

## The Case of the Ruined Roses

"That was a neat program on UFO's," said Nina to her cousin Max as they walked down the street. "I think what really amazed me was that UFO's were reported as early as 1800."

"That's pretty hard to believe," said Max. "Anyway, do you really believe there are such things?" Nina started to answer when they heard a loud scream coming from Coach Thornton's house.

"Come on," shouted Max. They ran into the yard where the coach was staring at ten rose bushes that had been pulled from the ground.

"Look at that!" he demanded. "Just look at that."

"That's terrible," cried Nina. "Who could have done it?"

Coach Thornton looked disgusted. "I had to bench three of my best football players for cutting class. They were pretty mad at me."

"First thing, we'd better get these roses back in the ground," said Max, "Then we'll figure out who did it."

Nina and Max helped Coach Thornton replant the roses. Then he invited them in for milk and cookies.

"Now," said Nina. "Am I right? You benched Sam Cartland, Mike Brooks, and Alex Avery."

"And you lost the game," added Max.

The coach rubbed his eyes. "I know, but rules are rules."

"I'll bet one of them did it to get even," said Nina. "How about we nose around a little?"

"Let's see," said Max after they left. "Coach said the roses were all right when he looked out at nine. But shortly after ten, he found them pulled up."

"So, we check to see who doesn't have an alibi between nine and ten. Look!" Nina pointed. "There's Alex Avery over at the Dairy Bar."

Alex looked up as they came in. "Hi kids," he drawled.

"Hello, yourself," said Max. "We missed seeing you in the football game."

"That was a bummer all right. But I guess the coach didn't have any choice."

"Where you been all morning?" asked Nina.

"I've been right here since nine." He turned to the girl behind the counter. "Isn't that right, Amy?"

"Uh huh. You helped me carry in that heavy box."

"So you weren't anywhere near Coach Thornton's house?" asked Max.

Alex looked surprised. "No, I'm not mad at him, but I don't intend to visit him."

After they left, Nina looked down the street. "That's Sam Cartland's house. Let's see what he's been doing."

"What do you two want," growled Sam when he came to the door.

"Hey, lighten up, Sam," said Max. "Can we talk with you?"

"Sure, come on in." He pressed a button on his remote control and turned off his DVD. "I've been watching some football tapes to improve my game."

"We wondered what you were doing between nine and ten this morning," said Nina.

"I was right here watching that program on UFO's."

"That was a good program," said Nina. Remember when that guy from Roswell, New Mexico insisted he had been abducted?"

"Yeah," laughed Sam. "The one with the bushy hair. Funny how this has been going on for so long. That pilot, Kenneth Arnold, started it back in 1947 with the stuff he saw."

#### 4<sup>th</sup> grade- Central School Teachers

"Very interesting," said Max, trying not to look bored. "But we have to get going."

"Maybe we can find Mike Brooks working out at the gym," said Nina as they left.

"Probably," agreed Max.

They found him on the treadmill. "Hey, you two want to join down here? It's a great place to work out."

"Not right now," said Max. "We were wondering about what you were doing from nine to ten this morning."

"Right here. You can check the log book. Why?"

"Just curious," said Nina with a smile as they went back to the desk. Sure enough, Mike had signed in at five of nine.

This is great," Nina groaned. "They all have alibis."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Max.

## The Case of the Disappearing Dimes

Nina had expected her great-great uncle's house to be like mansions in the movies, with marble columns and rose gardens, not peeling paint and a weed-filled lawn. But Dad explained that Waldo hated spending money, except on his collections.

Nina's parents thought the kids were playing outside. Instead, they snuck into the candlelit parlor.

"Your Mom will freak out if she catches us," Nina's cousin Max muttered.

"I know. But Uncle Waldo traveled a lot and I never got to meet him while he was alive. I just want to see what he looks like."

"At least turn on some lights," Max grumbled. "This is creepy."

"Didn't you hear the lawyer talking to Mom and Dad? Uncle Waldo called the parlor his 'candle room.' He never had it wired for electricity." She crept over to the coffin and peered inside.

Waldo wore a tuxedo with a ruffled shirt and red cummerbund. His white hair was neatly combed, his nails manicured, and his diamond stickpin and silver cufflinks glittered in the candlelight.

"He looks nice," Nina whispered.

Max took one glance inside, then pulled Nina away from the coffin. "Weird," he said. "I didn't think people wore tuxedos when they were buried."

"He liked it. Dad said Uncle Waldo even had his portrait painted wearing this exact same outfit. He put it in his will that he wanted to be dressed for his funeral exactly the way he is in that portrait."

Max shivered. "I wonder who had to dress him?"

"Harvey, Waldo's assistant."

"Like a butler?"

"Sort of."

"So he really was rich. Hey, your Dad was kidding about inheriting twenty cents, right?"

Nina led her cousin back down the hall. "Well, Waldo did leave Dad two dimes. But Mercury is facing the wrong way or something, and that makes them worth a lot of money. Mom said it was enough to pay my way through college someday."

"Cool."

"Uncle Waldo's daughter, Fiona, inherited the house and all this stuff." They entered the study where Nina's parents were talking to the lawyer, Mr. Baxter. Max gawked at Waldo's "collections." Display cases everywhere were filled with jewel-encrusted objects.

Harvey, Waldo's assistant, handed glasses of lemonade to the kids, then left. Nina thought he looked as sour as the drink tasted.

"Fiona arrived earlier, but you probably won't see her until the funeral tomorrow," the lawyer was saying. "Waldo requested burial near his gazebo. Harvey will dig the grave himself."

"Poor Harvey," Dad murmured.

Baxter nodded. "At least Waldo set up a trust that will continue to pay Harvey's salary, small as it is. Now, would you like to see the dimes?"

In the master bedroom upstairs, the lawyer twirled the combination lock on a wall safe while Nina studied the painting of Waldo that hung above the fireplace. Decked out in his tux, ruffled shirt, jade cufflinks and diamond stickpin, he seemed to wink down at her.

Baxter removed a box from the safe and opened it.

Everyone gasped. The box was empty.

"Impossible!" the older man exclaimed. "They were here an hour ago."

"The safe isn't damaged," Mom remarked. "How many people know the combination?"

He frowned. "Just myself, Fiona and Harvey. I'd better call the police."

#### 4<sup>th</sup> grade- Central School Teachers

"Go ahead," Dad said. "But no matter who stole the dimes, they're small enough to be hidden anywhere. Even if the police tear the house apart, I'll bet they never find them." Nina stood up, staring at the portrait. "I think I know who took the dimes," she whispered to Max. "And if I'm right, I know where they are."

## The Case of the Disappearing Signs

Nina was eating cold pizza for lunch at Max's house one hot July day. Mrs. Decker came in looking warm and weary.

"I'm so disgusted," she said. "Remember that old house over on Norton Drive that I listed? I put a FOR SALE sign up in the yard early this morning. Just drove by now and it's gone. This is the third one this month that has disappeared."

"Why would anyone steal a realtor's signs?" Nina asked. "What would anybody do with them?"

"Who knows?" Mrs. Decker poured herself a glass of lemonade. "Probably some kids with nothing better to do. I suppose they could use the signs to build something. They were the wooden ones."

Max nudged Nina. "Want to bike over and see what we can find out?"

"Not much there to see," his mother told him. "Only two houses on that whole street. An old lady-Mrs. Stearns-lives in the house next to the empty one."

"Maybe she saw something," Nina said. "Let's go ask."

Half an hour later the two were biking toward the end of Norton Drive. A pick-up truck was parked in front of the empty house. A man was standing on the sidewalk looking in all directions.

"You kids know anything about this place?" he asked. "I'm from out of town, and my nephew has been checking houses for me this past month. He thought I might like the one at the end of Norton Drive, so he let me borrow his truck to drive over here. But I don't know if this is the house he meant. There aren't any signs."

"This house is for sale," Max told him. "My mom is the real estate agent."

"Great! Then can you tell me her name and company? I'd like to ask about this property. Paul tells me that houses in this part of town sell fast. He says this one has been on the market for quite some time. Glad I got here before it was sold! Just couldn't get over here any sooner."

As soon as Max gave him the information, the man drove off. Nina stared after the truck. "Know what? His nephew, Paul, might have taken the signs. Maybe he didn't want people to see that the house was for sale until his uncle had a chance to look at it. You can put lots of things in the back of a truck."

Max nodded. "Let's ask this Mrs. Stearns if she saw anything this morning."

Mrs. Stearns came to the screen as soon as the two knocked. She was gray-haired, but she stood straight and tall. "Oh, I think I know who might have taken those signs," she told them. "Freddie Swanson. He lives a block away, but he's always up to mischief."

She held the door open as she talked, so Nina peeked inside. She liked the cozy living room. The sofa and chairs were velvet-covered antiques. Lace doilies covered the end tables. A large painting hung over the intricately-carved fireplace mantel, and a cheerful fire crackled below.

"I know Freddie," Max said. "And I know where he lives. Let's go see him."

Freddie was putting a lawn mower in the garage when they reached his house. He mopped his brow, as he talked to them. "Why would I take a dumb old sign?" he asked. "Besides, I've been out here doing yard work all morning." Nina stared past him at the garage. Her parents could hardly get their car in her garage at home because of all the stuff in it, but this one was practically bare. Then she noticed a crudely built tree house in the yard. The boards were gray and weather-beaten.

She and Max talked as they biked back to his house. Mrs. Decker was washing the lunch dishes when they banged into the house.

"We think we know who took the signs," Nina told her.

## The Case of the Charley Cheetah Theft

The sky was dark and cloudy as Max and Nina left Carol Decker's car. They ran past the small artificial pond in Harborville Junior High's courtyard. Nina's science class had carefully arranged various colored rocks beneath the water, but nobody sat admiring the design today. "What a gloomy afternoon!" Nina said as they ran up the steps.

Just as Max flung open the front door, the rain poured down. "Lucky thing we didn't get caught in that," Nina said. "My hair looks like a scouring pad when it's wet."

Max laughed. "You mean you don't have wash and wear hair?"

Before Nina could answer, loud voices echoed from the school media center, the only other room leading from the corridor. The two cousins hurried over and peered in.

Ms. Purdy, the school librarian, was glaring at three students. "I know one of you took Charley," she said. She glanced over and beckoned Nina and Max inside. "Maybe you two can help. I left our school mascot on my desk when I went to the cafeteria to get coffee a few minutes ago. As I was walking back here, I saw these three students in the corridor outside my door. Charley Cheetah is gone."

"Well, I sure didn't take him," Jack Weins said. "And I had a good reason for being in the corridor." He pointed to the cast on his left arm. "My mom is taking me to the doctor today. I stepped outside, didn't see her car, but saw it was going to rain any minute. Ellen was on the steps, so we walked inside together. She'll tell you that. I don't have any reason for taking Charley Cheetah."

"Ha!" Bill Bateson blurted. "Maybe you're mad that you broke your arm and couldn't be on the team. Isn't that a good enough reason? And Ellen didn't make the cheerleading squad this year. Maybe she wanted to cause trouble because of that. But me-- I just came here to get a book. When I saw that Ms. Purdy wasn't in the room, I went out to the corridor to wait for her. I sure don't have any reason to--"

"Hey, you'd do just about anything to get a good story for the school paper," Ellen interrupted. "I was only in that corridor because I was coming back from lunch. And Jack saw me, just like he said. Bill might have taken Charley just so he could have a great headline: Charley Cheetah, School Mascot, Stolen from Media Center."

"And I'd like to know where he is," Ms. Purdy said.

"Sounds like nobody had much time alone," Nina said, gesturing to the three suspects. "Maybe someone here still has Charley Cheetah right now. After all, he's just an eight inch iron figurine."

"You think it's in my purse?" Ellen angrily demanded. "Take a look." She dumped the contents on the desk. Only the usual things tumbled out. Nina reached for her hand to calm her and felt the soaking wet cuff of her sleeve.

"Well, it sure isn't in my book bag!" Bill declared, turning his canvas bag upside down. Nina noticed he had a school yearbook and two candy bars.

"And where would I hide it?" Jack asked.

Max stepped closer and Nina noticed Jack cringe. "Just how loose is that cast?" Max asked. "Charley Cheetah isn't very big. Could you have--"

Jack laughed. "You can bet my cast isn't that loose! He moved his arm closer, and Nina saw that the plaster was peeling away from the edges.

Max glanced at Nina. "Could someone else have been in here and----"

"No." Nina shook her head. "One of these three took Charley. And I think I know who it was. And I think I know where Charley is right now."