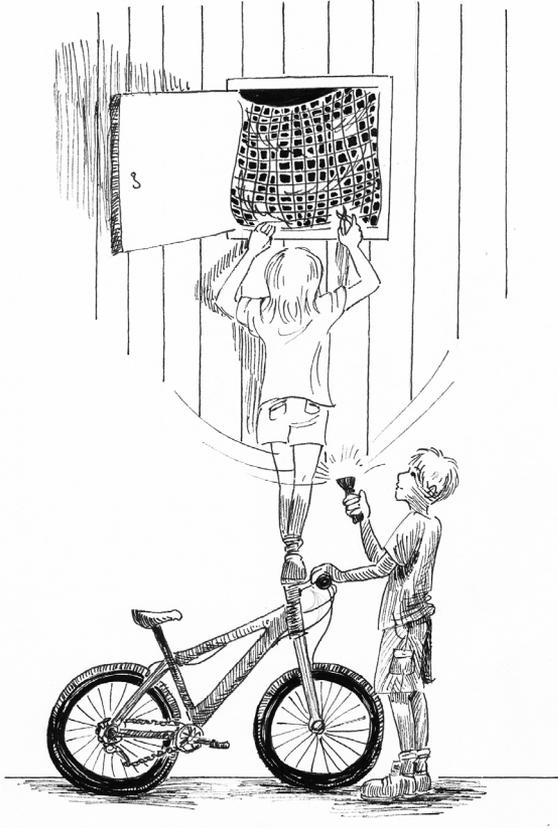


The Shockoe Slip Gang

A Mystery



Patricia Cecil Hass

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For my husband, Anthony,
with my gratitude and love.



When I was little and lived in Richmond, birds sang and trees bloomed, and children rode their bicycles everywhere. Richmond was a perfect city for riding bicycles, especially in the summer. Green branches hung over the lovely streets, and there were just the right size cobbled alleys, freely wandering dogs and cats, and cool back gardens to explore.

But danger roamed in Richmond, too, and one hot, pulsing summer night, riding along the moon-drenched, silver-dappled avenues, I came to his dark street, and found him.

– Author’s note



CHAPTER ONE

Andrew walked out on the back porch, holding a tall glass of ice cream in one hand and pouring ginger ale in it with the other. He looked out across the back yard, shimmering green in the afternoon sun.

“Sally?” He called.

“Here.” Her voice came from a clump of trees in a corner of the garden’s brick wall.

He picked his way across the grass, thick and bouncy from the July heat, and edged under the tree branches. “What’re you doing?”

“Reading.” She looked down at him. “A book Mom gave me. It’s good, about this guy who’s got a gang and rides around on a horse. He wears a mask so nobody knows who he is, but when he goes away he always leaves his mark, a big Z. His name’s Zorro.”

“Is that all he does?”

“No. He helps people.”

Andrew handed her his glass and swung himself up on the wall. “Too bad he’s not here. I could use some help with my yard work.”

Sally sucked white foam from Andrew’s drink and tried to picture a masked man galloping around their city with a band of followers behind him, their horses

prancing and rearing. She pulled one knee up under her chin and picked absently at a scab. “Nobody like that would ever come to Richmond. It’s too normal here.”

Andrew grinned. “We could try to make it weird.” He stretched out on his back on the ivy-covered wall, knowing just how to do it without falling off. It was cool under the trees and sparrows cheeped in the branches over their heads. They could hear the sound of cars swishing by on the street in front of their house and see their orange cat, Peaches, walking toward them across the grass.

A door slammed inside the house, and they heard Jane, their little sister, calling their names. The terrace door burst open and she nearly fell onto the flagstones, but she caught herself and ran onto the grass, her curly brown hair flying around her face. “I’m getting to wear eye-glasses!” She shouted, sounding pleased.

Andrew jumped down from the wall and picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder and racing up and down the lawn. “She can see! She can see!” he shouted, as Jane screamed with delight. He dumped Jane on the grass and sprawled beside her, and Sally sat up.

“So when are you getting them?” she said.

“I don’t know, but I can stay with my grade next year.” Jane petted Peaches, who had climbed onto her lap.

“That’s good,” Andrew said, remembering how hard last year had been for Jane, for all of them. It wasn’t only

Handwritten musical notation in Arabic script, including notes, clefs, and lyrics, arranged in a flowing, curved pattern across the top of the page.



the glasses. She had had trouble concentrating too, after their Dad died. That had been a year ago, on a hot day like this, when a drunk driver swerved into the wrong lane and slammed into Dad's car. He had been heading home from work early, except that he never made it. Andrew felt his eyes watering at the memory, but Jane didn't seem to notice and Sally, who usually noticed everything, was still on the wall.

Jane squinted up at her. "I have to go to summer school over again though."

"You might not mind it this time," Sally said. "With glasses you can see the work."

"But she won't be able to help me." Andrew stood up. July and August were his busiest months, when his lawn business expanded into house and pet sitting. He looked at Jane. "Where's Mom?"

"She went back to the office." Their mother worked at the city's fine arts museum, and she had just been assigned to organize a new exhibit of antique American toys. It was a big promotion, and it had come in the nick of time for their family's finances. They'd been on a tight budget since Dad died, with not enough money for any extras like guitar lessons or travel. Even class trips were a luxury. Mac — their part-time housekeeper — was still with them, but only because she'd agreed to work in exchange for room and board while she went to the business college downtown.

Jane pushed Peaches away and squatted on her

heels. “Mom works too much,” she said. “I liked it better before she got promoted.”

“You know why she has to work so much,” Sally said, her voice rising. “Besides, this whole exhibit was her idea. She wants to make sure it’s good.”

“I know,” Jane nodded glumly. She stood up. “Anyway, she said if you’re going swimming to take me.”

Andrew grunted. “Okay. But I have to feed Mr. Kelso’s pigeons on the way.”

“I’m coming too.” Sally put her book in a tin box in the ivy and dropped to the ground. They walked across the grass, blinking in the sunlight, into the dimness of the cool, high-ceilinged house.

They could hear Mac on the second floor, vacuuming and singing at the same time. Mac was tall and bony, with yellow hair and pale skin. She often sang really loud while she worked, which she said helped whatever was bothering her.

“She sounds awful today,” Sally said.

“It’s her feet.” Andrew picked his bathing suit off a hook in the back hall. “She sounds off key like that when they hurt.”

“So?”

“So, let’s get out of the house before she finds stuff for us to do,” Andrew said.

Sally and Jane grabbed their suits and towels and slid through the side door behind him. They wheeled their bikes along the cool walk beside the house and

bumped down two steps to the sidewalk in front.

Their house stood on a tree-lined avenue divided in the middle by a wide grass plot edged with green maple trees. Traffic was light in mid-afternoon, and the city hummed gently around them, making Sally's thoughts drift to Zorro and his gang. It would be so cool to see guys like that, riding right up to her, their horses snorting and pawing the ground.

"Sally?" Andrew called. He and Jane were already halfway up the block, looking back to see where she was. Andrew was eleven — a year younger than Sally — but two inches taller and fifteen pounds heavier, and he could ride very fast.

"Coming!" She started moving, pedaling hard along the next two blocks, before they turned onto a boulevard lined with more houses, a history museum, and the big Fine Arts Museum where their mother worked. Andrew pulled up in front of a row of houses across from the museum and set his kickstand, looking at Jane.

"If you come with me it'll save time. You can change the water."

Sally waited with their bikes, leaning on her handlebars. A month before school ended she'd hurt her leg playing Lacrosse, which had put her on crutches for six weeks. She still felt out of shape, and now sweat trickled down her arms and legs as she moved into the shade of a persimmon tree, pushing back her helmet. Absentmindedly she looked around, and then her eyes

stopped. Across the street in front of the museum a man sat quietly idling his motorcycle. He was wearing a headlamp and a heavy black canvas jacket. A crowbar was sticking out of one of his pockets.

“In ninety degree heat in the middle of the day?” She said aloud.

He couldn’t have heard her, but he looked in her direction, and she couldn’t help staring back at him.

“Done.” Andrew’s voice came from behind her. “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Sally’s mouth barely moved. “Don’t look, but there’s a weird guy over there.”

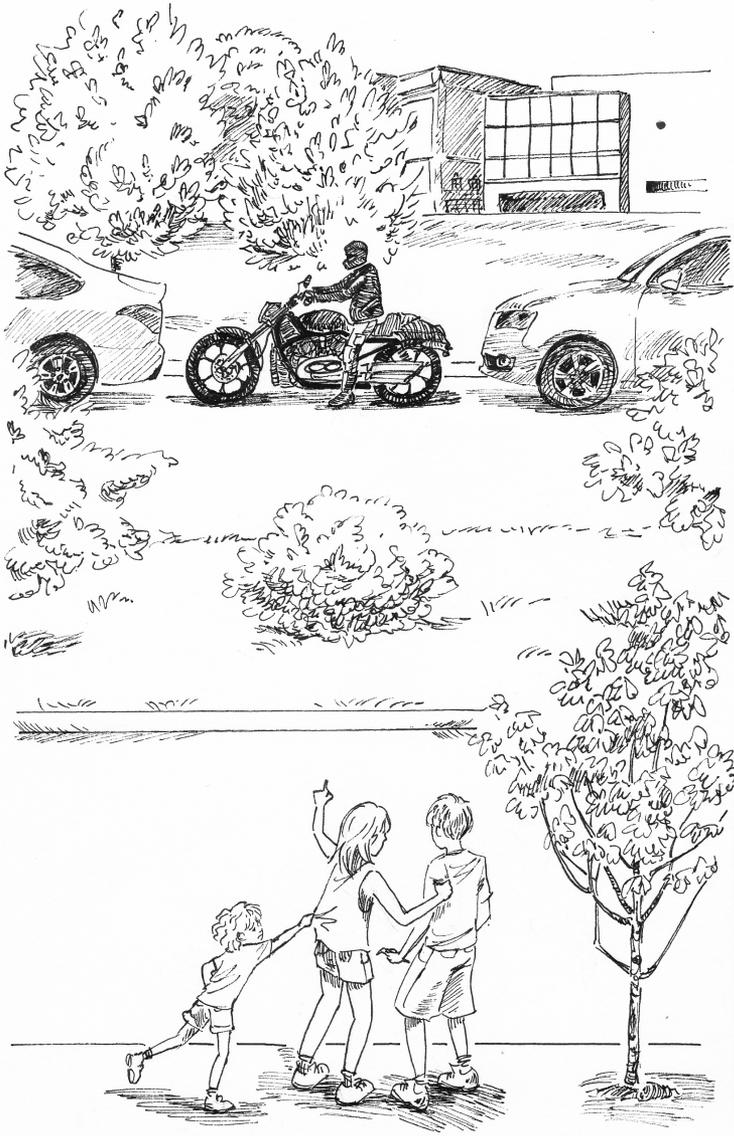
Andrew eased onto his bike. Then he leaned over, pretending to tie his shoelace. “He must be melting. And what’s with the headlamp?”

“He’s a terrorist.” Jane had come up behind them. She sounded scared.

“Don’t be silly, of course he’s not.” Sally said.

“Maybe he’s waiting for dark, to rob a store or something,” Andrew said. “Let’s check him out.”

They walked their bikes along the sidewalk, pretending to be heading toward the museum’s landscaped parking area. They could see the man on the motorcycle had taken off his headlamp and put on his helmet. He looked around quickly, then saw them and stopped, staring at Sally again. His look made her shudder, as though he was sending some evil spell in her direction. She stepped back quickly, moving behind one



of the parked cars, and when she looked out again the man had dropped his gaze and was rolling his motorcycle slowly forward, gently revving his motor. Suddenly he accelerated and shot off along the Boulevard, veering around the next corner until he was out of sight.

Sally pulled on her bike helmet. “What a creep,” she said shakily.

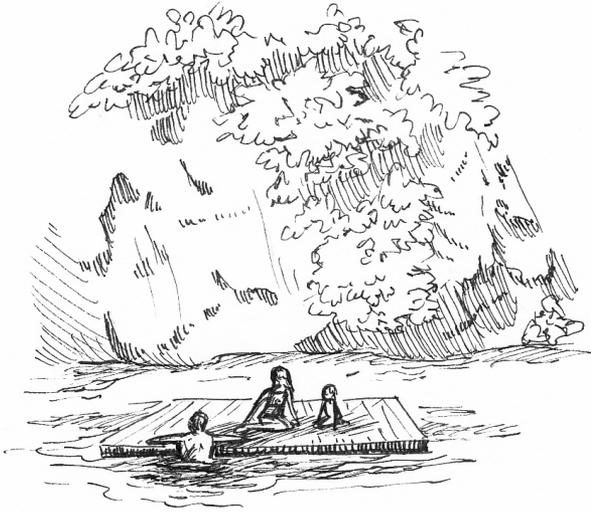
“He knew we were watching him,” Jane said, sounding worried.

“Maybe,” Andrew said. “Anyway, he’s gone. Come on, let’s go swimming.”

Four blocks west they crossed the downtown expressway and turned into a quiet lane lined with trees. At the end, a high chain-link fence surrounded an old stone quarry, now filled with water, amber-colored and dappled with shade. Children floated in inner tubes in a roped-off area, and some adults were swimming slow, circular laps around the edge.

Andrew and Jane propped their bikes at a stand inside the gates, but Sally moved hers closer to the bathhouse when she saw a lady waving at Andrew. He would drop anything for a new customer, but Sally and Jane were too hot to wait. They changed into their bathing suits, rushing out and flinging themselves off the stone dock, heading for the raft. The water felt cool and wonderful, and Sally rolled over and lazed on her back, staring at the sky through the trees, thinking how good she felt in the summer.

Jane had climbed up the raft's ladder and sat down, scowling. "Nobody I know's going to be at summer school," she said. "Everybody's either away or doing something else. Like earning money, the way Mom needs us to."



Sally climbed up beside her and reached over to rub her sister's small, bony shoulder. She knew Jane never used to worry like this before Dad died, but now it seemed like she was always scared of something. "It'll be okay," Sally said. "You can still earn money after you finish summer school. And don't forget your new glasses – they'll look great, like you're a brain," she teased.

Andrew had reached the ladder and hung on, his fingers looking brown. "That person in the parking lot wants her cat and dog fed, and the dog walked," he interrupted. "And her yard done once a week for the rest

of the summer.” He looked at Sally. “I could do a lot more if you’d help, now your leg’s okay.”

Sally rolled over. “I have to do my reading list.”

”You can read at night,” Andrew said. He heaved himself up onto the raft. “You could help in the day, instead of lying around.”

”I’m not lying around. I just don’t want to cut grass.” But even as she said it, she knew Andrew would have trouble finding someone else. Most kids had summer jobs or were away at camp or in some kind of program. She was practically the only person she knew who wasn’t doing anything, and now that her leg was healed she ought to be earning money too.

”You always wanted to do stuff before,” Jane said. She was blinking hard, a sign she was upset. “You’ve been acting weird all summer. Why’d you get so lazy? Mom said we all need to help each other.”

”I know what Mom said. Just back off, will you?” Sally slid off the float into the water and started doing kicks on her back, already sorry for the way she’d sounded. Was she really lazy? She didn’t think so, but she had to admit Andrew was right – she could easily do the work he needed. The trouble was that she liked doing nothing. It felt more like her old life, the one when she was a kid, not the responsible oldest daughter she’d had to become after Dad died. All she really wanted was to bury herself in the summer’s heat, sweet-smelling grass, and deep greens and blues, and keep those inside

her head to help her feel safe and whole, before the cold of fall and winter returned and the emptiness without Dad came back to live inside her.

Still she felt guilty, and she couldn't shake off a feeling of doubt as they left the quarry and got on their bikes. Lost in thought on the way home, she looked up as they were passing the museum and Mr. Kelso's house, and she felt a quick shiver, remembering the guy on the motorcycle. She slowed and looked around, hoping he was really gone. What if he wasn't, she thought. What if he's watching us, from somewhere we can't see? She shook her head, knowing she was being silly, but then, not understanding why she couldn't shake her uneasy feeling, she kept looking behind them all the way home.



CHAPTER TWO

“Zorro was an old TV series,” their mother said at dinner. “I used to watch reruns when I was growing up, and I loved it.”

“You’re not going away again, are you?” Jane said suddenly from her seat at the middle of the table. “I want you to stay home.”

“Let’s get these conversations together.” Mrs. Corbett smiled at her daughter. “No, I won’t have to travel again. We have all the toys – the last ones arrived today, including a miniature wooden cannon.”

Andrew perked up. “Can you set it off?”

His mother laughed. “It’s over 200 years old. Not strong enough to be fired. It’s belonged to the same family for generations and they’re very attached to it, so I wouldn’t want it to blow up.”

Sally speared more tomato slices onto her plate. “It’ll be fun to see these new ones.”

“Yes, but I love all the toys,” Mom said. “And having so many of them here is really exciting. It could give our museum a big boost.”

Outside the dining room windows the cicadas were buzzing, and Andrew helped himself to a third ear of corn. He slathered it with butter, which dripped onto his

third biscuit.

“I got a new customer today,” he said. “When we were at the quarry. That makes as many clients as I can handle. Dad would...,” he stopped.

“Dad would what?” his mother asked gently.

Andrew put down his piece of corn and stared at it before he answered. “I guess I’m hoping he’d be proud I have so many.” Dad had been an investment advisor, with lots of clients of his own. “I should bring in almost a thousand dollars this summer.”

Mom smiled wistfully, watching Andrew blow on his ear of corn before taking a bite. “Yes, he would be proud of you. I’m proud of you too. And we do need the money.”

Sally batted her biscuit away from the tomato slices on her plate so it wouldn’t get soggy. She sighed. Andrew could be bossy, but he was an okay brother, and he needed her. I better tell him I’ll help him, she thought, as Mac walked in from the kitchen, bearing a steaming dessert. She looked belligerently at Mrs. Corbett and sat down. “You forgot the ice cream, so I made bread pudding.”

“That’s wonderful,” their mother said. “You know we couldn’t survive without you. Or your bread pudding.”

“I hate bread pudding.” Jane pushed back her chair.

“Don’t leave,” Mom said. “We have to finish filling out those school forms.”

Andrew could tell Jane was going to start an argument, and he jumped up. “I’ve got to feed some

dogs. I'll grab a popsicle in the kitchen."

Sally half got up too, looking at her mother, who nodded.

"Listen," Sally said to Andrew as she followed him out. "I'll help you. But if I don't like it, you'll find another person, okay?"

He nodded, looking pleased. "Yeah, sure. Thanks. Meet me out front."

It was still light when they swung onto their bikes and started down the grass-plot. Cicadas buzzed in the ivy that climbed on the houses, and the warm air smelled sweet and soft. The avenue stretched ahead of them to Meadow Street, misty in the evening glow. They pedaled three blocks, not talking, until Andrew cut right on a side street into a paved alley.

Mulberry trees hung over the back garden walls and dogs barked as they passed. Halfway down the alley Andrew coasted to a stop beside a fence. A big brown and white collie stood whining and wagging his tail.

"That's Bruce," Andrew said. "He always worries when I'm late."

He pulled a wadded piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. "All the dogs I've got on this block are friendly, so we can split up to feed them. The food's in that garage."

They worked quickly, mixing the food with water, taking the bowls to Bruce, to a Springer Spaniel, two labs and a bouncy Dachshund named Jerry. Afterwards they

took the dogs to a little fenced triangular park, where they sat on the grass watching the streetlights come on. Swallows flew over their heads as it slowly grew dark, children played hopscotch on the sidewalk across the street, and a bat swooped in the silence of the dusk. Sally rubbed Bruce's head, wishing they could linger in the park until the sky turned midnight blue.

"Look at all these houses," Andrew said, half to himself. "Yards, dogs, cats. What a profit situation. If we had more people we could do these gardens too."

"Andrew, stop," Sally said. "We're on a break. I don't want to think about your business."

"Well someone has to." Andrew sounded hurt. He stood up. "Let's go. We've still got four cats to feed."

They put the dogs away in silence and got on their bikes, riding up Grove Avenue. After the cats were fed, Andrew turned on an automatic sprinkler system and they pedaled toward home on the streets below the Boulevard. At a tiny corner store Andrew stopped to talk to one of his customers while Sally waited, looking through people's front gardens into their back yards, wondering if under some oak or dogwood tree she would see Zorro's men's horses, moving restlessly while they waited for their masters. Maybe Zorro himself would appear, looking toward Sally. He would raise his hand. "Wait," he would call as he cantered up to her, wheeling his horse to a stop. He would be smiling and very handsome, and she would give him a level look.

A wailing siren interrupted her thoughts. Two police cars burst into sight, sirens bleating in short bursts as they whizzed by. Andrew hurried out of the store, peering up the street as another police car wailed around a corner with its lights flashing.

“Something big’s happened.” He hopped on his bike. “They’re on the Boulevard.”

They pedaled fast, rounding the corner to see a cluster of police cars in front of the museum.

“Six cruisers!” Andrew said.

Sally coasted slowly along the curb beside him, taking in the squawking loudspeakers, the police dogs and handlers coming in and out of the shrubbery around the building. The sky was lit by huge arc lights, bugs fluttering in their glare.

“We better get Mom,” Sally said.

“Mom’s already here.” Andrew pointed to the wide entrance, where she stood in the glare of the searchlights, talking to three police officers. “This looks really bad.”

Even from far off Sally and Andrew could tell how upset their mother was – her usually cheerful face looked almost gray under the lights. They locked their bikes to the rack by the steps and pushed through the crowd to reach her. She tried to smile at them, but it didn’t quite work.

“It’s clear that several of the toys are gone, Mrs. Corbett,” one of the officers was saying. “But we aren’t sure exactly which ones until you show us.” His name

badge read Miller. He had a neatly- trimmed mustache and graying hair underneath his hat.

“Do you have any idea what happened? How the thieves got in?” Mom asked as they all walked inside.

“Not yet,” the other policeman, a younger officer named Knudsen, said. “We’re not sure if there’s been negligence or...” He glanced at Miller, who was shaking his head like he didn’t want his partner to say anything more.

Sally saw her mother’s face tighten. Could they mean this was Mom’s fault?

Sally wondered which toys were gone. The tin circus train pulled by two wind-up elephants, with tin boxes that fitted on the train cars and opened into animal cages with all the toy lions and tigers inside? The Pullman train, complete with seats that turned into beds with tiny sheets and blankets and pillows, even net hammocks for the clothes? She, Andrew and Jane knew every toy by heart, watching their mother work day after day, her staff carefully unpacking each toy as it arrived. Just this week they’d begun designing the glass display cases that looked like small-scale rooms or gardens, with lifelike figures of children playing with the toys.

Now she almost hated to walk through the marble halls, darker than usual, and across the indoor courtyard planted with trees. Even its usually splashing fountain was quiet, as if it was sad as well.

Two of the officers began going in and out of the other

exhibit rooms, with one of the museum guards turning lights on and off as they went, their voices echoing.

At the end of the passage Mrs. Corbett turned down a private hall towards an open door, where two more policemen stood in the middle of a large storage room. Everyone waited, silent, while Mom began to walk along the big tables, torn open crates and broken glass display cases, seeing how the children's figures inside had been knocked over, their careful settings strewn every which way.

A door banged and Sally heard the sound of footsteps hurrying toward them. A tall, ruddy-faced man in a seersucker blazer hurried into the room. "I came as soon as I heard," he said, sounding a little out of breath. "Cary, what happened? The policeman on the phone said—"

"And you are, sir?" Miller asked.

"Robert Calhoun, the museum's Executive Director." He held out his hand to shake Miller's before he took in the destroyed room. "A robbery. Here? Cary, how did this happen?" He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his perspiring face. Mom stepped forward. "It seems someone broke in...they were able to bypass the main alarm."

"What?!" The museum director's voice was rising.

"Let me bring you up to date, sir," Miller said calmly. "We were just going through the room more thoroughly. Mrs. Corbett, can you tell us how much is gone?"

Mom had been inspecting the damage while Miller



spoke. At the end of the room she turned around. “It’s hard to tell yet,” she said. “But certainly quite a few of the smaller toys.” Her voice shook a little, and Sally thought she was on the edge of tears.

“Would you say it was methodical?” Miller asked.

“Oh, yes, very methodical,” Mom answered. “They must have known exactly what they wanted, and they were going after it – until they triggered the secondary alarm.”

“Was the exhibit properly armed? Who’s job is it to check that?” Miller spoke calmly, but Sally felt herself tense. She glanced at Andrew, who was looking down at the floor and scowling. Neither of them liked where this was going.

“It’s my job, when I’m the last to leave,” Mom said. “And yes, the alarm was on. And as I’m sure you know, you can check that with the security company.”

Sally breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn’t thought of that.

“Right,” Miller said, nodding, and writing down the company’s name.

Mom’s glance veered to a box in the middle of a table. “Strange,” she said slowly, “Here, the thieves left some of the better things. I’ll have to get my inventory list – but here I think they misjudged...” she was walking along, rapidly now, “...and yes, here too.” She turned, looking puzzled. “Not the most expert choices, then.”

“What does that mean?” Miller asked. He tapped

his pen against his notepad.

Mom frowned. "I don't know. That they were amateurs, perhaps." She turned and looked around the room. "No, not amateurs. But it is odd."

"We have a report from a guard that he might have seen someone inside after closing," Officer Knudsen said. "But when he went to look he couldn't find anyone."

Mom looked at him. "So there was someone inside earlier," she said. "And he must have been very clever."

Sally was watching Mr. Calhoun pace up and down the room, avoiding the broken glass and open crates on the ground. He wasn't just the executive director. He was mom's boss, and now a robbery had ruined her exhibit...

"We saw someone hanging around this afternoon," Andrew broke in. "It was outside, and half a block away, but we noticed him because he was wearing a heavy canvas jacket with lots of pockets and a headlamp. A guy on a motorcycle."

Sally shivered, remembering the guy's hard, cold stare.

"Could you give us a description? Of him or the motorcycle?" Miller was asking. "Every bit of information helps."

Sally let Andrew do most of the talking, and she listened closely as he described everything he could remember about the man, the motorcycle, and how he had sped away when he saw them watching him. "He looked mean," Sally added. "The way he stared at me

gave me the creeps.”

Miller folded his pad. “This sounds like it could fit with the other reports.”

“I could help you look for him,” Andrew said. “I do people’s yards and keep an eye on their houses, so I’m used to surveillance work.”

Officer Knudsen grinned. “Thanks, buddy,” he said. “But it would be best if you stay out of it. If these are professionals they are likely dangerous.” He turned to Mrs. Corbett. “When will you be able to give us a full inventory?”

Mom glanced at her boss. “I’ll have it done by 10 AM tomorrow,” she said. “If that’s all, I’ll leave you to your work.”

Mr. Calhoun followed them into the hallway. “I don’t need to tell you how serious this is, Cary.” He pursed his lips.

“No, you don’t,” Mom agreed. “But I’m sure the police will get to the bottom of it, and they have some good leads.”

Sally thought Mom was trying to sound more reassuring than she felt, and Mr. Calhoun shook his head.

“Even so, it’s a disaster — not only for our reputation, but for all the collectors who trusted us to keep their heirlooms safe, not to mention the other museums who added so much to this exhibit.” He sighed deeply. “I’ll contact the board of Directors immediately.” He nodded to Andrew and Sally before he strode away.

Mom leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. Sally and Andrew exchanged glances and went over to hug her.

“Mom, it’s going to be OK,” Andrew said. His voice cracked and he cleared his throat. “They’ll find the toys.”

Mom straightened her back and put an arm around each of them. “Thank you. But it’s not just the toys. The Board took a big chance, making me the Head Curator. Having Mr. Calhoun question my competence doesn’t help. Although,” she looked away for a minute, “he never was enthusiastic about this exhibit. He might not mind if it fails and I lose my job.”

“But we’d mind,” Andrew said as they started walking along the hallway. “And everyone else would. It can’t fail.”

“How could anybody have done something so awful?” Sally burst out. “All those beautiful toys! Why would anyone want to ruin something so important?”

They reached the museum’s entrance and went outside, squinting in the glare of the spotlights.

“Thank you so much, officers,” Mom said to the policemen as they passed. “The staff and I appreciate anything you can do.”

Then she turned back to Sally and her face looked sad. “Lots of people do things like this – sometimes just to vandalize, to be destructive – but often for the money. They don’t care about beauty, about history...” she trailed off, thinking. Then she began again. “But some of those

toys are irreplaceable, and if we don't get them back, that will truly break my heart."

Andrew touched her arm again. "We'll help, Mom. I promise. There's got to be something we can do." He wasn't going to let anything more happen to the family — and he was definitely not going to let Mom lose her job.

"There is something." Mom smiled at him. "Get your bikes and I'll follow you home. And then get a good night's sleep so we'll all have clear heads in the morning."

And, Sally said to herself, so we can figure out a way to get every last one of those toys back.



CHAPTER THREE

Across the city Henry Morrison got silently out of bed and crossed to the window. A rooster crowed, and he could see that along the river it was growing light. Church Hill, where the Morrises lived, was an Historic District, and some people kept chickens, like old-fashioned times. Henry liked the rooster's sound — it reminded him of his grandmother's small house in the country.

It would be clear today and that meant it would be hot — he'd have a lot of watering to do later, in his clients' gardens. But for now the dawn breeze was cool as he found a tank top and shorts and picked up his running shoes, tiptoeing along the hall. His little sister Rose was still asleep in the room next to his, and his parents' room was quiet too. But Fluffy, the family's Australian sheepdog, stood waiting downstairs, her short tail wagging so hard it moved her hind legs back and forth.

“How do you always know when I'm going running?” Henry tousled her ears while he pulled on his shoes. Outside the sun was peeping gold over the trees at the top of the hill when Henry walked his bike across the yard, marveling at how many birds were singing at the same time. He loved the way they sounded on early summer mornings, not singing their hearts out the way they did in

the spring, but full of life just the same.

“I guess I just like bird noises,” he said to Fluffy as he hopped on his bike.

She answered him with a quick yap, running on ahead while he pedaled slowly to where Church Hill dropped off, looking south to the river and west to Broad Street. His glance dipped down into the Shockoe ravine and then up again to the business section of the city. He could see the red clay gashes where huge cranes had torn up the trees that had lined each side of the ravine. Henry hated the way the cranes looked, reaching for the sky, and the way they had destroyed the trees.

“Not that you’d notice,” he said to Fluffy. “The only time you look at a tree is when a squirrel is running up it.” He grinned at her and she gave his hand a quick nuzzle. Then he started up again, coasting down the hill and pedaling hard up the next. He was heading for the parking garage at the bottom of Main Street where the city’s Marathon always had its finish line. When he reached it, he chained his bike to a stanchion inside, went back outside to stretch for a few minutes, and then, with Fluffy beside him, began to run.



Five miles to the west Sally woke up with a start, as if she’d just had a bad dream. She sat up quickly, wondering why she felt so nervous, but then it all rushed back – the

robbery, the wreckage in the museum storerooms, and the look on her mother's face.

Early red-gold sunbeams were slanting in her window, a cardinal was calling outside, and insects were zinging their dawn songs. Usually some of her favorite noises, but not today. Nothing felt right today.

Wondering if anyone else was up, she got out of bed and went in the bathroom to splash water on her face. Then she walked to her door and stood listening, but the house was quiet. Hopefully her exhausted mom was still asleep. She went back to her dresser and pulled on a T-shirt and shorts. If she hurried, she could get in a run before everyone else woke up, which would clear her head. She knew that's what Dad would have done. He loved running, and because of him, she did too. He used to run whenever he felt upset about something, saying it helped him think better. And right now she needed to think better too.

Her bare feet made no sound padding down the back steps to the pantry, where Peaches came up to twine around her ankles. She stooped to pour some food into the cat's bowl. She grabbed a banana before writing a quick note to mom that she'd gone running, her mind still seeing the broken crates in the Museum's storeroom and scattered toys lying in the smashed glass cases. Walking across their house's thick straw rugs to the front door, she wondered again how anything so bad could happen to their mom, to them all.

“The toys might be in somebody’s van right now, on their way to be sold in New York or someplace farther away than that,” she’d said to Andrew last night when they were getting ready for bed.

“They could still be in Richmond, too,” Andrew had answered, splashing water on his face, which was how he washed when Mom wasn’t around. “And I’ve been thinking. Remember that guy on the motorcycle had really big jacket pockets? If he was one of the people they said was in the museum later, he could have stuffed the small toys in his pockets and got them out that way.”

“And no one would notice anything,” Sally said, as she reached for her toothbrush, feeling a quick shiver. She still didn’t like thinking about the man on the motorcycle.

Andrew picked up his towel and dried his face. “Right. But whoever took them and wherever they are, the main thing is we have to get them back. And I’m not stopping until we do.”

Last night his determination had made her feel better. But this morning, opening the heavy front door and trotting down the wide front steps in the early daylight with everything looking so familiar, she wasn’t so sure. What, actually, could they do? They couldn’t just hop on their bikes and pedal around the city streets, not knowing where to look. And they had so little time – the exhibit’s opening date was only a few weeks away. Mom couldn’t borrow any more toys, because after what had happened no one would trust the museum to keep them

safe.

Worse still, since she was in charge, she was going to get blamed, even though it wasn't her fault. Sally swallowed hard. It wasn't what Mom needed, what any of them needed, coming on top of losing Dad. Sally brushed away the tears she felt welling up and reached for a Kleenex, then blew her nose and shoved her damp tissues back inside her shorts' pocket.

She crossed to the grass plot and did a few stretches before she started moving at a slow trot, hoping this would help her mood, her pace quickening when she breathed in a smell she loved – newly cut grass, its sweet scent mixed with damp earth. On the next block she let her speed pick up, running in and out of slanting sunbeams that flickered through the maples' trunks and turned the leaves vivid green.

She had gone four blocks when she noticed someone halfway up the grassplot ahead of her. A boy, running in bright blue shorts and a white tank, with a big blue-mottled dog keeping a steady lope beside him.

How long had he been there? She hadn't even noticed. That was so typical. No wonder her soccer coach kept telling her she was always daydreaming. As she slowed at the curb she saw something in the gutter. It looked like a swim-club patch, and she hesitated, breaking her stride. Could the boy ahead of her have dropped it? She swung in a circle and scooped up the patch.

It probably wasn't his, but it wouldn't hurt to find

out. He was going faster, and Sally relaxed her arms and hunched into her stride, leaning slightly forward, churning along the dappled grass with big drops of dew splashing over her flying feet.

She looked up just in time to see the boy swerving out and slowing, looking startled. He was African-American, probably a year or so older than she was. His dog circled too, looking at them attentively.

“Sorry, hi, wait...” she panted, trying not to gulp air. “I found this.” She waved her hand with the patch in it. “I thought it might be yours.”

He looked surprised. “Hey...it is! I must have dropped it. Thanks a lot.” He turned the patch over in his hand. “I just got it, in a race. That’ll teach me to sew ‘em on better.”

He smiled at her, and Sally saw other patches, up and down the side of his shorts.

“You race?” He gestured for her to use the path, and fell in beside her, jogging slowly. Sally noticed he was breathing easily, his stride springy and relaxed, while she was still catching her breath.

“No,” she said. “I just like running. And it keeps me fast for soccer and lacrosse.”

“Anybody as fast as you ought to race too,” he said.

“Really?” Sally heard her voice squeak.

“I was motoring,” he said. “You had to be flying to catch up. What’s your mile time?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never timed myself.” She looked

again at his patches. “It looks like you win a lot.”

He nodded. “In my category, 13 and under. I want to do more, though. I’m training for a half-marathon this October. I’m hoping to win my age group.”

They had reached the top of the block and he pointed to a street, lined with tall oak trees. “Here’s my route. Thanks again for my patch. I really appreciate that.”

With a wave he veered off, his dog alongside, and Sally turned around too, realizing that for a few minutes she’d forgotten the robbery. Then it all came back in a rush, along with a feeling of dread. Mom would be up by now, and Sally hated to think what she’d find.

But at the house Mom seemed calm. She was sitting in the kitchen with Andrew and Jane, who were gobbling down wheat puffs. And though her eyes had purplish half-circles under them, like she hadn’t slept much, she could even smile at her oldest daughter.

“I’m glad you’re back,” she said. “There’s one bit of good news. I just heard from the Lieutenant that the alarm was turned on, obviously by me, when I left the museum last night.”

“That’s great!” Sally said. She put her arms around her mother and hugged her. “And,” Mom went on, “the Lieutenant also said the alarm was turned off again about an hour and a half later, from the inside.”

“You know what that means,” Andrew looked up from his cereal bowl. “One of the burglars stayed there.”

Their mother nodded. “And he would have been an

expert about electronic systems. The police now think these are professionals who were looking the museum over and studying our security system long before the robbery.”

“But where would a burglar hide so the guards wouldn’t see him?” Jane asked. She looked worried.

“It’s a big museum,” Andrew said. “And there aren’t as many guards on duty after everyone leaves, right Mom?”

“That’s right.” Their mother looked at her watch. “Anyway I’ll learn more when I get there. Right now I have to go. The press is already parked in front of the building, and I’m meeting with my staff members in thirty minutes.” She stood up and looked at Andrew and Sally. “I’m sure I’ll need to stay at the museum most of the day, so if you two will come to my office at lunchtime we’ll get sandwiches in the cafeteria.”

They nodded, and she turned to Jane, who was pushing a biscuit around her plate. “Time to leave. Not good to be late your first day at summer school. You can take that biscuit with you.”

Jane got up and carefully pushed in her chair before she rushed out behind Mom, and Andrew stood up too. “I’ve got some ideas about clues we can start on as soon as we get the pigeons done and get to the museum,” he said to Sally. “Catch up with me at Kelso’s?”

She nodded. She was wondering how Mom could stay so calm. I want to be like her some day, she thought,

as Mac came in with a saucepan full of lukewarm oatmeal. She spooned it into a bowl, which Sally filled to the top with milk and brown sugar.

“It’s good you’re helping your brother,” Mac said. “It’s just wonderful a boy that age, trying so hard. When I was little all we did was work, but nowadays most young people don’t do anything. Why, years ago...”

Sally’s mind glazed over while Mac went on talking. Even though she understood Mac’s special feeling for Andrew – liking the business world, as she said, ‘the same as me’ – Mac’s lectures on the old days could go on and on.

Sally concentrated on finishing her cereal before she said, “Maybe they know something by now.”

Mac nodded. “Let’s hope.” She patted Sally’s shoulder. “Your mom’s a good woman. This shouldn’t have happened to her.”

For the second time that morning, Sally’s eyes filled with tears. She blinked hard. “It’s just that we’ve got to help her, and I don’t know what to do.”

Mac reached for a paper napkin and handed it to Sally.

“Just what you *are* doing,” she said. “Helping Andrew, so you’ll both have more time to help your mother. And keeping your hopes up, which will make her do the same. Things could still turn out for the best.”

Sally managed a lopsided smile. That was what Mac always said, and even though today it was hard to believe,

it somehow made Sally feel better. Maybe, she thought as she hopped on her bike, Andrew's idea about clues would make sense too.

Mr. Kelso's pigeons were flying in a wide circle above the rooftops when Sally reached his house. For a minute she stood still, entranced, watching them climb higher and higher into the sky.

"I've cleaned their boxes and filled their food and water trays," Andrew called from inside their coop "That'll hold them 'til later."

He stepped out, carrying a tin pie plate full of seeds. As he held it up and rattled it the pigeons, far up, either heard the sound or saw his form by the coop, arm upstretched. The whole flock turned, and almost as one bird they hurtled down like arrows, banking and slipping through the air without stopping until they landed on the coop's roof and pushed their way in through the hanging wire doors, heading straight for the feed trays.

"That's amazing!" Sally said. "I never knew pigeons were so smooth!"

"They're homing pigeons. They've been trained to come in fast to save time in a race," Andrew said. "And right now, we need to hurry too."



Henry leaned his bike against his back porch and walked into his house, heading for the kitchen. He washed

his hands and took a croissant from a tray his father was pulling from the oven, chewing while he picked up his orange juice.

“How’d it go?” His father asked.

“Fine,” Henry said. “I did a 5:35, and it felt okay.”

His father, a lawyer who had been a champion track and fielder in college, trained Henry in his spare time. He eyed Henry over the top of his bifocals. “Okay.”

Henry sighed. He knew that his father’s “okay” really meant not okay. There were many times when what he did wasn’t enough for his dad.

“See if you can break 5:30 next week.” Mr. Morrison began arranging the croissants on a plate.

“Dad, I’m trying.” Henry couldn’t keep the frustration out of his voice. “I’ll leave earlier tomorrow before the heat comes up. Maybe I can shave five seconds off.”

Mr. Morrison looked up from the platter. “As you should have been doing all along.”

Henry stared at the croissants and took a deep breath. “Yeah, okay,” he said.

“By the way, there was a big robbery in the West End last night. Antique toys from the Museum. Very valuable, some of them.” Mr. Morrison was Chairman of the museum’s Board of Trustees and also volunteered his legal services. “I’m headed there later to see what I can do. Tell your mother I had to leave early, will you? She and Rose are out walking.”

“Right,” Henry said, picking up another croissant, covering it with honey and washing it down with a second glass of orange juice. He ran upstairs to change, left a note for his mother, snapped his key pouch to his belt and patted Fluffy goodbye. Then he hopped on his bike and pedaled along East Broad Street into the now steaming morning.

He passed the eastern side of Church Hill and came to Chimborazo Park — a neighborhood of older brick houses with brick-walled gardens — where he had several clients. He worked fast until noon, cutting grass and trimming walks and shrubs, finally stopping to spray water from a hose over his head and down his T-shirt. He stood for a few minutes in the cool stream before he put his cap back on and walked his bike along a cobbled alley. At the end he pushed open a high, ramshackle gate, actually a collection of slats nailed together by two wide boards, centered in a run-down fence.

But once inside, the garden was surprising. A small but carefully tended square of deep green grass lay in the middle of flower borders filled with exotic plants, surrounded by a walkway of bricks. At the outer edges of the yard, tall magnolia trees shaded stone benches in the cool spaces underneath.

My wonderful garden, Henry thought to himself. Of course it wasn't his, it was his client's, but since Henry had helped plant it, he still felt that way. He always tried to leave it for last because it was so special. All the

plants, shrubs and flowers were endangered varieties, preserved and grown, as his client, a professor, liked to say, by “nuts like me who keep them going.” From the professor, Henry had learned how to prune and water, thin and transplant these unusual plants, and the more he worked with them, the more interested he became. It was as though all his yard work had led to this wondrous new world called Botany, a world he wanted to explore more and more.

Now, closing the gate, Henry stepped onto the bricks and waved at the professor, who was sitting on the porch. “Hello, sir. How are you?”

“Oh, not bad for an old history professor.”

It was what he always said, and Henry grinned. He didn’t seem old, although he had been a history professor, even a famous one, according to Henry’s dad. That was before he’d retired from William and Mary College in Williamsburg and come back to Richmond. Henry wasn’t sure what he was doing now besides taking care of his plants, but it really didn’t matter – working with him in this garden was enough.

Now the Professor put away what he was holding and came down the steps, pointing to a plant halfway down the border.

“I’ve been looking at the *Cypripedium*,” he said, heading along the brick path.

Henry knew that was the Latin name for Lady Slippers plants, and he crouched down to look at the pink

and white flowers. Puffing slightly, the professor bent beside him. “They’re used to the heat, but I think they all need more dappled shade than they’ve got, with this July sun right overhead at mid-day. We need to move them.”

“Right,” Henry said, and set to work carefully, loosening the soil around the Lady Slippers’ roots while the professor watched.

“Excellent,” he said, patting Henry on the shoulder. “You have a gift with plants, my boy.”

Henry smiled, carefully lifting the Lady Slipper from the soil while Professor Saunders walked up and down the border peering up at the sun’s angle in the sky. Finally he found a spot that satisfied him and tapped the earth with his fingers.

“Here,” he said. “If you’ll bring the nutrient bag from the porch, I’ll dig. It’s next to those boxes with the blue plastic covers.”

Henry ran up the porch steps and looked around. He saw the bag of plant food but when he reached to pick it up, his foot accidentally touched one of the boxes and something fell out with a clatter. Henry jumped, but it was only a flat piece of wood with two small wheels, shaped like a horse.

“Leave that alone!” the Professor called quickly. “Come back here and get some water, these plants are already drooping.” Then in a calmer voice he added, “I’ll add the nutrients later.”

It was not until later that afternoon that Henry

would remember thinking it odd that an unmarried, elderly history professor had a wooden child's pull toy, with its paint peeling off, on his back porch.