me regardless of whether or not the name of a single creek makes sense.

No one has seen him for over a month. I've had a rash

of cases so haven't been out to see him for a while. He usually gets into town at least once every two weeks. Shops, banks, has a cup or two of Bertha's good coffee (well, I've been told it's good. I'm not a connoisseur of the bean, myself).

I've just climbed the winding path beside the waterfall to the east and have Zeke's place in sight. Odd, there is no smoke coming from his chimney. Zeke has been cold natured from the first day I met him – back on one of my preschool adventures into forbidden places such as this. I imagine Anna was with me. As best friends, we seldom got into trouble separately.

Pounding on his door didn't raise him. I tramped around the grounds calling into the outhouse, looking inside the wood shed, walking through his little barn. His horse, Maggie, was there in the corral next to the barn. She was skittish at my approach. That was something new. She'd known me since she was born ten years before. I offered her the lump of sugar she had come to expect. She took it but remained upset. I forked out some hay from the barn and she took after it like she hadn't eaten in days. Hmm?

I returned to the cabin – one room, a fireplace on one end, built-in bunk beds – odd for a hermit I always thought – and a few pieces of roughhewn oak furniture. I knocked again. Nothing. I peeked in the windows. I saw him on the bed so I opened the never locked door and went inside.

Sadly, he had passed away - very recently, I assumed considering his condition. He must have fallen ill and was unable to make it into town. He was not a cell phone guy; in fact, he had no modern conveniences at all. I covered him and called the police. It was Hoffer who answered. I filled him in. He said it wasn't his jurisdiction but he'd notify the Sherriff. Within minutes they called me. Two deputies and the coroner were on the way.

I looked around while I waited – mostly for the happy memories it brought me. On the round table in the center of the room – the very place I had my first sips of black coffee, yuk! – was a large envelope – perhaps twelve by eighteen. Oddly, it had my name on it. Actually, it read: 'For K Kress, Springfield.' It wasn't sealed. I puffed it open and peeked

inside. A picture of some kind. I removed it. There was a charcoal portrait of a girl – maybe six – maybe a bit younger. With girls, I can never tell. She was pretty with a beautiful smile if the rendering was to be believed. There was also a slip of brown paper – most likely cut from a grocery bag. On it was a strange verse.

So, some juice is sweet,
And some is quite tart.
The two seldom meet
In clandestine art.

Some clues are quite cold.
And some clues are not.
But this truth be told,
Should really be HOT.

Oh, and then there is the nutter.

Clandestine means hidden, secret, concealed, I thought to myself. What could juices have to do with art, clandestine or otherwise? Hot was spelled out in all capitals. That surely indicated it was a most important part of the . . . clue, I guess. But why a clue in the first place? A clue to what? To how he died? I figured the coroner would figure that out. And why was all this addressed to me? And who was the girl? And that last disconnected part about a ‘nutter’. To what did it refer? I had a thousand questions.

He always liked hearing me tell about my detective cases. Perhaps he figured whatever this was all about required the talents of a sleuth. It’s what he always called me, His ‘young super sleuth’.

Within minutes I heard the Sherriff’s helicopter and within an hour, old Zeke was on his way to town for the last time. I decided to keep the envelope and its contents. . . well, clandestine, for the time being. If later on it seemed the law guys needed it I’d happily hand it over. It was addressed to me so it wasn’t like I was removing something that didn’t belong to me.

They put a lock on the door when they left. That

wouldn't keep me out, of course. I knew how to get into the root cellar in back and up through the trapdoor in the floor and into the cabin.

I called Anna and gave her the news. It was a sad walk home. I had never thought of the two of us as being really close and yet, now I understood that we had been. It was not a good way to start a weekend – for either of us, I suppose. Zeke would have smiled at that so I did, too.

Anna was sitting on my front steps when I walked up. She was always there for me. Zeke was much more my friend than hers but I knew she hurt for me. I could tell myself he was old so it was okay. It wasn't. I could tell myself he was just an occasional acquaintance. He wasn't. What I could tell myself was that he had assigned some sort of mission to me and I would see it through to its conclusion.

I sat down beside Anna and handed her the envelope. She read what was on the outside, and then removed the contents.

"Odd odor," she said sniffing the paper. "A pretty little girl. Know who she is?"

"No idea."

"Odd."

"Odd, what?" I asked scooting closer to get a better look.

Anna smiled at me. My scooting had not been intended to prompt a smile. Surely, she knew that. She pointed to the lower corners.

"No artist's signature or date. Charcoals and pastels are almost always signed and dated."

I hadn't known that. I tucked it away in my gray matter.

"Read the verse," I said.

She read it out loud. Her furrowed brow kept furrowing further. Clearly it made no more sense to her than it did to me.

"Ideas?" I asked.

"I'd say start with the 'nutter' line. What's a nutter?"

"Like, 'Please pass me a nutter sandwich,' maybe."

"It deserved knuckles to my shoulder and that's what I got."

Perhaps it was the pain. Perhaps was the time my

mind had to process it all on the way home. I suddenly remembered about nutter.”

“Zeke called his corn shucker a nutter because he used it to shuck walnuts. Pour them in at the top with their husks on and out they’d shoot at the bottom huskless – shucked. As a small boy I spent many hours turning that big wheel with my little arms. He always joked that by the time I became a teenager I’d have the largest biceps in the county. He was wrong but it sure kept me turning that wheel.”

“So, you can make sense out of the phrase: Oh, and then there is the nutter?”

“Only as a reference to the machine. It’s added like an afterthought. Like it was not the main clue but would in some way be important. I’ll have to go back out and examine it, I guess. Maybe he left another envelop with a less esoteric message.”

“Esoteric?”

“Obscure. Mysterious.”

“Well, the verse is certainly, that. What’s with the juice references, do you think?”

“Let’s talk it through,” I said. “Sweet juices are like orange, apple, apricot, peach, and so on. Tart or sour juices are like lime, lemon, grapefruit, kumquat, cranberry. Nothing comes to mind.”

“It mentions art – like still life, maybe, a picture of a bowl of fruit?” Anna suggested with a shrug.

“But the art we have here is not a still life; it’s a portrait,” I said not really clarifying anything. “Move on to the cold and hot clues. What is H-O-T about the picture of a little girl?”

“He wasn’t one of those strange old men, was he?” she said.

“Zeke? No. Never. He’d been married once a long time ago. He never said why he didn’t seem to be married any more. Never spoke of his wife. Never saw a picture of her.”

“Could this be his daughter?”

“I have no idea. Why would he give me a picture of his daughter and wrap it up in such arcane verse?”

“Arcane?”

“Unfathomable?”

“You are full of esoteric and arcane words this afternoon, my friend.”

Her references made me smile. Zeke had been a man of big words. I suppose the occasion was bringing them out in me.

“Do you know of any juices or anything referred to as juices that are used in painting or drawing?” I asked, grasping for anything at that point.

“Not really. I think Michelangelo used to use grapes and cherries to color the paints he made.”

“I doubt if old Zeke would be making reference to Michelangelo. Think about that line, should really be hot. This, should really be hot. This what?”

“This clue, I suppose.”

“Good thinking. I think you may have just got our foot in the door. Some clues are cold and some are hot, he said but this one needs to be hot. I’m sure that’s the right interpretation. Now if we just knew what clue he was referring to.”

“All that seems to be left, then, are the juice references and the nutter thing,” she said.

“And the portrait. I think something about this portrait is the main clue. But clue to what? Why would penniless, essentially friendless, old Zeke, need to put any message in the form of a word puzzle? Why couldn’t he just come out and say it?”

“Maybe he was playing with you – knowing how you love a mystery.”

“It’s a possibility but it’s nothing he ever did while he was alive.”

“So, do we do more tonight or get a fresh start in the morning?” she asked

“Let’s try it out on my folks. They just might have some idea about the girl.”

We went into the living room where mom and dad were sitting together on the couch reading.

“Evening, guys,” I said trying to disguise my impatience in an air of casual sincerity.

Dad turned to mom and looked at her over the top of his glasses.

“Was that his, ‘I really need your help but I’m willing to make nice for a minute or so first’ opening line, dear?”

“It did sound that way to me, dear.”

Think of that! Parents who actually understood their teenager!

They put their books in their laps and tried to look erudite. (intellectual)

“Okay. So, you can read me like a book.”

I offered them the portrait.

“Any idea who this might be?”

Mom took the picture.

“Odd odor,” she said sniffing.

What was it with that female sniffing thing?

They studied it with great care. Mom responded.

“Baxter. It could be Amy Baxter back when she was four or so.”

“Amy Baxter? More please.”

“Margaret Baxter’s daughter. Her husband had been killed – war, car, I’m not sure. They just lived here a year or two.”

“And when would that have been – that she looked like this at four?”

They sat and looked at each other, each doing some calculations. Dad spoke first.

“She broke her arm on the playground, remember.”

Mom nodded.

“And Dr. Sword took care of her.”

“I think you’re right,” Mom said, nodding and adding:

“He’d just come to town and taken over old Doc Murray’s practice.”

“That’s right so that would have been about thirty years ago.”

“Yes. About thirty years ago.”

Mom turned to me as if she were going to deliver their decision.

“We were here. We heard the discussion. Thanks. Where is she now?”

“Amy contracted meningitis, I believe it was, and it paralyzed her so she couldn’t walk,” Mom said.

“And she and her mother moved down to Decatur. I

haven't heard anything about them since."

I started to walk Anna to the door so she could head home. I turned and on a whim asked if they knew anything about using fruit juice in painting or creating portraits like the one I had just showed them.

"Don't know about juices in painting but I did use lemon juice this morning to make a lemon nut bread if you're interested," Mom said.

Plans change. Anna and I headed for the kitchen. Mom's fruit breads were the finest in town – ask anybody – well, take my word for it. I'm known as an honest sort.

Anna cut, and I poured milk. You have to have milk with Lemon Bread. It's like a rule of Nature.

I spilled some milk on the table and with my finger I used it to write A-N-N-A on the wooden tabletop. Connections suddenly burst forth in my brain.

"Let me see that portrait again. There's a smudge. There. See it? Where her hair meets her left cheek."

"And this is crucial because . . .?"

"Because I just solved the riddle in the verse."

I guess I said it in a loud voice since mom and dad were soon in the kitchen with us. It was too sensational to just lay on them so I set out the clues.

"Smudge on the picture, cold lemon juice, writing on the table or on some more relevant surface."

Dad had the answer immediately. Every 4th grade boy knows the process.

"Invisible ink made from lemon juice. Don't try writing over ink or it will run – smudge."

"One gigantic gold star for the head of this household," I said. "And the next step – reading the invisible message."

Again, it was dad.

"Gently expose the back of the paper to heat, usually a flame. The invisible message magically darkens and appears. It also usually fades again but there's plenty of time for the reading."

"Gee, dad. When was the last time you earned two gold stars in the same night?"

Mom's eyes sparkled.

"We don't discuss such things with our son."

She took his arm and smiled up into his face.

That was embarrassing. I moved on rapidly; very, very, rapidly.

“Turn on the burner on the stove top,” I said, directing it to Anna.

She did. With great care, I held the paper eighteen inches above the flames so it wouldn’t catch on fire. As the heat rose and warmed the paper words gradually appeared. We would soon have our answer.

Or not!

She turned off the flame. We all bent in close to read what had developed. As one, our brows furrowed.

It read: *Amy, daughter, BLB 21, All 4 her, Love you, Dear one.*

I lay it on the table – the dry side of the table. We studied it some more.

“Well, the ‘Amy’ seems to verify the name of the girl as you two remembered it,” I said. “Daughter? Could that mean Zeke’s daughter? It makes no sense if the girl’s father was dead. The three initials and 21 make no immediate sense to me. Do they to any of you?”

Heads shook all around.

“The last four words seem to be a message – probably to the one in the picture. It’s an affectionate affirmation: Love you, Dear one.”

“Seems pretty obvious,” Anna said. “Zeke was Amy’s father and for whatever reason was in hiding needing to stay out of her life. In essence his dying words are for her, telling her he loves her. And, he has entrusted Kevy with the task of delivering his message to her.”

Mom and dad nodded in agreement. I also knew it was probably true but I initially shied away from the responsibility that placed in my lap. I diluted the revelation by returning everybody’s attention to the three initials and the number 21. I turned again to my folks.

“Know anybody with those initials - BLB?”

I received two shrugs, but they were that ‘not certain’ variety rather than the ‘don’t have any idea’ variety. They ran through a number of possibilities – mostly just first and last initials. It’s amazing how few of our acquaintances’ middle

names we know.

“How about the ‘All 4 her’ phrase there in the middle?”

It was an open invitation to anybody. Again, it was Anna.

“It sounds like there something of value and he is stating that it is all for – f-o-r – her, Amy. His estate, perhaps?”

“Zeke with an estate?” I said. “Doubtful. He had to scrimp to save enough to buy hay for Maggie to winter on.”

Dad and mom nodded. It was certainly the take everyone had about him.

Dad had a question.

“Did he ever say what he had done for a living before coming here – if he had ever worked?”

“Not really. He did say once that when he finally got smart enough to hang up his coat he never put it on again. I figured he worked outside or in some cold environment. I was pretty young at the time. Haven’t given it any thought since.”

“That could also mean he had been a professional – a suit and tie man,” Dad said. “And that he gave it up for a simpler life style – no suit and tie.”

It made some sense. Most of the unique, seldom used, big words that I knew I had learned from him. My. My. I hadn’t considered that. And his books. He had a virtual library on the wall opposite the fireplace in his cabin.

“He talked sometimes about a place called New Haven – like he had once lived there.”

“Where?” Anna asked.

“New Haven,” I repeated.

“Yale,” Anna said.

“The University?” I asked. “The Ivy League University?”

“One and the same. He may have been associated with Yale in some way.”

“That is unbelievable. I need to go do a web search and see what I can find out. I’ll be busy late. Good night. I’ll take the bread and a quart of milk with me – if I hear no objections.”

I didn’t, so I did.

Once upstairs I called back down somewhat sheepishly.

“Any of you have any idea what his last name was? I just may need to know that.”

“Reinhold,” came dad’s response. “Zeke Reinhold.”

“Thanks. And Mom. Magnificent lemon bread. And Elsie. Delicious milk.”

I laughed myself over to my desk. It had been an ‘esoteric’ reference to Elsie the Borden cow in an old TV ad. Probably no one down there got it. OR . . .

“MOOOO,” came a three-part chorus from below.

I thought my quiet smile would break my cheeks. It didn’t. I got to work.

By three fifteen that morning I had enough of the details to satisfy me. Professor Ezekiel Wentworth Reinhold, PhD, had taught journalism (newspaper writing) at Yale for five years. He and his wife, Margaret, had a daughter. When she was 18 months old, the professor disappeared and was never heard from again. He had been working on a book exposing some underworld family. The lore that grew up around his disappearance was that the family had done him in. His wife moved to Springfield, where her older sister lived. She went back to using her maiden name – Baxter. The sister died soon after their return. Margaret taught high school English here for two years. When her daughter became paralyzed she moved to Decatur where better medical help was available. Rumor in New Haven had it that she changed her name and went into hiding – no reason given about why that would have been. Her current whereabouts and those of her daughter, Amy, are unknown. That wouldn’t stop me. I already knew she used the name Baxter here in Springfield.

Now, how to come by the meaning of the initials, BLB and the number 21. It occurred to me that the final ‘B’ might stand for Baxter. I was too tired to continue. I crawled into bed no longer as sad as I’d been earlier because I realized the old man had depended on me to carry out his final wish. It told me he had respected me and had faith in my ability. I’d not let him down. I was soon asleep.

As often happens when one’s mind gets headed in a certain direction just before going to sleep, my dreams provided several long forgotten or at least misplaced pieces of information. On several occasions when I was younger, I had

come upon Zeke at his place while he was speaking with a man in a black suit, who, upon my approach, drove off in an expensive, black, SUV of some kind. Zeke explained it away as some tourist who was lost. He'd given the man directions. Once maybe, but not three times over four or five years. And, probably not even once, since there was nothing in that area to attract tourists and only the most primitive vehicle trail from the main road up north to the cabin.

And then the mail. Zeke never received mail. He didn't even have a mailbox at the post office and there was no delivery out to where he lived. Sometimes, though, when he had come to town and I was tagging after him he'd stop at doctor Sword's office and without so much as a word passing between him and the receptionist, she'd reach under the counter and pull out an envelope for him. He'd nod and we'd leave.

I never saw a return address but it was stamped and cancelled. It had been sent to him through the mail in care of the doctor. Upon awakening the next morning I determined that it probably happened regularly during the first week of every month. He'd go from there to the bank and the envelope was never to be seen again. As a kid, it was nothing to catch my interest. Grownups got mail and grownups went to the bank. End of story. I'm sure I would have been chattering at him about things that were far more important to me rather than asking what he was doing.

Now I had to wonder. A monthly letter that made its way to but not from the bank. A check of some kind. A pension maybe. Social security, maybe. He had a little money sometimes – he bought the staples needed to sustain his life – and Maggie's. In my mind, I'd never questioned where a non-working person might get money to spend. I doubted if the bank would be able to tell me about that – confidentiality and all. He might have kept one of those envelopes around at his cabin. I needed to get out there.

"You decent in there?" came Anna's voice through the open window from outside in the tree.

"Depends on how you define decent. Probably, yes, for a men's locker room."

"I could have just come in without announcing myself,

you know.”

“Just kidding, you know. Give me thirty seconds.”

“Okay. Enter at your own risk.”

I pushed the window wide open and lent her a hand – not that she needed that but I found myself doing such things for her recently.

“We need to get back out to Zeke’s. Earlier the better. I want to get there before any law guys begin snooping.”

“Umm, I smell coffee,” she said.

“That signals breakfast. Go down and share secrets with Mom. I’ll be there as soon as I finish dressing.”

Ten minutes later we and our fanny packs were on the trot toward Zekes – a fifteen-minute jog if we didn’t stop to pet calves or watch sitting rabbits wiggle their noses.

“Look there,” I cautioned as we came up the rise along the waterfall. “Somebody heading for the woods behind the cabin.”

“Two somebodys, actually, she said, pointing as a second figure dashed across the fifty yards of meadow.

“Suits. Were they wearing suits?” I asked.

Anna nodded. We held back and waited a few minutes.

“I suppose if they ran off so we wouldn’t find them there, they won’t come back to bother us,” I said.

We moved on to the cabin. The padlock the deputies had put on the front door had been cut off. We entered. Nothing looked as though it had been touched except the books. They had been cleared off the shelves and lay in heaps on the floor.

“I have no way of knowing if any are missing,” I said.

I moved on.

“Where would he keep mail and important papers,” I said looking around, mostly talking aloud to myself.

“Desk drawer?” Anna suggested. “That cabinet? The boxes under the bunk? A secret passageway that leads directly into a gold mine beneath the cabin?”

“I smiled. She was trying to lighten my spirits and she had.

“You take the desk and cabinet. I’ll take the boxes.”

“And should I know what I’m looking for?”

“An empty envelope. One that was mailed, opened, and emptied.”

Before I could pull out the first box, she crossed the room to me.

“Like this?” she said holding a handful of envelopes.

“Yes. Just like those. I remember how they looked now. Brown, governmental looking with a red return address printed in the upper left. They were window envelopes so, once emptied, there was no way of telling how they had been addressed. Good snooping, Anna. Anything else of interest in the drawer?”

“A writing pad and several pencils. Mostly it was bare.”

I put the envelopes in my fanny pack.

“Let’s get a look at the nutter out back.”

It was sitting in the same spot up next to the barn where it had always sat. There were a few fresh husks scattered around the ground. Anna leaned to pick one up.

“I wouldn’t. They’ll stain your hands brown for a month.”

I looked inside the wide funnel near the top. It was designed to receive dried corn on the cob but mostly used there for walnuts in the husks. Toward the bottom where it narrowed, it curved toward the center of the contraption. It was dark. I lit it with my penlight.

“Something,” I said.

I slid my arm in and could barely reach it. A plastic sack. I managed a good enough grasp between my first two fingers to loosen it and soon had it removed. It was a small grocery sack taped up with duct tape, probably to keep it dry and make it difficult for little varmints to tear asunder. It felt empty and smelled awful. Perhaps the clue was the sack itself.

“Scalpel, Nurse Anna,” I said handing her my knife and holding the top edge of the sack toward her.

She soon had carefully cut a slit cut across the bag. Girls are better at careful than guys. I pulled it open.

“Something in there,” I said as I reached in. “Two somethings, actually. A key and a mothball. Zeke added it to keep away the mice and squirrels. Like me, they dislike the odor.”

“Does that mean your kin to the rats or that the rats have your good taste?” Anna asked.

It would receive no response since the answer was clearly the second possibility.

I handed the key to Anna.

“Strangest key I’ve ever seen,” she said.

It was four inches long and had numerous uneven grooves cut at varying lengths along both of the bottom edges. It only faintly resembled the keys used inside Mr. Toms’ mansion being larger and wider and much heavier. I had never seen it before nor had I ever seen a similar one. Anna was as puzzled as I.

“Maybe a safety deposit box or the key to a storage box in a bus station,” she suggested trying to help.

“Could be either, I suppose. We need to get back to the bank before it closes.”

“It’s only 7:10. We got lots of time before noon.”

“Since we foiled that bank robbery a while back, they have been rather friendly with us, haven’t they?” I said. “There’s something else I want to do before we leave.”

I explained that I wanted to see if we could lure back the guys that ran off as we came upon the cabin. We’d give the impression we were leaving and then once out of sight double back. There was a huge oak tree that I liked to climb as a boy. It still had the boards nailed to it that I’d put there to use as a ladder to get up to the first crotch.

Ten minutes later we had settled into that familiar old perch. It seemed to have shrunk! Anna kept watch on the meadow. I adjusted my camera for the best telephoto shots I could get. I didn’t have my best lens with me.

Before long, out they came, hunched down at first as if rushing to board a helicopter. I took pictures. They reentered the cabin. I called the sheriff’s office and notified them of the trespassers. They could do or not do whatever they wanted.

We were immediately out of the tree and on our way back to town.

“Oh. I did find something else, back in the cabin,” Anna said, reaching into her jacket pocket. It wasn’t in the drawer so I didn’t mention it. It was on the floor by one of the piles of books.”

She offered it to me. A piece from a keychain. A replica of a New Jersey license plate. The current year, even. In our haste, we hadn't handled it carefully enough and had undoubtedly smudged any prints that it had held. It was plastic and the chain hole had worn through the edge.

"We'll run this number on the computer and see where it leads us," I said.

As we continued to walk, I took a moment to evaluate things.

"Let's see, we have this plate number, we have pics of two well suited interlopers (people being where they aren't invited), we have the envelope with the return address, and the key. Not bad for the first sixty minutes of our Saturday morning. I think we need to go for a division of labor here. While I visit the bank and ask about the key, how about if you go back to my room, get on the computer and see what you can find out about the crime family Zeke was writing about. (Four 'abouts' in one sentence – that may be a record!) You seem to know more about that university and journalism stuff than I do. If you have time after that, run the plate – that website is on the list by the keyboard – you remember. Then see if you can trace the whereabouts of Amy Baxter. Probably under some other name. And, find out how Amy's aunt died."

"And while I'm doing that three weeks' worth of research you will be visiting the bank."

"You got it. Fifty, fifty. Like always."

She smiled knowing I'd be there to help just as soon as I could."

When I entered the bank, I went straight to Mr. Rifkin's office. We'd consulted on numerous things in the past including the establishment of my trust fund from Mr. Toms.

"Good to see you, Kevin," he said standing and offering his hand across the desk. "Sit. What can I do for you?"

I handed the key back across the desk.

"You know what this is?"

"Yes. It's called a Bank Lock Box key."

"Like a Safety Deposit Box?"

"Yes and no. We don't even have such accounts anymore – not for new customers at least. A few still exist from the old days. A safety deposit box requires two sets of

keys – the box holder’s and the banks. It can’t be opened without both. A security feature since the person wanting to gain access must prove his or her identity before the bank key can be made available. In the old BLB’s . . .

I stopped him.

“BLB for bank lock box?”

“Yes. In the old BLB system there was only the customer’s key – it was referred to as bearer access – whoever had the key had full access to it and its contents, no questions asked. It was more secret than a Swiss bank account. No records were kept on its ownership. So, as long as the rent was paid, the box was left alone. After a three-month lapse in rent, the bank drilled out the lock, installed a new one, and it was ready to be rented again. Rent was always paid in cash. Present day government regulations prohibit such an anonymous banking arrangement.

“And where are the BLBs located, just to complete my education, here?”

“Rear of the main bank room to the right of the vault door. Look like large post office boxes.”

“Thanks. I appreciate your help.”

He looked puzzled as I reached to retrieve the key. I left without giving him a chance to ask any questions and went directly to site of the boxes – drawers, actually. It was in a semi-private area behind a lattice work sort of screen. There was number 21. I took a deep breath and inserted the key. It turned easily. I slid it open. It was fifteen inches wide, ten inches deep, and two feet long – front to back. I could have slept in it up until I was two.

It contained dozens of green money bags tied shut with drawstrings. I opened the nearest one. It was filled with bills – tens, twenties, hundreds. The scene took me back to Mr. Toms’ stash (The 1010 Wilson Drive, case.) I didn’t stop to count or even do an estimate. I wondered if I should just leave things there. According to Mr. Rifkin, I had the only key. Things should be safe right there. But, perhaps as a part of the investigation of Zeke’s death the authorities would get a court order to open the box and then who knew what would happen. I took out two plastic bags from my fanny pack and transferred the money bags. At the bottom of the box was a

black and white photograph – three by five inches. It was the same picture as the one portrayed in the charcoal portrait. I suddenly understood the aroma on the portrait – the same musty smell as rose from the Lock Box. There was also a small address book. I slipped them into my shirt pocket, closed and locked the box, put the key in my wallet, and walked toward the door. I felt like I used to when I had taken a cookie from the jar before supper – certain I was about to be caught.

The guard at the door gave me a hard look – me and my two probably suspicious looking bags. I lifted one up in his direction and smiled.

“Can’t get anybody in here interested in buying my cookies this morning. Guess I’ll go try down at the hardware.”

He smiled back and held the door for me. Smooze. You either got it or you don’t, and I got it!!!!

I entered my room through the window.

“Boy, do I have stuff!” I said sitting on the floor between the two bags. I emptied them out between my spread legs. “More money. Zeke must have saved almost everything he made all these years.”

“And,” Anna pointed out,” he directed that it was all 4 Amy. Now we just have to find her.”

“There is a photograph, too – the one the portrait was made from.”

I handed it to Anna.

“It’s fuzzy,” she said.

“I noticed. Probably means it was taken from far away through an old fashioned telephoto lens. He must have gotten close enough to shoot the picture but couldn’t actually make personal contact. It would have been sometime before she got ill, I suspect – she looks robust and all in the photo, don’t you think?”

Anna nodded.

“It may be why the portrait wasn’t signed – not a sitting portrait – more of a copy job I guess you could say.”

Again, she nodded.

“I got lots of stuff, too. The return PO Box on the envelopes is for the FBI’s in-house post office in Virginia. The crime family name is DiLuca. Amy’s aunt who your folks said

died here was actually killed in a hit and run auto accident when Amy was four – about the time the photo was taken, I'd guess. The driver was never convicted but the plate was traced to a well-alibied nephew of a DiLuca from New Jersey. The plate number I found on the floor is registered to Alfonzo Girranti, also of New Jersey. I still don't have a lead on Amy's current whereabouts."

"What you been doing up here, nappin'?" I said with a smile. "That was great work. Anything about Amy's mother."

"No, without the name they used after leaving here, I'm not sure how to go about it."

"There's a trick people used to use when they needed to change their identity. They would add a fictitious person to a utility bill – electricity, gas, water, even phone. It was then like two people were responsible for the payments. Two being better than one, the companies used to allow it. Then, the person would move, sign up for new services under the fictitious name – by then a legal and dependable utility bill payer. And, the new identity was established. Won't work anymore with all the security regulations in place these days."

"Interesting, but that is relevant how?" Anna asked.

"See if Amy's mother pulled such a thing before leaving here for Decatur. If so, we may get a lead on the name she used down there."

"Oh. That's how it's relevant. I see."

She smiled.

"First, let's find Amy's mother's date of birth. Then run that date through DMV under the last names of Wentworth or just Worth – from Zeke's middle name. Men tend to go with alias names that are very different. Women tend to keep some tie-in to the real one."

"I just had a terrible thought," I said. "I mean a great thought about a terrible possibility. What if Zeke, who was in hiding and not dead, just the way you suggested earlier, came to get a look at his daughter through a telephoto lens – hence the picture? The DiLuca's found out but Zeke gave them the slip. So, they put a hit on Amy's aunt, to send Zeke a message that next time it might be his wife or daughter so he'd better disappear for once and for all."

"It is a terrible possibility," Anna said but it makes even

more sense with the FBI tie in. Maybe Zeke had shared his info with them so they could convict the bad guys. They knew the family would kill Zeke if they found him. So, they put him in something like a witness protection program and paid him an allowance every month – like a retirement account – the money in old BLB 21.”

“Okay. Just what I’ve been thinking. We need to find out if the DiLuca family was brought to trial soon after Dr. Zeke disappeared. Do your magic with a newspaper search. See what the New Haven papers might have to say about such things.”

I remembered the address book.

“And there was also this.”

I took it from my pocket and thumbed through it.

“An address book. Only a few entries, but some are doozies – DiLucas, Girrandi’s, some others I don’t recognize.”

I handed it to Anna.

“What are these black dots pasted to the ‘I’ page?”

“I didn’t see them.”

She handed the book back to me.

“I think I know. Get my microscope from the shelf.”

In a minute, we had it set up. With my pocket knife I freed one of the dots – no more than a quarter of an inch in diameter – and placed it on a clean, glass, slide. I slipped it into place and brought it into focus.

“I was right. A microdot. They were used in the spy games during the cold war era. One dot like this can hold a huge amount of data shrunk a hundred times. It’s so tiny that I can’t even read it under these lenses, but I can see line after line of what I’m sure is text.”

I moved so Anna could take a look. She nodded. I couldn’t tell if that meant she agreed with me or just that she saw it. It didn’t matter.

“Let’s see if there is an FBI contact listed in the book.”

As she searched it, I thought out loud.

“Through all of this – since we came up with the possibility that the DiLucas didn’t kill Dr. Zeke when they first had a chance – I’ve wondered why. If they knew he came to take that picture of Amy, you know they were keeping track of him. Why not kill him and get it over with? Now I understand.

They knew Zeke had something they needed – these microdots, I’ll venture – so they couldn’t get rid of him for fear upon his death the authorities would get them. As long as he had them in his possession to use as protection the bad guys felt safe, too – he’d not turned them over to the FBI. And, so long as he had them well hidden, he knew he was safe.”

“Complicated. So, what do we do with them?”

“Get them to the FBI when we find a guaranteed legitimate contact.”

“No address in here,” Anna said.

It was a slight setback but we understood about setbacks.

“Who do you think those men were we saw today?” Anna asked.

“Could either be DiLuca’s men or the FBI, I suppose. I’m now thinking the men in black suits and SUVs I used to see with Zeke were probably FBI – maintaining some sort of regular contact. If the guys today had been Feds, I doubt they would have run. With Zeke dead, they’d be in charge of things, now, I suspect.”

Anna nodded.

“Regardless of any of that,” she said, “our most important thing is finding Amy.”

I agreed. We could go to Decatur and snoop around, of course, but that would involve arranging for transportation, a place to stay, and things like that. First, we’d see what we could do from Springfield.

“Are we going to count the money?”

“I thought so at first but now I’m thinking maybe that should just be between Amy and her dad. What do you think?”

“I agree. Our job is to get them together – so to speak – not to pry or snoop into their personal stuff.”

“That’s settled then. I have room in my safe for short term storage of the money bags.”

Anna looked around my room.

“I can’t imagine where you have that safe hidden in here. And, no, I don’t want to know. Way too much responsibility. Just mention it because . . . I have no idea why.”

“Because you’re so impressed with my ingenuity and resourcefulness that you just wanted to pay homage to me.”

It brought the intended broad smile to her face. Things had become pretty heavy and depressing during those past several minutes.

Our search of the newspaper reports of crimes and trials around the time just after Zeke disappeared presented an interesting set of information. One DiLuca kingpin was prosecuted and put away for life. His brother, who was suspected of equally terrible crimes, was never prosecuted.

“Zeke passed on the dots that convicted the one but held back the evidence against the other,” I said. “Pretty sharp. He got protection and income from the FBI for the DiLuca he helped convict, and kept the rest of the family away from him by holding on to the evidence about the second man. A brilliant plan, I’d say.”

Again, there was the smell of coffee. It was like the signature aroma of our house. Anna indulged occasionally. Regardless, it was the signal for lunch. We took the ladder from my room down to the little central hall, which connected the kitchen, the bathroom, the living room and my parents’ bedroom. As I became older, I came to realize it was a really small house but that had never seemed to be a problem for me. ‘Less to clean,’ my mom would say. As a family, we really had everything we wanted and certainly everything we needed. I knew sometimes my parents felt bad that they couldn’t offer me more stuff – clothes, allowance, vacations, access to a car, things like that – but I felt that I’d been fortunate to be raised to be grateful for what I did have and to realize a guy’s stuff had nothing to do with his importance or worth as a person. It was one’s ability to love and be compassionate, thoughtful, and helpful that really mattered. I was so thankful I hadn’t been born into a snobbish, wealthy home for fear I might have missed acquiring all that truly important ‘stuff’.

“Got it all solved?” Dad asked as he finished setting the table.

“Lots of it. We believe we have most all of Zeke’s story figured out and feel confident he was Amy’s father. Still haven’t located Amy and that’s doubly important now. We’ve

located things Zeke wanted her to have.”

We took seats and as we ate Anna and I took turns filling them in on what we had discovered and restated the questions that still remained. Where was Amy? Did she know about her father? How to go about turning over the microdots and to whom? And where was the entrance to Zeke’s secret goldmine. (Just kidding.)

Another question came to me but I didn’t share it with the others. What if the bad guys knew about my relationship with Zeke and, learning of his death would come after me in search of the evidence hidden on the dots? I wondered if they really knew about the dots. I had to assume they did. I wondered if they were really even interested anymore. I had to assume they were. I excused myself and went back up to my room for several minutes. I put the sacks into my safe, locked the window, and pulled the shade. Then I returned to the pot roast and pie. I certainly didn’t want Anna or my parents to be in danger. I would make it a point to escort Anna around town for a while.

After lunch Anna and I offered to do the dishes. Mom shooed us out of the kitchen and told us to go find Amy. We went upstairs but seemed to come upon one dead end after another. On-line we found Margaret’s obituary (Amy’s mother) in a Decatur paper. It was listed under the Baxter name. No survivors or home addresses were listed. Hmmm? With her being dead the driver’s license idea wouldn’t help us get an address since once a license is retired in our state all the data is removed from the system. Amy, being in a wheelchair, wouldn’t have a driver’s license.

“But,” I said, “she would have a state Identification Card. We need to get her birthdate. Then we can start by assuming she kept her own first name. We can search Baxter first since that’s how her mother was buried. Then Wentworth and Worth if we need to. She may have even gone back to her original Reinhold name.”

There was a noise at the window. At first I assumed it was a hungry squirrel hoping for a handout – I had been known to keep a few nuts around – besides Anna. (We won’t tell her I said that. Really, we won’t!!!) The shadow cast by the early afternoon sun suggested either the world’s largest

squirrel or a regular sized man. Neither seemed like a good thing to find sitting outside my window.

I put my finger to my lips and walked close to the window. I peeked through the crack between the shade and the frame. It was not a squirrel – not nearly as cute and probably not nearly as harmless. I could see enough of the face to recognize it from the pictures I had snapped that morning at Zeke's. He had puffy cheeks with a scar from his chin to his ear. Only one conclusion: The bad guys knew where to find me and that's just what they were trying to do.

I called Officer Hoffer. As a cop, he had the spine of a jellyfish, but I was sure he'd delight in chasing a prowler. Within moments we heard the siren bearing down on us. Personally, I would have opted for the silent approach so as to not scare him off, but having him leave was certainly better than having him join us there in my bedroom.

"Go down and explain what's happening to my folks, okay?"

She nodded and disappeared through the opening in the floor.

The glass shattered. It appeared that he had opted to join me in my bedroom.

His gun was drawn. He wasn't as large as he looked from a distance.

"Get me the dots!" he said.

"Apparently, you aren't much for introductions, Alfonso. I'm Kevin."

I offered my hand. I had taken the chance that it would be the one who dropped part of his key chain. I had a fifty-fifty chance to be right. Apparently, I was right. He stopped and delivered a perplexed look. It didn't last. I continued.

"And as for Dots – I prefer Jujubes, myself."

"Don't get smart with me, kid."

He took a threatening step toward me. I circled away, hands in front of my chest, palms facing him. I soon had maneuvered so my back was toward the window putting him further into the room.

"Tell me again which dots, please, Sir?"

"The ones with the DiLuca report on them."

"Oh, the crime family DiLuca you mean."

“Call it whatever you like. I want them dots.”

“And what makes you think I would have them?”

“You was thick with Rheinhold. They ain’t in his cabin. We think that means he give ‘em to you fer safekeeping.”

The idea of ‘safe keeping’ tickled me since I was keeping them in my safe.

“Can you lower that gun? Look. I’m just a scrawny kid, here. How could I harm you?”

He thought for a moment and dropped his arm, the gun pointing toward the floor.

“Your pal?” I asked. “Where’s he? Out snatching purses from little old ladies? I’d hoped to meet you both, you know.”

“Only one topic here, scrawny kid. Give up the dots! Now!”

I heard Hoeffr’s whiny voice in the hall down stairs.

“I need to just get over there to my desk,” I said, pointing, making it appear he just needed to back up few steps to allow me to pass.

He did and was standing at the edge of the opening in my floor.

“Hoffer!” I called out.

“Kevin!” came his answer.

“Leave the hall, down there. Incoming!!!”

The intruder was clearly befuddled by the exchange. When he turned to find the source of the other voice, I ran at him full force and sent him plummeting through the hole and onto Hoffer. I had warned him.

In short order Alfonso was in cuffs and being carted away, done in, believe it or not, by no less than a scrawny kid. Anna held onto me for longer than felt comfortable, but then mom was doing the same to dad. A female, clingy, thing, I figured.

There was a knock at the front door. I answered it. Another set of men in black suits. These had badges raised for immediate viewing.

“Agents Taylor and Regis,” the taller one said. “FBI, AIT - Alternate Identity Taskforce.”

“Kevin Kress, VGYFSU.”

They frowned.

“Very Glad You Finally Showed Up.”

Contrary to the stereotype of federal agents, they actually smiled. I invited them in. We sat in the living room. Mom put on coffee. We shared information. They knew where Amy was – Amy Reinhold, as it turned out, now of Indianapolis. She was an office manager for an insurance company. Before I turned over the dots, the address book, and the cash, I did ask to examine their credentials at close range. Again, they smiled and complied without question.

“And the FBI PO Box number in Virginia is . . . ?” I asked as I hesitated half way through the return of their badges.

They recited it together as if rehearsed.

They left with the items they had come for and expressed their appreciation for our help. Agent Taylor wrote his private cell number on the back of his card saying he was available if I ever needed him. Pretty nice I thought, so I took out my card, jotted my cell number on the back of it and handed it to him.

“Same here. Call anytime you guys get stuck on a case. I’ve been known to solve some pretty tough ones.”

Case # 5

THE CASE OF THE CODED NOTES

A first-person account by Kevin Kress – Teen Detective

By David Drake

It was either the worst song ever written or it was a new case for Kevin Kress – Teen Detective.

At the end of last period when I returned to my locker to gather the books that I would need for homework that night, I found a large envelope taped to its door. It was sealed and taped and stapled shut. One just might figure that somebody wanted to make it hard to open. It was.

Not there, however. I put it in my backpack and waited until I got home – until we got home, actually. Anna was with me. She had volunteered ‘our’ services to fold brochures that advertised the Winter Carnival – an annual event at school to raise money for the extracurricular activities. Over the course of five days, there would be a play one night, a band concert Sunday afternoon, a wheelchair basketball game, a dress-up dance with corsages and boutonnieres, and a family carnival in the gym with booths where folks could pay a dollar and win a prize worth a quarter – but like I said it was a fundraiser for a worthy cause.

There were four boxes of sheets each needing to be folded twice to make the flyers. We set up in the living room so we didn’t have to carry everything up the ladder to my attic room and then back down again. Plus, down there, dad and mom would probably pitch in and help. It had been years since

they had climbed the ladder up to my place in the attic (about the same length of time since my bed had been made!).

We went right to the kitchen for a snack, which was our usual after school ritual. Once at the table I handed Anna the envelope and with far greater care than I would have used she opened it and removed the contents. Inside was a single sheet of music paper – the kind with sets of blank staves for composers to use when writing songs. This one wasn't blank. It had two lines filled in by hand with pencil – four notes to the bar and seven bars in length.

"This is crazy," Anna said even before I had a chance to look it over.

"What's crazy?"

"Look at this. Notes have sharps and flats by them that can't have sharps and flats. Let's go to the piano in the living room."

I rescued my milk and a handful of cookies and followed her. She sat and played what was written – a one finger, plunking, rendition. It was, as she had predicted, horrendous.

"Maybe you have it upside down," I joked as I began trying to get my head around it. "Play it without the sharps and flats." [Sharps raise a note a half tone. Flats lower it a half tone.]

"Ouch!" I said making a face. "That really didn't improve it any, did it?"

"What's this up here at the top?" Anna asked pointing. "Looks like a line of random letters," which she read aloud even though I was right there looking at them with her.

"C-O-K J-E-G-K Z-I A-E-N Y-K-W-Z-B Y-N-K-I-I "

"And," I added, it looks to be a boy's printing. Girls at any age are neater than that."

Anna nodded – that time with the raised eyebrows she used when wanting to exaggerate her agreement. I continued.

"My best guess is that it's a simple substitution code – a cryptogram where letters are substituted for each other – like 'K' might equal 'E', like I suspect it does in this one."

"What makes you say that?"

“ ‘K’ is the most frequently used letter in that line of code – four of them – and ‘E’ is the most frequently used letter in the English language, so it follows ‘K’ most likely equals ‘E’.”

“Didn’t you do a demonstration for some seventh-grade class about that code stuff a month or so ago?”

“I did. Had a great time. I think I know what this says.”

“Already? How is that possible even for the Great Kevin Kress?”

I chose to ignore the friendly sarcasm, instead, turning it into a warm fuzzy. (Did I really just say ‘warm fuzzy’?)

[The reader may want to print out the code on a piece of paper and follow along as Kevin and Anna work to solve it – entering the letters they discover right under the code letters.]

“Well, follow me. The first three-letter word ends in what I just figured is an ‘E’ and begins the phrase. That will likely be the most common three letter word in English, ‘THE’. There aren’t anymore ‘O’s but there are three more ‘K’s. The word, THE, is an adjective so it tells us the second word (the word it is modifying) needs to be a noun, a thing – in other words, ‘the something’. The third word has just two letters so one of them has to be a vowel – all English words have vowels. Hold that thought. Now, here’s the short cut I think I found in this one. Who is the message for?”

“You, you mean? Kevin?”

“Kevin who?”

“Kevin Kress.”

“Right. Now look at the configuration of the last two words. Both begin with the same letter. And the second one ends in double letters. I’m betting they translate as my name. That would make the two letters in the third word - ‘IS’. It’s a good position in a sentence for the verb. So what do we have at this point?”

“The blank is blank Kevin Kress.”

SOLUTION SO FAR:

Message: C-O-K J-E-G-K Z-I A-E-N Y-K-W-Z-B Y-N-K-I-I

Decoding: T-H-E _ _ _ _ I-S _ _ _ K-E-V-I-N K-R-E-S-S

“That second blank. The blank is what Kevin Kress? Again, one letter has to be a vowel and we already have found ‘E’ and ‘I’. ‘U’ is uncommon so that probably leaves ‘A’ or ‘O’. Not always, but often, three letter words have the vowel in the middle. Let’s insert a common three letter word having ‘O’ in the middle – FOR. If that’s correct then one word is left – the subject of the phrase. And what is all of this?”

“It’s like some kind of a code, I guess,” Anna said with a shrug as if wondering if that was what I meant.

“Right. And that second word has become __ O __ E, making me think the word is probably ‘CODE’, like you suggest. This was uncommonly easy since short cryptograms are usually much more difficult to solve than longer ones because in longer ones you have more opportunities to fit letters to more words.”

“So, even if it does say, THE CODE IS FOR KEVIN KRESS, why would that be needed?” Anna asked. “It was delivered to you so who else would it be for?”

“Interesting. I just imagine it holds some sort of a larger, more general, clue for later. It was an intentionally easy phrase to decode. Perhaps just to tell me the music part works like a cryptogram, also.

THE FULL SOLUTION:

Message: C-O-K J-E-G-K Z-I A-E-N Y-K-W-Z-B Y-N-K-I-I

Decoded: T-H-E C-O-D-E I-S F-O-R K-E-V-I-N K-R-E-S-S

“From the piece of sheet music let’s just list the letter names of the notes with the flats and sharps in the order they occur,” I suggested. [# = sharp b= Flat]

E_b C A# A_b A_b E# // E_b A F E // F_b
A_b// B //
D_b A_b B B E D // B_b B_b F# // F E B //
F_b E G# //

“Well, that doesn’t seem to spell anything,” Anna said when she finished transferring the note names onto a sheet of paper.

“Interesting, though,” I said thinking out loud. I count fifteen different letters each designated by combining one of the letters of the music scale – A through G – with or without a sharp or a flat symbol. Ingenious, actually. Now, if the coder has this set up to solve like a simple substitution cryptogram we’re home free.”

“You’re home free, Kevy. I’m still out in the pasture waiting for a ride.”

I smiled. An odd reference but, oddly, I understood. I was to be on my own. (It never really worked out that way!) We returned to the kitchen table where it was easier to work – and to find cookies!

[The reader may want to work it out before reading further – or not!]

“I assume the double slash marks (//) after a note on the staff represent the end of a word. With only seven actual letters to use – A through G – the notes in the musical scale must be expanded into the 26 letters of a complete alphabet. That’s where the sharps and flats come in. ‘A’ equals one letter, ‘A#’ another, and ‘Ab’ a third.”

There are four Ab’s and four E’s – the highest frequency of any letters that occur in the code. In a true cryptogram, a letter in the code cannot be the same as the letter in the message. So, the ‘E’ shouldn’t represent an ‘E’. If this has been done by an amateur, we can’t be sure of that.

Anna rewrote out the musical note code on a new sheet leaving room underneath each note code element for the corresponding letter of the decoded phrase. Then she underlined each word to make it easier to see them as separate from each other. (From // to //)

Code: Eb D A# Ab Ab E#// Eb F B A// Fb Ab// E//

Solution: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Db Ab E E A C// Bb Bb F#// B A E// Fb A G#

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

“Okay” I said. “Let’s see what we have here. The standalone ‘E’ should be either an ‘A’ or an ‘I’ – the only one letter words in the English language. Sometimes a ringer can

be thrown in, however. It looks like that's the case, here. In the code for the fifth word there is that double 'E'. Since there can't be double 'A's or 'I's in English words it does have to be something else. Hmm. So, that lonely 'E' won't give us a starting place the way it usually does."

"We need to step back and think about why this would be sent to me. Folks who know me know I deal in mysteries. Assume this is a clue about a mystery; what is that mystery? And what kind of clues could be given: names of people, criminal acts, date that something is going to take place, and so on. Since we're not currently working on a case – which would have already happened if we were now solving it – this could be a clue about something that is yet to happen. Hmm. It draws my attention to the last two words. The message might be telling us that 'something is going to happen on ____' (the date). That could make the next to the last word the month and the last one the date. If this something is about to happen let's assume it will still be in this month – February or Feb. Make that next to the last word, FEB. That would make all 'A's in the code become solution 'E's. So, the second letter in the last word would be 'E'. What three letter number, that could be a date, has an 'E' in the center?"

"Ten," Anna said knowing the answer was so obvious that it really didn't need to be said out loud.

I nodded.

Code: Eb D A# Ab Ab E#// Eb F B A// Fb Ab// E//
 Solution: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Code: Db A b E E A C// Bb Bb F#// B A E// Fb A G#
 Solution : _ _ _ _ E _ _ _ _ F E B. T E N

"Today is February fifth so that date suggests something in the future – just five days in the future. How about a time of day indicator in there somewhere? Nothing jumps out at me. How about you?"

"Not really but wouldn't the time usually come just before date – like seven p.m. on Feb ten?"

"Good thinking. The word that proceeds the date has three letters so it can't be a.m. or p.m. and there is no colon to

make it a time, something like 7:30. Notice how that word begins with double letters. Not sure how that will help us but very few words begin with double letters – eerie and Aaron are two that come to mind – so it is probably not a word but an abbreviation or shorthand of some kind. What kinds of mysteries have we solved recently – things someone might have heard about so might try to enlist our help with something similar?”

“Ghosts, bank robbery, jewelry robbery, lost person,” Anna said listing the most recent. (Cases One, Two, Three, and Four in this story series.)

“Look at the fifth word. Double letters like there are in ROBBERY, which you just mentioned.”

“But robbery has one too many letters,” Anna said. “How about robber or robbed?”

“Probably a verb not a noun (ROBBED instead of ROBBER) in that place in a message. What help does it give us if we make that Robbed? Fill in all we think we have.”

Anna added the letters. We studied what we had up to that point.

Music note Code: Eb D A# Ab Ab E# Eb F B A Fb Ab E
 Solution: ___ ___ ___ O O ___ ___ ___ ___ E T O
 B

Music Code: Db A b E E A C Bb Bb F# B A E Fb A G#
 Solution: R O B B E D ___ ___ ___ F E B T E N

“A good start. See that stand alone ‘B’ under the ‘E’ – short for the word, ‘BE’, I imagine.”

“Why shorten it like that just to save one letter?” Anna asked.

“Can’t be sure, unless it’s the work of some kind of compulsive dude – or dudette – who needed to make the words come out even in seven complete music bars even though a seven-bar passage is odd to begin with – usually even and most often eight. Maybe a first-class text sender using texting and IM abbreviations. I really have no clue. But tell me this! What gets robbed that fits the configuration of that second four letter word?”

“Four letters ending in ‘E’? HOME, maybe? Got it –

SAFE.”

“That would give us, ‘Somebody’s safe to be robbed something Feb. ten’. From the placement of the double letters, I think I have the first word – the place – our place, seven periods a day.”

“The school. With its double ‘O’s it fits all right. What could that modifier be?”

“A time of day. Can’t be a.m. because the ‘A’ in safe is represented by ‘F’. What if we just pencil in PM for the final two letters.”

“The what if is that since the first and second letters are the same, the first letter also becomes ‘P’ – PPM? Parts Per Million? I don’t get it,” Anna said.

“Or, it could be shorthand for not just P.M. – any time after noon – but double ‘P’ or much, much after noon – like late night. I think we have just decoded the disclosure of an upcoming safe robbery.”

“And that really does make sense,” Anna said. “The tenth is Sunday, the day the Winter Carnival ends. Think of all that money that will have to stay in the school safe overnight.”

Code: Eb D A# Ab Ab E# Eb F B A Fb Ab E
Solution: S C H O O L S A F E T O B(E)

Code: Db A b E E A C Bb Bb F# B A E Fb A G#
Solution: R O B B E D P P M F E B T E N

“We now have place, target, and approximate time – between say midnight after things close down until six or so Monday morning when the custodians arrive to open up.”

“Do we notify the police, now?” Anna asked.

“We have several days left. I’d sure like to find out who wrote this coded message for me and see if we can verify the information. We have received prank clues and cases from kids in the past, you know.”

“Let’s go into the living room and fold brochures while we talk,” Anna said.

She hated to waste so much as a minute. I wonder if all girls are like that. As I had expected, dad and mom had already begun the task. We spread out on the floor and I sort

of filled in my folks. They preferred not to know all the details of my cases. At their ages, they didn't need more things to worry about. I'm sure that just having the concerns that come with a teen age son were more than enough.

"A new case dropped into our laps today – well, more accurately got taped to my locker after school."

"That's nice, son," mom said suggesting that was really all she wanted to know.

I continued my conversation with Anna.

"I have a hunch – well, two hunches actually, I guess. I think the sender of the clue – message, whatever it should be called – provided us with two clues as to who he was, and yet went to great lengths to protect his identity from us. But that's a second question – why do that?"

"And the hunch slash hunches are . . .?" Anna asked.

"Drum roll, please."

Dad provided it on a nearby, empty, box. They had been busy.

"Hunch one: The cryptogram at the top of the page was to let me know that he not only knew about cryptograms but that in some way I knew that he knew about them. It makes me suspect it could be a kid from that 7th grade class I showed about codes back in December. Hunch two: The actual clue was presented as a musical composition – even if all quite terrible. That could be an intentional clue for me that the writer is into music."

"Was that piano genius kid in that group? He's in seventh, I think," Anna said.

"Jerry. Yes. He was. I knew I kept you around for some good reason."

It was a gentle pay back for the 'Great Kevin Kress' remark earlier. No one ever really won such one-upmanship contests between us. Virtually the same contest had been going on since we were five.

"What's his last name?" she asked.

"Donaldson," mom interjected. (So, she was listening!) "He played for the woman's club last month. I must say he is wonderful for his age – well, for most any age I suppose."

"You mean he outplays Anna's one finger plunking?"

There! According to my count, I was now one up, even

though I knew it would be short lived and that Anna would insist my count was wrong.

“Thanks, mom. He’s new around here, isn’t he? Know anything about that?”

“Martha Wilson told me that he and his older brother – mid-twenties, she said – moved into the old Ramsey place in November. She didn’t know the circumstances – why there are no parents involved – but I assume it’s all legal.”

Mom always assumed things were legal. I assumed that assuming that provided her with a sense of security.

“How would a twelve-year-old come by information about a robbery?” Anna asked.

Dad raised his eyebrows in mom’s direction. She returned the gesture but neither spoke. (Don’t ask me. It was their secret code and I seldom really understood.) I responded to Anna.

“Can’t be sure. We need to get to know more about his situation. Anybody know anything about his brother.”

“Name’s Bert,” dad said. “Works as a mechanic at Ronny’s Garage. I heard Ronny mention hiring him at Friday Night Bingo back before Christmas. I’ve seen him there. Seems to be a quiet kid. Haven’t heard anything else.”

I nodded. It was intended to convey both my thanks to dad and that I understood that it had been the extent of his information. It was Tuesday. I’d make it a point to run into Jerry sometime on Wednesday. I wouldn’t ask him outright if the message came from him – wouldn’t want to force him to lie – but I’d let him know I had received and decoded it. Hmm. Pulling that off might be tricky. I had the evening to figure it out – that and do twenty Biology questions.

I left the house half an hour early the next morning. I jogged around the park, which lay between the junior high school and the Ramsey house. I figured Jerry would come that way. I was right. He was short even for a boy his age. Most of the girls in seventh grade probably towered over him. I remembered how it was. I hoped he realized there was a growth spurt in his near future that would fix that. So many guys stew about that and in my experience stewing never changes anything. (So much for my sermon to myself.) He struggled along hitching his backpack into place every few

yards. I jogged in behind him and gradually closed the gap.

“Hey. Morning. Jerry, isn’t it?”

He turned and looked at me and as quickly turned back to his determined struggle toward school.

“Great morning, don’t you think?” I added.

I hoped that would force some response from him so we might get a conversation going.”

He nodded. I took that to indicate his willingness to continue.

“My mom was telling me how much she enjoyed the piano program you gave for the Women’s Club not long ago.”

“November 22nd. They were nice people.”

His response suggested both intelligence and a bit of compulsiveness – remembering the exact date months later. I’d see if I could verify that second thing since I thought it was also indicated in the setup of the music code clue.

“I have no idea how many women come to those meetings.”

“There were twenty-three the time I was there. Probably fifteen of them were over sixty-five.”

So, I got my answer. Most kids his age couldn’t remember how many were in their math class. Most kids his age wouldn’t have any interest in knowing how many were in their math class, let alone how many old ladies attended some old lady’s meeting.

“You like it here in Springfield, okay?” I asked.

I had slowed to a walk alongside him.

“It’s okay. About like any place, I guess.”

That got me nowhere.

“I imagine you must practice long hours.”

“Yes, I do. From three to six every afternoon on the piano in the practice room at the high school. More on the weekends. Should do more but I don’t have a piano at home.”

So, he would have been in the high school building after school and therefore had the opportunity to tape the envelope to my locker.

“I’ve never heard you play. Could I drop by after school someday and just listen?”

He looked up at me and made eye contact for the first time.

“You really want to do that?”

“Yes. I really do want to do that.”

“Sure. I guess. You know where the practice room is – the one with the grand piano?”

His enthusiasm seemed to pick up.

“Yes, I do. I’ll be there this afternoon if that’s okay.”

“Sure. I’ll be the little kid on the seat who has to struggle to reach the pedals.”

It was delivered with a smile – the first I’d seen. Clearly his stature problem presented more of a concern for him with his piano than with girls. I wondered if he knew that also was about to change. I’d not be the one to burst his comfortable bubble. An interesting word – comfortable – that I chose to use in characterizing the pre-girl period in a guy’s life. I’d have to think on that later but it was a fact that an interest in girls complicated one’s life in a hurry. That reminded me that I still needed to get a date for the Carnival Ball. Anna was going with David. We usually doubled. I’d ask the new girl, Tasha, between fifth and sixth periods. (Tasha wasn’t between fifth and sixth periods, you understand. It was the asking I’d do between fifth and sixth periods.)

Jerry brought me back to reality.

“You’re the detective kid, aren’t you?”

“I guess you could call me that.”

It was an odd question since I had been introduced to his class that way. He was leading up to something.

“Working on a case right now?” he asked.

It was my opportunity. One he had clearly opened up for me all quite intentionally. It was like the opening moves in a chess game.

“Just started one, actually. Clues sent in a code – sort of like the one I talked about to your class before Christmas.”

“You figure it out – the code clues?”

“I did and I have a pretty good idea that I know who sent it to me.”

I got another direct look into my face but no more conversation. I took that as my cue to leave him alone. I didn’t want to ruin what minimal relationship we had going.

“Well, I gotta git. See you later, then,” I said and I ran on ahead.

I met Anna at the fountain out front of the High School and filled her in on what I'd learned. She had information as well.

"Rumor has it that Jerry's parents are both in prison – they were part of an auto theft ring. His brother has been in and out of trouble all his life. Learned mechanics while he was in jail a couple of years ago. Seems to have kept his nose clean since his little brother fell into his care. They move a lot. I feel so sorry for that little kid."

"That little kid with a genius for music?"

"I know he has that going for him but what chance does he really have coming from that background? He'll probably end up playing for his fellow inmates someday."

"Well, instead of serving hard time at least he'd be serving 4/4 time," I joked. (4/4 time is a musical term meaning four quarter notes to a measure like in the coded message.)

* * *

"Hi, Tasha," I said approaching the new girl at her locker. "I wondered if you'd like to go to the carnival ball with me." (I have never been one to beat around the bush.)

"Aren't you going with Anna?"

"Why does everybody think Anna and I are boy and girl friend? We're just best friends. Have been since before either of us can remember anything."

"Well, in that case, I'd really like to go with you. You won't be running off in the middle of a dance to go solve a mystery of some kind, will you?"

I had to think in order to give her an honest answer.

"That would certainly not be my intention."

"I'll take that as a 'probably not'."

She had a nice smile and easy way about her. I liked that.

"Mind if we double with Anna and David?" I asked.

"That's fine. They're both a lot of fun."

"We usually go over to my place afterwards – junk food, fireplace fire, low level of illumination, parents already asleep but with their door open."

"Sounds great."

"Dance starts at seven. We'll have to walk. I don't have transportation. Me at your front door about seven, then.

Can't be the first there if we're going to be the last to leave."

"I take it you like to dance."

"I'm planning to enjoy every moment of the evening getting to know a very special lady."

"Do you ever give just a straight answer?"

"Perhaps you will be able to answer that after our evening together."

"There you go again."

I had done that one intentionally, of course, hoping she'd see it as humorous. I smiled.

"Later," I said turning to be on my way.

She shook her head, looked down, and frowned. I felt sure that a girl shaking her head, looking at her shoes, and frowning after accepting an invitation to a dance was not the best reaction she could have displayed. Oh, well. She had said yes!

I had PE seventh, last, period of the day. I arranged it that way so I could shower just before going home. We only had a tub at my place and a bath just took more time out of my day than I cared to spare.

With my head still damp, I headed for the music wing and the piano practice room. Junior High got out half an hour before high school so I figured Jerry would already be there. He was. Before entering, I watched him for a moment through the tiny window in the door. Remarkably, I couldn't hear a thing standing right there. I'd have to learn how the room was soundproofed. I loved to learn new things. Anna said I carried more useless information around in my head than anybody she'd ever known. I had never begun the conversation with her to define 'useless information' but wore her comment as a compliment regardless of how it was intended. I knocked on the window to announce my arrival, not wanting to startle him.

Jerry looked up and nodded but didn't stop playing the scale he was practicing. I entered and remained quiet, taking a seat on the only extra chair. When he finished, he stopped. (Probably a reasonable thing to do – stop when you're finished.)

"Hey. I knew you'd come," he said enthusiastically, suggesting it was a far bigger event for him than I had

suspected.

“Of course, I came. When Kevin Kress gives his word, he keeps it.”

“Unless he gets run down by a heard of stampeding elephants,” he added, giggling.

It had been in reference to some lame joke I had made when I was talking to his class. Evidently not lame to a seventh-grade male. It was great to hear him giggle like a real little kid.

“So, what kind of stuff do you want me to play – classics, contemporary, country?”

“Your choice. Some piece that’s a favorite of yours.”

He didn’t hesitate. I listened. After a few bars, he began speaking while he played.

“You know this?”

“Yes, Debussy’s Clair de lune.”

“Know what that means?”

“I guess I don’t.”

“Moonlight in French. Know Debussy’s first name?”

“Again, I’ll have to plead ignorant.”

“Claude. Claude Debussy.”

“Thank you for all that information. You play beautifully.”

“My playing technique is mechanically outstanding but it is my interpretation that makes it beautiful.”

I had the feeling that this kid’s blunt and unpolished approach with folks just might drive people away from him – a know-it-all who seemed to enjoy showing that he was superior to them. Maybe he thought that would make him seem important to them – impress them. It wouldn’t. I felt bad for him. No wonder it had been important to him that I show up. He probably had no friends and was lonely.

During the next twenty minutes, he played one piece after another. When at last he paused, I tried to start a conversation.

“Do you compose as well?”

He turned on his seat and faced me, legs swinging.

“Sure. I’m well versed in music theory. I’m working on a concerto.”

“I have a piece of music here and I wondered if you’d

play it for me. Real short and I've had trouble making sense out of it."

I took the coded music sheet from my pocket and handed it to him. He flashed a quick, perhaps frightened, glance directly into my eyes then smoothed out the paper and set it on the piano.

"It's musical gibberish," he said. "Nobody who knows the first thing about music could have written it. It really sucks."

It had been a good defensive move, I figured. Anna's one finger plunking had been every bit as good as his. Not sure I'd tell her that. Wouldn't want her to get the big head.

"I see what you mean," I said, mostly just to keep the conversation going.

"It might have some hidden meaning," he said. "Some of the European musical masters used to write their first drafts of new compositions in their own personal code so no one else could swipe their stuff before it was published."

What an interesting combination of seventh grade slang and polished English this kid spoke. I had never heard of the code-thing he referred to but suspected my education about the matter was not his true purpose. He wanted to make sure that I'd delve into it for hidden meaning. It was like verifying that I really knew what I had told him that morning.

"Well, thanks," I said as he passed the sheet back to me. "I appreciate your expert opinion, Jerry. I need to be on my way. It'll be dark soon. You okay walking home?"

"My brother comes by for me after he gets off work. He's good with his hands, too. A mechanic. I've always told him he should take up piano. He and I could go on the road together and give concerts. You need to get to know him."

I would need to digest his last offering. Seemed to hold a lot more than just the words that made it up. It was as if he felt the need to influence his bother to change directions in his life and he was counting on me to help him do that. Hmm.

On my way out the front door of the school, I met what was clearly a twenty-something year old mechanic – a ball cap, wrinkled green work uniform, and greasy from head to toe after a long day's work. The name sewn onto the shirt also helped. Bert. I introduced myself.

“You’re young Jerry’s older brother, right? Jerry, the kid pianist.”

I extended my hand. He displayed his greasy palms and begged off the shake. I nodded indicating that I understood.

“Yeah. So! He in some kind of trouble?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that. I was just listening to him practice. One in a million talent, I hear.”

“I guess. His teacher says he needs more practice time so I’m saving up for a piano so he can have one at home. ‘Til then he’ll have to keep doing it here, I guess. He needs a real good one, you know. Not just a used furniture store variety.”

“Well, I won’t keep you,” I said. “Nice to have met you.”

“And you are who?” he asked, his brow furrowed.

“Sorry. I’m Kevin Kress. Go to school here. Lived here in Springfield all my life so forget that some folks may not know me. Always glad to have new people move in. Hope you’ll be with us for a long time.”

“Why you being so nice to us – to me?”

“Should I not be? Do you have the plague?”

I pulled back with a half swivel of my shoulders in what I hoped he’d think was a humorous gesture. His chuckle suggested that he did. It brought the first smile to his face. Seemed there wasn’t a lot of smiling in that household. I could see why. That needed to change!

He entered and I left. I had several errands to run. By the time I got home, it was nearly six. There was a folded piece of bright orange paper sticking out of the mailbox – a color I couldn’t have missed. I removed it and went inside. Supper was ready. I apologized for being so late. Time had gotten away from me. Mom was never surprised by my tardiness and always good natured about it.

Anna dropped by in time for dessert. She had a way of doing that when mom was making chocolate lava cake. MMMMM!

“What’s the Halloweenie paper about?” she said referring to its bright orange color.

I had it on the table beside my plate.

“Haven’t looked at it. It may be for dad and mom.”

I unfolded it. Another coded message. That took me by surprise. It appeared to be the same uneven scrawl that had accompanied the music code.

F-H-C-P-K-C B-M-H-H A-J-N S-C-C-F D-Q-C
T-N-K-M-R-M-P-U'-K L-O-J-D-Q-C-O J-N-D J-E L-M-I
D-O-J-N-L-H-C ? F-L

After doing the dishes, Anna and I went up to my room and began working on the code – hoping it was a cryptogram or simple substitution code. Anna set it up on a sheet like the first one. I noted that near the end there was a question mark so there was likely at least one question word near the beginning – what, why, how, etc.

“The most frequent letter in the code is the ‘C’ – seven of them – probably ‘E’s,” I began,” pointing them out. “And the fifth word – three letters – ends in an ‘E’ so it is probably THE, although it could be ARE or SHE. Look at the second word – four letters ending in a double. If the ‘C’s are ‘E’s then those two ‘H’s aren’t ‘E’s (like in FREE), which is the only usual double vowel typically found at the end of a word. So, they will most likely be consonants, which means the ‘M’ will be a vowel – almost has to be before a consonant. Gives us nothing but speculation. Look at the eighth word – another three letter one. Let’s make the ‘D’s all ‘T’s. See the ‘JN’ combinations in the third, eighth, and eleventh words? One three letter word, ending in ‘T’ that comes to mind is, ‘OUT’. Let’s make the ‘J’s into ‘O’s and the ‘N’s into ‘U’s and see how that works. Show me what we have with all that now.”

F-H-C-P-K-C B-M-H-H A-J-N S-C-C-F D-Q-C
e e o e e t h e

T-N-K-M-R-M-P-U'-K
u

L-O-J-D-Q-C-O J-N-D J-E L-M-I D-O-J-N-L-H-C ? F-L
o t h e o u t o t o u e

“Now look at the seventh word. An ‘E’ before the final letter usually – though not always – makes the last one either an ‘R’ or a ‘D’. ‘ED’ would probably indicate past tense and I doubt that’s the case in this clue to a future event, so let’s

make the 'O' into an 'R'. Look at the last long word once the code 'O' becomes an 'R'. TROU__E. You should certainly get that one," I said awaiting knuckles to my shoulder as soon as she figured it out."

"TROUBLE," she said.

"Ouch!" I said. (I had been correct!)

"Good. That makes the double letters at the end of the second word 'LL'. Add all that in now."

F-H-C-P-K-C B-M-H-H A-J-N S-C-C-F D-Q-C T-N-K-M-
e e ll ou ee the u

R-M-P-U'-K

L-O-J-D-Q-C-O J-N-D J-E L-M-I D-O-J-N-L-H-C ? F-L
r o t h e r o u t o t r o u b l e

"Back to that second word. The 'M' has to be a vowel and we've already used up 'E', 'O', and 'U' leaving 'A' and 'I'. With an 'A' it could be CALL or MALL or FALL, but not TALL since we've already assigned 'T' to 'D'. With an 'I' it could be WILL, SILL, FILL, KILL, and lots more I suppose. We'll list them if we need to. Hmm. Put that aside a minute and think about the third word. Has to be YOU. It's the only 'A' in the code and 'Y' is a very uncommon letter in English. Let's tentatively pencil in WILL as the second word. It may be the question-setting word. The combination of WILL YOU' makes sense. What we got?

F-H-C-P-K-C B-M-H-H A-J-N S-C-C-F D-Q-C
l e e w i l l y o u e e t h e

T-N-K-M-R-M-P-U'-K
u i i

L-O-J-D-Q-C-O J-N-D J-E L-M-I D-O-J-N-L-H-C ? F-L
r o t h e r o u t o i t r o u b l e

"Now we're cookin'," I said. That apostrophe 'K' at the end of the sixth word. The 'K' is either going to be an 'S' or a 'T' and since we already have 'T' make it 'S'. It doesn't give us help with any other words but shows us that long word is a

possessive – something’s or somebody’s – not a contraction like can’t, won’t, or didn’t. The two-letter word, third from the end is probably ‘OF’. It makes sense with the word before it, ‘OUT OF ____ TROUBLE’. Out of what kind of trouble with an ‘l’ in the middle?” I asked out loud.”

“Could be ‘BIG’ says the Queen of Trouble,” Anna suggested with a grin. “That would give us a ‘B’ to start that seventh word. Here’s what we would have.”

F-H-C-P-K-C B-M-H-H A-J-N S-C-C-F D-Q-C T-N-K-M-
_ l e _ s e w i l l y o u _ e e _ t h e _ u s i

R-M-P-U’-K
_ i _ _ ‘ s

L-O-J-D-Q-C-O J-N-D J-E L-M-I D-O-J-N-L-H-C ? F-L
b r o t h e r o u t o f b i g t r o u b l e _ b

“Nice going,” I said. “And whose brother would that be?”

“Probably the writer’s. I see, so it would be ‘MY BROTHER’ except the spot for ‘MY’ is nine letters long.”

“It makes that final two letter thing end in a ‘B’,” I said. “Its first letter is the same as the first letter of the first word – code letter ‘F’. Assuming the writer is either polite or desperate; I’ll bet the first word is ‘PLEASE’. That decodes the two ‘F’s as ‘P’s – though the final word makes no immediate sense that way – and ‘P’ becomes ‘A’ which is of no further help, I see. Sit back and say what we have.”

Anna gave it a try. “PLEASE WILL YOU __ EE __ THE somebody’s BROTHER OUT OF BIG TROUBLE. How about making that double E word ‘KEEP’? That would make sense. The note is clearly from Jerry but how does he refer to himself – the somebody’s part?”

“I think I have it,” I said. “What is Jerry?”

“A pianist, a piano player.”

“Right. And a pianist is a musician. And, I see that fits.”

Anna filled in all the blanks.

F-H-C-P-K-C B-M-H-H A-J-N S-C-C-F D-Q-C T-N-K-M-
P l e a s e w i l l y o u k e e p t h e m u s i

R-M-P-U'-K
c i a n' s

L-O-J-D-Q-C-O J-N-D J-E L-M-I D-O-J-N-L-H-C ? F-L
b r o t h e r o u t o f b i g t r o u b l e . p b

“So what’s the ‘pb’ at the end? The chemical symbol for lead, isn’t it?”

“It is, but I imagine these are initials used for the signature. I think it will still be in code even after being decoded.”

“What? Speak my language, okay?”

“Who do we think has sent us all this?”

“Jerry Donaldson.”

“So, his initials would be JD.”

“I see the problem,” Anna said.

“Jerry is a what that plays what? I asked hoping that would unwrap the clue.

“A boy or musician who plays the piano. Ah! ‘PB’ – Piano Boy. I could probably get to like doing these cryptograms.”

“You’re getting better with everyone. Just takes some practice.”

“And patience,” she added.

“The bigger message in all this,” I said, “is intended to tell us something important linked to the music code message that we received first.”

“That it is Jerry’s brother who is planning to rob the school safe?”

It had been more of a statement from her than a question.

“Seems clear to me. Plus, Jerry is scared out of his toenails that it will mean losing Bert and he’ll be left out in the cold – again.”

Anna nodded compassionately.

“I still have to wonder how Jerry found about his brother’s plan.” she said.

“Twelve year olds are innately sneaky. Remember us at that age?”

“I’d rather forget, thank you! Why didn’t Jerry just add that it was his brother in the first note and save time?”

“He probably wanted to make sure he could trust me.”

Anna nodded.

“So, what do we do about Bert’s plans?” I asked, thinking out loud.

“Two alternatives as I see it,” Anna said. “Either set a trap for him and catch him in the act at school or do something to prevent it before it takes place.”

“Or,” I added, “do nothing and let him take his chances of being caught later by the law.”

“You’d never do that,” Anna said.

She was right. I needed to get to Bert and stop him, but I needed a plan so he’d never know that Jerry was the one who ratted him out (That’s high-class detective talk for ‘tattled’!). I figured Bert’s plan was to use the money from the robbery to buy a new piano for Jerry. A lot of good that would do if big brother went to prison and Jerry was sent to a foster home. I had an idea. It was a risky idea that involved stretching the truth just a bit. If it didn’t work I would need to formulate a Plan ‘B’.

I figured that since Jerry got himself to school mornings, Bert probably went into work early. That would allow him to get off in time to take Jerry home after the boy finished practicing. He really seemed to be trying to do right by his little brother.

Anna went home. I made several phone calls, one of which was to the lawyer that was handling Mr. Toms’ estate (from Case # One: 1010 Wilson Drive). I had an idea.

The next morning I stopped by Ronny’s Garage, early. Bert was the only one there. He was changing plugs on an ancient looking pickup.

“Morning, Bert,” I said.

I couldn’t really be nonchalant about it, me showing up where I had never showed up before at that ungodly early hour when most teens are pulling the pillow over their head to muffle their mother’s wake-up call. He glanced up from under the hood to see who was talking to him, then returned to work.

“Mornin’,” he managed.

“I’ve been doing some research and I’ve found a way for you to get Jerry that piano you spoke about yesterday at the school.”

That got his attention. He stood up and wiped his hands on a rag. Why mechanics believed that wiping their hands on such greasy rags would actually clean them up had always been a mystery to me – one I had never been able to solve. He was listening so I continued.

“The old gentleman, Mr. Toms, who lived in the mansion at the end of Wilson Drive died a few months back. He had a fine grand piano. I’ve spoken with the executor of his estate – a local lawyer – and told him about Jerry and his musical gift. He said he was sure he could arrange for the boy to have the piano. There would be a few strings attached (no pun intended – well, maybe it was!) such as you couldn’t sell it, would have to return it if you couldn’t continue to house it, have to take good care of it, and things like that. I would add that the boy’s guardian would have to keep his nose clean – legal-wise. No run-ins with the law – no assaults, car theft, no robbing of safes. Things like that you understand.”

I got the look of the century – hard, cold, puzzled, even exhibiting a flash of fright I thought.

“I see,” he said. “And nobody wants nothin’ in return?”

“Like I said, n o s a f e r o b b e r i e s.”

I drew it out for emphasis.

“Why do you keep bringin’ that up?”

He worked the rag between his hands, nervously.

Next came that really risky thing on my part and, actually, I had no Plan B in mind.

“It’s come to my attention that recently you were secretly examining the school safe after hours. I get fascinated by things like that. I tend to put two and two together and get a safe full of money from the Winter Carnival Sunday night just ripe for the taking during the wee hours of the morning by someone who’s good with his hands.”

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and started to lean back under the hood, then hesitated and stood up again.

“Why wouldn’t whoever that person is who thinks he saw me at the safe just turn me in, instead of gettin’ a ten-thousand-dollar piano for my little brother? That ain’t how life works.”

“Seems to me that Jerry needs a piano. The lawyer

needs to get rid of one. You need to stay out of trouble for Jerry's sake if not for your own."

"Sounds like a set-up for future blackmail," he said. "You'll be askin' me for favors in return for not tellin' my parole officer on me and those favors keep gettin' bigger and bigger. I've been there before."

"Telling on you about what? The way I see it there would be nothing to tell on you about."

"You have to be the strangest person I've ever met – Kevin, was that your name?"

I nodded and responded.

"I've had other people say that about me. I tend to like it. I'd hate to be just a run-of-the-mill sort of person. What fun would that be?"

Bert shook his head. He turned away but not before I witnessed a single tear stream down his greasy cheek. He sniffed, wiped his face with the rag (big help that was since a grease soaked rag is impervious to water). He turned back to me and offered his hand. I felt compelled to shake it, filth and all. It wasn't that I didn't spend my share of the time being filthy but just then I was on my way to school. Oh, well. What's a little good clean filth when it's for a good cause?

"I'll stop by later and we'll work out the details and logistics," I said. "The lawyer will probably have a document for you to sign."

"Not sure what logistics is but I'll trust you on that one, Kevin. Can we like make it a surprise for the kid? Maybe have it waiting for him when he gets home from school someday. Maybe some balloons."

"That sounds great."

"You'll be there of course, and that lawyer fellow, too, if he wants," Bert said, his spirits clearly on the rise.

I nodded. I had the idea that big brother's ear-to-ear grin would telegraph to Jerry that something was up. Still, I was sure he'd never guess what, beyond maybe the calling off of the robbery.

"I can never repay you, you know," Bert said. "But if you ever need anything that I can help you with, you let me know. I'm pretty good with cars and Ronny say I'm getting' better. And, I make a mean pizza – learned how while I was

in Juvie when I was fourteen.”

“Juvie Pizza. Maybe you should start a chain. “Best pizza a parole officer ever took into custody.”

After I said it I hoped he'd accept it in the humorous sense I had intended. His smile suggested that he had.

Only one major part of the mystery remained for Kevin Kress - Teen Detective. How in the world was I going to get my right hand clean before the dance that night? Maybe I could start a new fad and wear just one glove. Oh, no. Some little dancing dude already did that! Mom would know. Mom's always know!

JUST FOR FUN

A selection of fairly easy cryptogams. Most refer to the Kevin Kress stories in some way. (# seven doesn't)

HAVE FUN!

1- GNWOX GNNVV OV J ZOGNJNZN,
IJPNTMZNMX, NMX, ZNWOXI, ENNX CNENIECWN.

2- HRCUV DVJ DVVD DWR HUVJ DVJ
UVFRWRNFUVS FRRVDSRWN

3- DYBTX'V DTXG GHG HXG LRL LHDY
STJY MHNKYM YHVO JRM NKKYTM VRX.

4- KAH KHHXFSHP AFC F SPHFK SHXCH JZ
ALBJP

5- MWPR F HKYIIPK RPPEY YNCJGRD IWP
TPYGEPRY NV YSTGRDVGPCE FYZ ZPJGR VNT WGY
WPCS.

6- CGXM XM P QVJSCLOVPE LR CGH CJSH
FHKXZ CGH OVHPC CHITZ WHCHQCXDH YXFHM CL
MLYKH

7- ZKG MWQ ZKG MYB WGZ ZTYBB GY
ZBW GY WOWB, OJZ SGJY, MZ VBMIZ ZG FGIZ GS
JIIZTQBWZI.

HINTS AND SOLUTIONS FOLLOW

Don't use the hints unless you need them.

CRYPTOGRAM HINTS

- 1- E in code = T in solution
- 2- U=I
- 3- K=H
- 4- C=S
- 5- G=I
- 6- V=R
- 7- J=U

CRYPTOGRAM SOLUTIONS

(Note: Go by numbers since the order is mixed up so readers

won't unintentionally peek at the next one!)

1- Kevin Kress is a likeable, careful, fun loving, teen detective.

3- Kevin's kind dad and mom make life rather easy for their son.

5- When a mystery needs solving the residents of Springfield ask Kevin for his help.

2- Kevin and Anna are kind and interesting teenagers.

6- This is a cryptogram of the type Kevin the great teen detective likes to solve.

4- The teenager has a great sense of humor.

7- Two and two are not three or ten or nine, but four, at least to most of us students.

Case #6

THE CASE OF THE MESSENGER BROACH

A first-person account by Kevin Kress – Teen Detective

By David Drake

It wasn't my dog. It was my back yard. Unfortunately, the dog thought it was his and had been digging holes across it for the past week. Now, I'm not a mean-spirited, person but I sure had the urge to fill that little terrier's behind full of buckshot. Anna, of course – tenderhearted, animal loving, Anna – wouldn't hear to it. After an unsuccessful search for its owner she set about finding it a home.

The afternoon its new master was to come and pick it up, 'Dog', was at it again. I hurried toward him offering my best arm flailing, "scat, get out of here, stop that," hoping to rescue the lawn from his final invasion. Damage had already been done. Dog seemed proud of his accomplishment and pranced as if deserving of some great treat. Not happening! As I knelt to begin pushing the dirt back into the hole with my hands I noticed what appeared to be the end of a rusted, metal box showing through the earth. A metal box hadn't buried itself. Perhaps it was the beginning of a new mystery for me - Kevin Kress – Teen Detective.

Anna arrived with Tommy Benson and his mom. They had brought a collar and leash. It was my impression that 'Dog' was not about to take kindly to either of those things. Tommy and Dog seemed to hit it off immediately – hugs, face licking, run and chase. They left both seeming to be happy.

(Mother carried the collar and leash.)

I directed Anna's attention to the still mostly buried box. With a sturdy stick, I began digging it out and shortly had pulled it up onto the grass. It was metal, as I had first thought, about 12 inches long, six inches wide, four inches deep, and very heavy. Through the gunk, it appeared to have a small hasp and padlock-type security arrangement. It was still intact, though, like the box itself, it was well rusted. I probably could have opened it with one good yank on the lock – the hasp looked to be easily separated from the lip of the lid.

“Embossed,” Anna said pointing around the top.

I nodded.

“Fancy. That may mean it contains something that is – or was – important to somebody.”

“Let's wash it off with the garden hose,” I suggested.

We made our way to the back steps where I handed the box to Anna. I turned on the water and held the end of the hose. The mud was quickly washed away along with particles of loose rust. It was a beautiful piece – probably brass or bronze – with an intricate sort of embossing that stood out from the top and sides. The metal seemed thick, I thought, for such a small container. Some of that might have been the contents. Anna shook it, gently. I clinked – loose metal of some kind – coins or jewelry, I figured.

From mom's rag bag, I took a discarded, holey, old towel (worn out, not religious). Between the two of us we soon had it fairly dry. We took it to my attic room by way of the tree beside the rear window that I used as my private entrance. I set it on the desk considering the best way to get it open without damaging it. As I went to get my cigar box of many-sized, many-shaped keys from a dresser drawer, Anna bent a paperclip, inserted it into the lock and a short 'click, click' later it was open and waiting for me when I returned. She looked smug. I'd give her that one.

I lubricated the hinges with WD-40 and waited the required sixty seconds before trying to lift the lid. I didn't budge. I slid the blade of my pocket knife between the lip of the lid and the body of the box. A great deal of rust and other unidentified gunk fell onto the desk. The lid was soon freed. I opened it with great care. The walls were something over a

quarter of an inch thick. No wonder it was so heavy for its small size.

Remarkably, the inside was dry. It was lined in gold colored silk that had become fragile with age. A flat pillow-like pad lay across the bottom holding more than a dozen pieces of golden jewelry. I assumed some of the unidentified gunk I had cut away had been a seal of some kind – a very effective seal it appeared, since the inside was still dry. There were gold chains and rings and bracelets. My bet was they were valuable but I'd let Russ, the jeweler, determine that later. One larger piece immediately caught our attention. Anna lifted it from the container.

"What an interesting . . . whatchamacallit," I said.

"Broach," Anna said supplying the proper term.

It was oval, two and a quarter inches long and one and a quarter wide, with a stone-like setting on which a picture of a man had been hand painted.

"Seems like an odd picture for a woman's broach," Anna remarked.

"It does unless that was a special man in some woman's life," I said, speculating.

It was surrounded by a heavy gold frame.

"Not really very feminine," Anna said turning it one way and then the other.

"What era is the picture?" I asked thinking out loud. "The 1940's you think?"

"Could be. Your parents can tell us for sure. Look! The stone is loose. Maybe Russ can fix that. You're not going to just let this go as a chance find in your back yard are you, Kevy?"

"It poses so many wonderful questions just aching to be answered," I said. "Like, who did the jewels belong to; why had they been buried, for safe keeping; by whom, the owner or maybe by a thief; how long ago; who is the man pictured; do they have some long-lost message for us; I could go on."

"And you will. I suppose the finder's-keepers rule applies after all this time – it's been in the ground for some time, hasn't it?"

I probably provided more of an answer than she wanted.

“The box had been buried at a depth of about fifteen inches from the level of the sod. From what I could tell, the dirt above it was packed every bit as hard and long as that all around the hole. I’d say there’s really no doubt that it’s been there decades. Dad and mom have had this house all their married life – just had their 53rd wedding anniversary. Before that it belonged to Grampa Kress. We will ask them if they know anything about it.”

“Good starting place,” Anna agreed.”

“Let’s just begin with the broach,” I suggested referring to enlisting dad and mom’s help.

We were soon downstairs. They were in the living room napping – mom sitting on the sofa and dad in his recliner. They napped a lot so I was not troubled by awakening them. There was a fool proof method, which I had discovered as a preschooler. Just stand close to them and remain quiet. They had a kind of parent-radar that seemed to automatically pop their eyes open in that situation. Sure enough. Pop! Pop!

“Oh, you’re awake.”

They smiled and skootched up into fully upright sitting positions.

“You’ll need your glasses,” I said waiting for them to take care of that. “We came upon this broach and want to know whatever you can tell us about such a piece. We are guessing it is from the 1940’s maybe.”

Dad moved to a place on the couch beside mom as I handed it to her. He picked up the magnifying glass they often used for crossword puzzles. They looked. They pointed. They hummed and oohed and felt its surface. Mom spoke.

“1935 to 1945. Gold was hard to come by during the war but the design and the picture are certainly from then. Made in the States. All the really good fine filigree work came from Europe and the war shut that down for a good ten years.”

“Probably a well-to-do person, considering the scarcity of gold, back then,” Dad added. “Don’t know the man in the picture, if you were expecting a quick ID. His suit and tie don’t tell us much about his place in society. Most men wore them back then; everybody when they posed for a picture.”

“Who around here might know more about the piece?”

“Russ, I guess,” dad said, looking at mom for more if she had it.

“You might try Mrs. Stone down on Patterson – Greta Stone. She is so old she makes your dad and me look like kids. She worked in the jewelry store when younger. In fact, she helped your father pick out my engagement ring.”

They exchanged a loving glance. Dad gave mom a quick peck on her cheek. I was used to them expressing their affection to each other . . . and to me. It tickled me, in fact.

“One more question. We found a metal box – a jewelry box – buried in the back yard about ten feet from the back fence and fifteen from the pine tree. Any idea when that might have been buried?”

They looked at each other and shrugged. Dad had one thought, however.

“During the war, WWII, my father and I turned our back yard into a garden – they were called Victory Gardens. We grew and canned food for the armed forces. It would have been easy to burry something back then with the grass gone and the soil kept hoed. We would have never noticed, I suppose. Nothing since we put it back in grass. You or I would have noticed such a thing when we mowed. And, speaking of mowing . . .”

“Yes, dad. Got it on my schedule for tomorrow afternoon.”

I thanked them, and Anna and I returned to my room. We made a list – an inventory – of the contents of the box. I was impressed by how much Anna knew about jewels – clearly a girl thing. In the end, there were thirteen items.

“I have to tell you that after examining all these pieces closely, the broach really seems out of place,” Anna said. “It’s not the style of the others. It’s massive. Everything else is delicate. And I think it’s only gold plated. The other stuff is gold through and through.”

I took out my magnifying glass and gave it a careful once over.

“Here. Bottom of the back. Tiny letters and numbers. Probably a manufacturer’s code of some kind. Look. What do you make out the top line of letters to be?”

“Cap something. Maybe Captain or Capstore or

Capstone?”

A quick web search disclosed a jewelry manufacturer who operated in Chicago from 1910 to 1950 and specialized in one-of-a-kind or limited edition pieces. John Capstone and Sons. I could find no images of pieces they had made.

“Oops!” [never a good sound], Anna said. “Look! The oval stone came entirely loose. Doesn’t seem to be broken – just came apart.

She held up the two pieces, their backs to me.

“Let me see the stone. Look, here on the back. Like a flap of thick paper cut the size and shape of the stone.”

I examined it with the magnifying glass and took out my blunt nosed tweezers. I gave the paper a little tug. It loosened around one edge. We soon discovered that it had been glued to the metal back but just around the outer one eighth of an inch. The stone had been glued to it, also just around the border. The paper was sandwiched between the stone and the back. No wonder it had come loose. I finished removing the paper. On the inside – the part facing the back of the stone – facing front – the paper contained printing – tiny, hand, printing the size of engraving done inside wedding bands. Down through the years, the ink had soaked sideways into the paper and smudged becoming difficult to read. I took it to the microscope. There, it was more easily read although not easily understood:

H.D.: Spinnendes Rad. Dochboden. Dorffman auf Hauptstraße. – Kappestein. HH

I read it out loud to Anna.

“Okay? Sounds like German.”

“Excellent ear. It is. The little I’ve had so far this year, doesn’t help enough. I don’t understand the H.D. at the beginning though with the periods I assume it is an abbreviation or somebody’s initials. Rad means wheel and I’m guessing spinnendes means spinning. My English/German dictionary is up there on the top shelf.

Anna found it and we began translating the next word – Dochboden. It means ‘attic’.

“Dorffman is a last name and auf means on. Hauptstraße is Main Street. The literal translation of Kappestein would be cap stone. Then I don’t get the HH at

the end.”

“What’s the funny letter in Main Street?” Anna asked.”

“It’s called Eszett or scharfes S is used in place of a double S (ss).”

“So, what we have is, H.D. : Spinning Wheel. Dorffman on Main Street. – cap stone. HH,” Anna said. “Any idea what it means, and I know I will regret that I asked.”

I’m sure I smiled. She knew I’d never been able to pass up a mystery.

“For starters, I’m taken by the Capstone jeweler we found out about in Chicago and the Kappestein at the end of the phrase. See the dash before the word. It’s often used in short notes before the signature. The colon after the first set of initials could be like those used in business letters after the greeting – Dear Sir: - you see? I’m betting this is a message of some kind from John Capstone – Americanized version of the German name – to somebody named Dorffman on some Main Street somewhere in the World.”

“Oh, thank goodness you’ve been able to narrow it down just to the World.”

I acknowledged her humorous sarcasm with a quick smile and continued.

“The broach was buried here so the message probably made its way from Chicago to Springfield – maybe not, but probably. See what you can find out about German spies who operated in the United States just prior to and during the Second World War.”

“Spies?” Anna said far more dramatically than I felt was necessary. “We’ve moved from a tin box dug up by a stray terrier to German spies?”

I shrugged. She should have known how my mind worked. She moved to the computer and fifteen minutes later had printed out several very interesting articles. There were spies – lots of them – but more interesting to me was a widespread group of German sympathizers here who found ways of raising money for the Nazi war effort. One such group working in the Midwest collected jewelry from their fellow sympathizers, melted it down into small ingots and smuggled them to Germany by way of Sicily – the big island just off the boot of Italy. Sometimes, inexpensive jewelry was included as

a distraction in metal boxes lined with gold or silver sheets. That might explain the thick sides of the box we found and its weight. Some part of that process must have gone through Springfield.

“Why go to all that trouble?” Anna asked. “Why not just buy gold and send it?”

“Regular citizens couldn’t own plain old gold back then and professionals who used it, like jewelers and dentists, had to regularly account for every ounce they purchased.”

Anna nodded. Even though she seldom admitted it, like me, she liked to learn new things.

“How can we find the names of Germans who came to America and lived in the Springfield area around that time?”

“Birth, death, and marriage records, I suppose and real estate transfers, maybe. Have to go by the last names and if Kappstein changed his to Capstone, I imagine lots of folks changed theirs as well – folks of German descent were not exactly popular back then and most were suspect of collaboration.”

“But maybe not those who still held Germany in reverence – the Motherland. They might have been too proud to make such a change,” I said more wondering than stating fact.

“But, again, Capstone did.”

“He was so visible it may have been necessary,” I said trying to find a starting point. “First, let’s see if we can find anything about a Dorffman here in Springfield at that time.”

“What time span shall we use?”

“Let’s go with mom’s 1935 to 1945 span – probably early in there rather than late. It would need to be somebody who was an adult during those years so we can rule out the children.”

Most of the records we needed were not available on the web so we went down to city hall. Mrs. Best, the mother of a friend of ours, led us to the basement and pointed out the crates and cabinets that contained the oldest records that she knew about. I began with the real estate records and easily found Hans Dorffman’s purchase of a house in 1938 and a business building on Main Street the same year. H.D. It was with his initials that the note began. Apparently, it was to

Hans Dorffman from Kappestein – Capstone.

Our next stop was the newspaper. The banner across the top of its front page said it all – Springfield Globe, Since 1910. Marge Gaither was the longtime owner and editor. She was always our best resource for term papers on everything that had to do with local history.

“Marge. Need some info from the mid to late 1930’s.”

“That was my daddy’s era but I’ll do what I can. Shoot!”

“Two things. Need to know what kind of a store Hans Dorffman started on Main Street in 1938. Second, wonder if you have any way of helping us find out who the man is on this old broach stone.”

“Microfiche machine. All the old editions prior to the 80’s, were transferred to those, microfilm files. Since then it’s been the computer. Best bet is to look at the ads. If he had a store he probably advertised. I really have no idea how to go about identifying the good-looking dude on the broach. If he was local there’s always a chance his picture might have appeared in the paper but with a paper published every week during that period could mean having to go through 250 to 500 editions. At ten pages per, you see that’s a lot of microfiche. Let me take a closer look.”

She examined it – glasses on and glasses off.

“It’s not a photograph, you know. This was hand painted on the stone. That exact photo probably won’t be found anywhere. Know anything else about it?”

“Made by a jeweler named John Capstone in Chicago back in the mid ‘30s to mid ‘40s – we think.”

“Okay then. See Russ at the Jewelry store. His mother is somewhat of an expert on jewelers of that era. I’ve run several stories on her over the years. She has dozens – maybe a hundred – scrapbooks with pictures and articles. And, she can find anything in them in a matter of minutes.”

After only about five minutes into the Microfiche search Anna found the ad we needed. Grand Opening of Dorffman’s Jewelry. Things were falling into place. We thanked Marge and moved on to Russ’s place. It was near closing time. He made a call to his mother and soon escorted us into her living room.

“We appreciate you being willing to see us,” Anna

began.

“We have this broach,” I continued, “and are interested in the identity of the man painted on it.”

She donned her glasses and picked up a large magnifying glass.

“It’s the work of John Capstone from Chicago. I’d place it at about 1936. That year he brought a fine artisan over from Berlin and he abandoned the heavy designs like this one for a return to the finer, more popular filigree. The man is Fritz Kappestien a well-known movie star in Europe at the time – a relative of John who had changed his last name. He had several hundred of these hand-painted in the man’s honor upon his death in December of 1935. Later it was discovered that Fritz had been a German agent traveling Europe and North Africa making preparations for the Nazi invasion. He was killed by French Government Agents, though that was not made public until years after the war.”

“My, you are everything Marge advertised you to be,” I said. “Thanks so much. I do have one more question. “We have found out that the present jewelry store was started by Hans Dorffman. Was he any relation?”

“No relation. My husband bought him out a few years after he opened. He moved away quickly under unexplained circumstances. We got a very good deal.”

“Anybody still around who might have known him?”

“Greta Stone worked for him. Then she continued with us for many years. A dear soul – old as rock. We have tea every Wednesday morning at her place. She’s pretty closed mouthed about the era you’re interested in, but I can ask if she’ll speak with you, if you like.”

“Maybe later. Thanks again for all your help.”

Russ walked us to the door. I had one more question for him.

“Any chance you’d let us snoop around the store’s attic?”

“You’re working one of your famous cases, aren’t you?”

He continued before I had to answer.

“Sure. How about first thing in the morning. Say seven thirty?”

We agreed and were on our way.

Back in my room I went to work on the jewelry box. I really hadn't examined it closely having been more interested in the broach. I would have Russ see what he thought about the other jewelry when we met him the next morning.

It was a very ornate box, yellow-bronze in color with small, squarish, metal legs a half inch or so high at the corners. The sides were a quarter of an inch thick. I wanted to estimate how much gold might be hidden in its walls, lid and bottom. Comparing the inside depth of 3 inches with the outside measurement of 4 inches I easily calculated the bottom was one inch thick. If the metal plates between which the gold was sandwiched – the outside bottom and the inside floor – were each 1/8th of an inch thick that made the gold layer $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch. $\frac{3}{4}$ times the length of 12 inches and times the width of 6 inches produced a volume potential of 36 cubic inches ($\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch-thick times 48 square inches). Gold weighs nearly three quarters of a pound per cubic inch so that much gold would weigh roughly 25 pounds.

I weighed the empty box. Roughly thirty-five pounds. Bronze is heavy also but even so that weight was within the realm of reason. At current day prices that much gold would be worth over \$300,000. Just three such boxes would come close to one million dollars. There was no obvious way to detach the bottom so I left that for later. Dog's little tin box just became pretty valuable. If this panned out I would have to remember to buy him a giant-sized dog biscuit or a bag of kibble or arrange him a date with a classy French Poodle. I put the box in my safe, finished my homework due Monday, and went to bed.

Sunday morning, we met with Russ. He looked at the jewelry that had been in the box and without adding in their antique value – which he said could be considerable – he called them low average in worth. In other words, they were inexpensive cover for the hidden gold. I'd have to see about getting inside the bottom of that box.

Anna and I met at the store a few minutes early. Russ arrived exactly at 7:30. The stairs were at the back separated by a wall from the rest of the store. Those leading to the attic went up from the right. Those to the basement descended from the left. The top of the stairs opened into a full attic with

a high, pointed ceiling all held in place by huge, roughhewn, wooden, beams. The floor was made of ten inch planks held in place with wooden pegs. Most of the clutter had been assembled at the near end – chairs, benches, an easel, crates, and an assortment of antique-looking household items – most made of wood.

One thing jumped out at us immediately – the spinning wheel. Anna and I moved to it. Russ stood back, armed crossed, and watched. I began examining it. The wheel turned. The pedal was still in place and operational. If there had been wool or cotton fiber available, I was sure we could have spun a spool of thread or yarn.

The immediate question was, why it had been mentioned in the first message. Surely it held a clue to some next step. The message on the broach was just a first step. It probably had not been associated with the jewelry box in the beginning. It was more likely the clue that led to finding the gold laden box or boxes. So, the broach was sent to Dorffman's store in Springfield. It directed somebody to the spinning wheel. Dorffman was probably the go-between – between the one who arrived with the messenger broach from Capstone and directing the currier to the final clue – the spinning wheel in this attic. But why send somebody upstairs in the same building. That part didn't make sense yet. There was a back door between the two stairways. It would have made easy access for either the attic or the basement for that matter. The two-step message was undoubtedly a safety precaution in case the broach was intercepted. Its clue was vague to protect the gold. It was this spinning wheel that contained the final clue.

"Where on such a gadget could one hide a clue?" I asked quietly between Anna and me but mostly for my own benefit.

"Underneath that peddle thingy, maybe," she suggested.

I turned it up and looked. There was a name stamped into the wood – Isaac. I asked Russ.

"Know anything about this?"

I pointed and he came over.

"Isaac was a woodworker in this area back in the first

quarter of the 1900s. Probably find that imprint on several things up here – that chair, the table, even that child’s pull toy, I’d guess.”

He was right on every count. No real help, however. I examined the wheel itself, looking at both of the outside surfaces and the inside, the spindles, and the axle that held it all in place. I ran my finger around the groove that held the fiber on its way to becoming thread.

“Interesting,” I said, motioning the others to come and look. “There is a very narrow leather thong circling the wheel at the bottom of the groove.”

Russ explained.

“If the bottom of the groove was smooth, the fiber tended to slip and slide, making for uneven thread or yarn, so it was typically roughed up some way. One of those ways was to lay in a narrow strip of leather rough side up. It would last for years.”

“You’re as full of interesting tidbits as your mother, Russ.”

He tried to turn the strip to show us how the other side was smooth by comparison. The ancient, fragile, strip broke and fell off the wheel. I stooped to pick it up. I examined the smooth surface. It contained printing. This time mostly in English and clearly a continuation of the first message.

“What’s the chance we could borrow this piece of leather? Promise to return it undamaged.”

“Sure. If that was original with the wheel, it could have been on there close to a hundred years. Imagine that. Old Isaac certainly knew what he was doing.”

We thanked him and left, quite certain it had not been there that long. Five minutes later we entered the front door to my house to the aroma of mom’s wonderful Sunday morning breakfast – sausage, Dutch toast (like French toast but dipped in a thick, sweet, flour-egg-and-yeast rising batter), eggs, juice, milk, coffee for those who could tolerate it, and still warm cinnamon rolls. We consumed 2,000 calories each and I would take on another thousand in rolls before the morning was over. That lawn mowing would be welcomed exercise later.

“The broach has led us on an interesting adventure, so

far,” I said, parents listening across the table. “You know about any German sympathizers who lived in this area during the war?”

“Not really,” dad said. “Lots of people of German descent Anglicized their names though. They were more fortunate than the Japanese, who because of their distinctive look couldn’t just blend in with a new name. Some of the Arian blonds went so far as to dye their hair.”

Mom continued.

“Greta Stone, who I mentioned to you, was one who changed names. She was married to a man named Kappestein – I guess that means ‘stone’ in German – and after he died – before she moved here from Chicago – she made it into just plain Stone. She mentioned that to me once but it’s never come up since. She won big at bingo Friday night, by the way. That’s good because I think she has a hard time making it financially.”

Anna and I exchanged a glance. We excused ourselves and went upstairs.

“A Kappestein connection,” I said.

“And, Greta worked at the jewelry store for Dorffman,” Anna added. “Let’s get a look at that strip of leather,” she said.

I smoothed it out on my desk. Having been pulled into a circle for so long it didn’t want to cooperate. A book holding down each end fixed that problem. I got the magnifying glass.

“Take this down,” I said shoving a yellow pad toward Anna. “At least this seems to be in English – well mostly.

“Heavy package. 9 items. Standard weight per. 119 Water, Sfld.

Deep Kabinette. Unterirdisch. Assingation 3.9.38 HH”

“Several things stand out to me. There is no addressee indicated by initials at the beginning like in the broach message, so it is either generic or a way of maintaining the anonymity of the person who was to get this message. It has the same HH at the end with no periods again so I’m thinking it’s not a person’s initials. The word spelled K-a-b-i-n-e-t-t-e is German for cabinet. It might be a misspelling by a German speaker since the word is so similar in both languages. I imagine the Sfld with a period after it is the abbreviation used

for Springfield. "Assigination" is an old-time word that means the assignment of, or the turning of something over into someone else's care – the transfer of the gold, I'm thinking. Unterirdisch I'll have to look up. Unter means under and irdisch I think refers to terrestrial things."

Anna found it in the dictionary.

"You were close. Underground."

"That could have two meanings – like buried or like the people working in the resistance movement often called the underground. We'll need more to go on for that one."

I moved on.

"The numbers are probably the date of the transfer. (3.9.38) Where we use slashes today, they used periods earlier and still do in many parts of the world – Germany included. The problem is – and it probably doesn't concern us – that in Europe the day is indicated first, the month second, and the year last. In the US, we put the month first and the day second."

"So, it's March 9th, 1938 using the US method or September 3rd, 1938 using the German method," Anna said just trying to get it straight."

"Right. There is a street address, 119 Water. We have a Water Street. I don't get the meaning of 'deep' in front of Kabinette but it will probably clear itself up later. The first three phrases refer to the items – nine of them at the regular weight and heavy package. That may mean a bigger amount than usual or some such thing."

Anna summarized in her own words – usually more to the point than mine.

"Like each of the nine individual items are of the usual or standard weight but since there are nine of them, the whole package is heavier than usual or heavier than the person might have been expecting. It may be a forewarning that some larger means of transportation will be needed."

"That's it, I think. If the items referred to are the metal jewelry boxes and each weighs 35 pounds that would come to something over 300 pounds – between a sixth and a seventh of a ton. Apparently the 35 pound boxes were the standard weight. I wonder if the one we have is one of the nine."

"Could the HH be a code for the whole package?" Anna

asked. "Maybe all nine items are coded HH. Some other package might have included all JJ's or some such thing."

"It's a possibility but I haven't found the HH anywhere on the box itself."

I leaned over the opening in my floor that led down stairs and called out.

"Dad."

"Yes, son."

"Anything about the letters HH that comes to mind thinking back to the late thirties and early forties?"

"Heil Hitler!"

"Don't be funny ... oh, you weren't being funny. HH for Heil Hitler. Thanks."

I returned to my chair at the desk.

"You heard, I guess. In Hitler's Germany, it was like a required oath of allegiance to begin and end all interpersonal contacts with that phrase – Heil Hitler – literally meaning Hail Hitler."

"So, the HH on both messages was just what would have been expected or required. An oath that lent legitimacy to the message."

"That's how I see it. Now let's work on that deep kabinette thing. I believe the way that word ends, means it's plural – cabinets."

"Well, deep could mean sunken or in a cabinet it could refer to how far it is from front to back – how deep it is," Anna said beginning to brainstorm."

"I think we need to take a peek at 119 Water Street," I said.

We left through the window

"This tree is a remarkable friend you know," I said, pausing for a moment. "When it was small, I was small and it supported my weight just fine. Now, that I am bigger, so is it so it can still support my weight."

Anna gave me the raised eyebrow look meaning who but Kevin Kress would ever contemplate such a thing. She was probably right. I'm glad I was not just like everybody else.

The address, 119, was an abandoned building at the end of a short, mostly abandoned, dead end, street that right angled into Main just beyond the current business district.

The long unpainted, one story, building was in very poor repair. It was perhaps twenty-five feet square. On the long-fallen, wooden sign, lying on the ground near to the front door, the still faint words, Smith's Laundry, were visible. For some reason the first word was better preserved than the second. We would have to get the history from my parents, later. As I ran my hand across the name the top layer of paint peeled off leaving the word Schmidt underneath – Smith in German. It had been painted over with the name change. The front door had boards nailed across it, as did the one, large, window next to it.

“Let's go 'round back,” I said motioning.

That door was ajar toward the inside, clearly hung prior to the modern safety code requiring all public establishments to have doors opening out. I pushed and it opened far enough to allow us to enter.

“Filthy,” Anna said.

I smiled to myself. Girls were bothered by fifth. I wondered if that was part of the female genetic structure. We needed our flashlights to see.

Inside there was a side to side counter near the front – where customers were waited on, I assumed. Several worktables remained, along with a cast iron, coal fired, cook stove and many feet of racks – probably used to hang clothes on. On the stove were antique irons – the kind that had to be heated on the stove before used. The walls were covered with vertical boards.

“Here's a calendar on the wall,” Anna said. “1938. September is showing. It's from the local feed store.”

“Probably the year this place closed,” I said stating the obvious.

The floor along the back had been paved with stone, a section ten by five feet out from the wall. The surfaces were scorched black. Perhaps, it is where the water heating units sat, coal fired from underneath. It was only a supposition. I'd have to look into the history of laundering at some later time. The old metal ducts still hanging from the ceiling directly above tended to support that theory, however – ways for the smoke to escape the building. They were in the southeast corner. I was sure I had seen a brick flue on the north wall

outside. There was no such thing there on the inside.

“No windows on the north side,” I said out loud, going over to examine that wall.

I knocked on it to see if I could tell if it were solid or hollow. Most of it seemed to be hollow but a section in the center – about three feet wide – was solid. That chimney had been set within the wall. Unusual. It also suggested that the wall must be several feet thick. Hmmm?

“Why a chimney if it doesn’t open up into the building, and clearly there wasn’t an unused fireplace that had been boarded over – the wall is intact the full length.”

“But, that wall looks different from the other three,” Anna said. “The pieces of wood that cover it are almost an inch narrower than the rest of them around the room.”

“I think I know why that is,” I said. “This wall was remodeled way after the building was constructed. During the war the standard widths of lumber were decreased – the old 1 X 6 became $\frac{3}{4}$ X 5. This wall was added later and right over the chimney. Why?”

“And, why a chimney at all?” Anna added.

“Down stairs. There must be a basement.”

“That would go along with the ‘underground’ comment in the message,” Anna said.

She figured that before it had entered my head.

“Good take on it,” I said.

We soon found the trapdoor near the back wall – to the south of the back door, which stood in the middle of the wall. I pulled it up. That sent decades of dust into the air. We waited a moment for it to clear. I aimed my flashlight down into the opening. There was a steep flight of steps.

“I’m going down. Looks really dirty down there. Don’t feel like you have to follow.”

It was. She didn’t.

Oddly, the basement was only half the size of the upstairs. It occupied the south side and there was no chimney or fireplace or hole in the wall leading to it. There were three cabinets along the north wall and two tables sitting about. A set of bunk beds sat against the front wall and a large closet-like piece of furniture against the south wall. It looked like it may have been living quarters. In earlier days, merchants

often lived in the rear or on the second floor above their stores. I guessed they could live in the basement as well. The phrase came back to me – ‘Deep Cabinets’. If ‘underground’ referred to the basement, then ‘deep’ must refer to something else. You wouldn’t repeat in such a short message. The ones there didn’t look deep to me – back to front deep like Anna had suggested.

I began examining them. I opened one. About fifteen inches deep. The same inside dimension as the outside. Six shelves. I opened another – another six shelves. The third was somewhat different. There were no shelves. A wooden rod, side to side, across the top, suggested it might have been built to accommodate hanging items like clothing. I examined the surface of the rod to see if I could find indentations that might suggest wire hangers had indeed been placed there. The rod turned in my hand. The back of the cabinet snapped open along the left side; I had stumbled onto a secret latch. I pushed. It opened like a door hinged right. I pushed it fully open and lit the area beyond.

“Anna! You really need to see this,” I called.

Anna was a trooper and she trusted me. She was soon by my side fighting the cobwebs with her arms and watching where she stepped. I entered through the cabinet and she followed. It was the other half of the basement. Deep cabinet indeed, I thought. The chimney was easily found. It was constructed of bricks that were much newer than those used to build the basement walls. It had been added later. It had provided the exit for the smoke from the fire that heated a small cement and brick vat. There was a half inch opening near the front toward the bottom with a metal plug lying below it on the floor. There were two huge bellows* – one on each side directing its airflow into the fire pit. Two sacks of hardened plaster sat in one corner. [* accordion-like mechanisms used to force air into fires like used by the black smiths of the old west to make the fire burn at a hotter temperature.]

“I’m sure you have it figured out so let me in on it. What is all this?”

“If I’m right, the gold jewelry was placed in the little vat, a coal fire was set in the pit beneath it, the bellows were used

to whip up extreme levels of heat; the gold melted and dripped out the hole down here into to special plaster molds the exact size of the bottoms of the jewelry boxes. The molds were then broken away and discarded. Gold melts at about 1,700 degrees F. so they had to have some way of maintaining between 1,800 and 1,900 degree temperatures. Anthracite coal could easily achieve that level.”

There was one, tall cabinet next to the secret door through which we had gained access. Anna opened it (I was amazed she’d even touch it.).

“Oh, my, gosh! Kevy. Look here!”

There, sitting on the several shelves, were eight more jewelry boxes, clones of the one we had.

“I guess that answers one of our questions,” she said.

“Only one?” I asked, joking.

“I mean that the box we have was probably one of the nine mentioned in the second message.”

I nodded and lifted one.

“A good thirty-five pounds. These are loaded and ready to go. For some reason, they were never picked up.”

“Maybe because the one we have contained the broach that gave the first part of the clue,” Anna said. “Without that, this place could never have been located.”

“Take pictures, Anna. Lots and lots of pictures. Then we’ll close it up and go map our strategy. Lots of possibilities to consider from this point forward.”

On the way home I did some figuring – rough calculating. My research had revealed that gold was selling for about \$35.00 an ounce in 1938 – the price was controlled. So, each of the plates of gold in the jewelry boxes would have been worth about \$12,500. That was a very large amount of money back then– it equaled the annual income of ten American families at the time. No telling how many of those sets the sympathizers were able to make and ship to Germany. If it had continued for long, it would have posed a real threat to the balance of gold in the world at that time as well as giving Germany an edge in the War.

Anna brought me back to the real world.

“Next steps, Remember!”

“Yes. Well, we have several questions. What do we do

with the jewelry boxes? Who buried the box in our back yard? Do we pursue what role Greta Stone may have had in all of this? She has some common ties to several parts of all this – she could be a national hero if she put a stop to this by ‘misplacing’ the broach.”

“Or the villain if she stole it for her own benefit.”

“I doubt that. It was never retrieved.”

“Why bury the messenger broach and the box? I don’t get it,” Anna said.

“Maybe as proof of the plot if she were ever approached by the authorities. I can’t be sure of course. She could have just destroyed the broach and the message chain would have been broken – The End. Hiding them together she had the whole story if it were ever needed. I guess we could ask her.”

“Not sure about that,” Anna said. “We could run it by Russ’s mother first. She could probably help us make that decision.”

“Good idea,” I said but first let’s get the bottom off this box. We haven’t yet proved conclusively that it contains a gold plate or slab. If the sides, top and bottom pieces are all solid brass the weight would be about the same – a good cover, by the way. I’m betting they are hollow to offset the weight of the gold.”

I was bothered that there was no easy way into it. Perhaps at their final destination the boxes were just torn apart. I had to think other contingencies would have been planned for like if the agent transporting them suspected he was about to be caught he should have been able to remove the gold from the boxes and stash it so he wouldn’t be caught red handed. That’s how I would have planned it, at least.

I took the box in my hands. It was heavy. I turned it one way and then another. I searched it for a lever that might reveal some secret panel. I opened the top and closed the top. It was not until that moment that I noticed it – or thought about it at least.

“See that chain that is attached to the end of the inside of the lid and is fed down into the far-right wall of the box through that tiny opening?”

“I do. Hadn’t paid any attention to it. Figured it was just

a catch mechanism so the top wouldn't fall completely backwards when it was open."

"I did, too. And it does seem to serve that purpose. But why not just attach the bottom end to the inside with a decorative screw? Why feed it inside the wall. It has to be weighted in there to always get pulled inside like it does when it closes."

"So?"

"It is uncommon. I tend to mistrust the uncommon until I've proved otherwise. I have an idea. Let's try this. I will hold the box so one end is pointing down. You open the lid slowly."

It was done. Nothing.

"Now the other way."

I changed the position of the box so the other end-panel faced down. Anna closed and then reopened the lid. About three quarters of the way open we both heard it – a distinct click. More than that we saw it – the ornate strip along the bottom of the end of the side panel flipped open and a plate slipped out. The plate was gold - \$350,000 worth of gold.

We sighed in unison as if it had been practiced for the big finish in a movie close-up.

"Ingenious. There is a weighted mechanism inside the wall and when the box is tilted with that end down and the chain is pulled up three quarters of its length, the spring-loaded panel opens. Neither the tilting nor the opening by itself will trigger the panel. Both must be perfectly in place."

I slid the gold plate back into place and stowed the box back in my safe.

"Give Russ's mother a call and see what she thinks about contacting Greta."

"Why me?"

"You are such a charmer and anyway she really liked you. We both saw that."

The call was made. She said she would go see Greta immediately and get right back to us. While we waited I mowed the lawn. Anna headed for the kitchen and she and mom traded secrets about a certain teen detective. That always made me uneasy even though my secrets were few and far between. Well, there was that one . . . (smile).

Mrs. Stone agreed to see us. She asked that my parents come along. Russ's mother had given her just the bare details because that's all we had given her: 'We had found the buried box and decoded the messages on the broach and the spinning wheel and had located the melting center and the real contents of the boxes.'

Greta had tea prepared – not my favorite beverage but I partook with the others. I was prepared to lay out the situation but she began without prompting.

"I was twenty. I was swept off my feet by a dashing young man with a mysterious foreign accent – Johann Kappestone, Jr. We married. His family had a prosperous jewelry business. Less than a year later I became aware that family members were German sympathizers – active sympathizers. I began snooping and discovered just the bare bones of the operation. It involved the solicitation of gold pieces from other like-minded, transplanted, Germans. I knew few details but figured the gold made its way into Germany's war program. My parents had come over from northern Europe so I knew firsthand about the heavy and hurtful German hand. I came across the connection to Springfield – this Springfield. Though I was given no reason for the trip, my husband had gone to Europe to travel with a movie star – a relative and the one pictured on the broach. My husband closely resembled him and may have served as a double in certain circumstances. At any rate, they were both killed in North Africa. No details were immediately available.

"I left Chicago and moved to St. Louis where I changed my name to Stone. Then I moved here. I had learned enough about the jewelry business to get a job. My sole purpose in life became stopping those gold shipments. From time to time men would arrive at the jewelry store – one at a time – and hand Mr. Dorffman a broach like the one you have. He would take it, place it in the safe, and hand the man a key. By keeping an eye on the key rack by his desk, I determined it was to the attic.

"Eventually I was able to examine one of the broaches, discovered the loose stone, and stumbled upon the hidden message. I came back to the store one night and searched the attic until I found a second message on the spinning

wheel. The laundry was still operating back then. I took a part time job there, having convinced Mr. Dorffman to write me a recommendation. Well, I'm a born snoop, and one thing led to another and I found the secret room in the basement – mostly because of how hot it would be in the building first thing in the morning – before the water heating fires were lit. Also, on occasion, after midnight, I saw smoke coming from the chimney that was attached to no kind of a stove inside. I'm sure the owner thought I was a part of the conspiracy, having been recommended by Mr. Dorffman, so I was given a pretty loose rein. One Saturday night – the laundry was closed on Sunday and I had never seen smoke on Saturday night – I returned to investigate. I found what you found. I took one jewelry box knowing it had the owner's fingerprints all over it. I was sure the boxes came directly from Kappesteins in Chicago so undoubtedly had some of their prints on them as well, that way tying Kappestine to the laundry owner - Schmidt – he changed his name to Smith for the usual reasons back then.

“I then took – stole, I suppose – one of the broaches Mr. Dorffman kept in the safe. It would have his prints on it as well as the other man's – the courier's. It seemed reasonable that the junk jewelry inside would also carry Dorffman's prints. I was certain that other man was the one who picked up the boxes and started them on their way to Germany. Putting the broach in the box connected everybody together by way of the prints. I caulked the lid and wrapped it in cellophane to keep it dry – probably long deteriorated, now – and buried the box in what I figured was the safest place in town. The Kress's were beyond reproach in every way.

“My plan was to retrieve it after contacting a federal agency. But, Mr. Dorffman left town before I could do that. The laundry closed without notice at about the same time – Mr. Smith reportedly died of a heart attack. Like I believed that! There was no local funeral. I heard from friends in Chicago that Kappestein had immediately closed down the Springfield connection – I suppose when he was informed that things were missing – the broach and the box. I wrote John Kappestien, Sr., outlining the operation as I had discovered it – anonymously, of course – and had it re-mailed to him from a

friend in Seattle to protect myself. Three weeks later he was found hanged in his basement – suicide. It was the only honorable way out for a failed German Agent.

“With that operation shut down, I really didn’t need to do anything further. Contacting the FBI would have served no purpose that I could see so I have just sat on all of this all these years. I’m glad it has come out like this, now. We have some big decisions about what to do with the remaining jewelry boxes. I imagine in today’s market they are worth several thousand dollars – the nine of them together, I mean.”

We thanked her for her time and assured her that we would return to help her with her big decisions.

* * *

It was a Saturday afternoon, six weeks later. There was a knock at our front door. It meant I could put off the yard mowing for at least a few more minutes. I answered.

“Yes. May I help you?”

“Agents Black and White from the FBI.”

They showed their credentials.

“Really?” I said. “Black and White?”

They chuckled with me and each pointed to the appropriate place on his ID card.

“We are here to deliver a message to Mrs. Greta Stone and since you were the one who contacted us, we are beginning here.”

“But how do you know this is really me?”

White turned to Black. “We were warned about you, you know. Fully briefed about your fancy footwork.”

Black nodded and spoke.

“We received more than enough information from another set of agents who worked a case with you some time ago. We were advised to keep on our toes.”

He took out an envelope and handed over a dozen candid photographs of me that I could immediately associate with that case (The Case of the Mysterious Portrait).

“So, how may I help? I just imagine you could find Greta without my help.”

“The Director wants you and your parents and your friend, Anna, to be present at our presentation.”

We were soon all gathered in Greta’s living room. She

was foxied up in her best Sunday go to meetin' dress so I figured she had been give some forewarning.

White took out a scroll and read it.

"The United States of America wishes to express its never-ending gratitude and appreciation to Greta Stone for her heroic contribution to the effort to bring World War II to a successful conclusion. Through your efforts, you severely disrupted the flow of illicit funds from this country to Germany by bringing to a halt the work of three high ranking enemy conspirators. Your bravery undoubtedly saved countless lives. We, the citizens of the United States of America, will never be fully able to repay our debt to you. A special allowance has been set aside for your financial support for the rest of your life."

He turned to Anna and Me and offered his hand.

"On behalf of the Director we offer you his thanks and appreciation for your tireless efforts in helping to bring this matter to such a successful conclusion and for your suggestion regarding the disposition of the material matters in this investigation (the gold). According to your wishes, the specifics of those philanthropic endeavors will be kept confidential. I do have one question, though, Kevin. Do you really want a gold-plated dog biscuit sent to: Dog, in care of Tommy Benson, here in Springfield?"

"Oh, yes, Sir. If it weren't for that doggone, holey terrier, none of this would have ever been dug up.

THE END