

1 A New Mystery

At just before three in the afternoon, Steve walked up to the doors of the popular diner, Tyrone's, smoothed back his slight afro, and inhaled a deep breath. In a few minutes, the Decoders' new client, their first *real* client, would meet them here, inside these doors.

A couple months ago, Steve and his two best friends, Matt and Jenny, had formed a secret detective group called the Decoders. So far, all three cases they had solved involved helping someone they knew. Today, that would change.

Exhaling slowly, he entered Tyrone's. The smell, a cross between fried chicken and grilled hamburgers, immediately calmed his nerves. The three friends ate there so often, the diner had become like a second home. He had even memorized the location of all the different sports memorabilia decorating the walls. He spotted Matt and Jenny sitting at a booth, talking to Tyrone Washington, the owner of the restaurant.

"Hey, Steve," the tall, dark man greeted as the boy slid into the seat next to Matt. "Heard you all got yourselves a new case already." The only adult in Beachdale who knew their secret, Tyrone had been a huge help to the detectives on their previous cases. Their last mystery, *The Sleepwalking Vampire*, involved helping Tyrone's family solve a robbery.

Nodding, Steve glanced at the front door. "Yes. Alysha said our client would meet us here at three."

"What's the new case about?" Tyrone asked.

Steve pulled one of the glasses of water sitting at the center of the table toward him. "We aren't a hundred percent sure, but it has something to do with a missing music box. A girl from our school read Alysha's articles about our cases in the local newspaper and contacted her about hiring the Decoders."

Jenny tied her long blonde hair in a ponytail. "Can you blame her? The way Alysha writes those articles makes us sound like the greatest detectives ever."

Grinning, Matt linked his hands behind his head and reclined back. "Dudes, we *are* pretty awesome."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Well, some of us are."

Laughing, Tyrone pulled out an order form and a pen from his apron pocket. "So, what can I get my favorite twelve-year-olds to eat on this fine Tuesday afternoon?" Matt ordered a double cheeseburger with fries while Steve and Jenny each ordered a chocolate shake.

At three-twenty, the young girl finally walked through the front doors. With waist-long, jet black hair and dark brown eyes, she looked exactly as Alysha had described her. She glanced around, noticeably nervous. Steve waved her over.

After scanning the diner, she slowly made her way over to their booth.

Steve stood and gave a short wave. "Hi, Rosa. My name is Steve Kemp, and these are my colleagues Matt Peterson and Jenny Reed. We are the Decoders."

The girl's dark eyes widened. "You are the detectives?" She spoke with an accent, but

not difficult to understand.

He nodded, motioned for her to sit next to Jenny at the booth, and then sat facing her. “We spoke to Alysha yesterday. She told us you’re missing a music box, but we need to get more details if we are going to help you find it.”

Just then, Tyrone walked up to remove their plates. “How was everything?”

“Amazing, as always.” Steve gestured toward the newcomer. “Tyrone, we’d like you to meet Rosa Romero. She’s a student at our middle school and our new client.”

The tall man shook Rosa’s hand warmly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. And congratulations on picking the best detective team here in Beachdale, California. Can I get you anything to drink or eat?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you.”

“All right then. You all take your time. Let me know if you need anything.”

The kids thanked him and he left, heading toward the kitchen.

Fiddling with the silver ring on her right hand, Rosa seemed a little disappointed. “I’m sorry for my surprise. I didn’t know you were kids. The stories I read in the newspaper, I thought...” Her voice trailed off.

“The stories are all true,” Steve said. He understood her concern. “The three of us are the detectives who solved all those cases.”

After pushing her empty shake glass forward, Jenny leaned back into the seat and nodded. “We just can’t let the world know who we really are. If our parents like ever found out about us, they would ground us for life.”

Rosa half-smiled, reached into her purse, and took out fifty dollars. “It isn’t much, but it’s all I have now. My father gets his paycheck in two days. I can give you more then.” She offered the money to Steve.

He shook his head and gently pushed her hand away. “The Decoders do not work for money.”

“That’s right,” Matt said. “We work to help people. And right now, you’re the one that needs our help.” He grinned and placed his elbows on the table, but one of them hit his water glass, spilling the contents all over the table. His face turned slightly red. “Oops.” He grabbed a stack of napkins from the dispenser next to him and began cleaning up the water. In doing so, he knocked over another glass of water. As he attempted to pull out more napkins, he knocked the dispenser over as well.

Noticing the twinkle in Jenny’s eye, Steve knew if he didn’t intervene immediately, she would tease Matt mercilessly. He whipped out his cell. “In order for us to help you, we need to ask you a few questions.” He opened the notebook app. “Alysha said you needed to find a music box that belonged to your grandfather. Does he live around here?”

The girl blinked several times as though fighting back tears. “No. He...he died two weeks ago.”

Reaching over, Jenny placed a hand on her shoulder. “We’re so sorry.”

Rosa opened her purse and pulled out a tissue. “That is why I must find his box.”

Jenny withdrew her hand. "What happened to it?"

"It was stolen."

Steve's eyebrows shot up in surprise. A stolen music box could be difficult to track down. According to a news program he saw a few days earlier, only thirteen percent of robberies were ever solved. But impossible odds had never stopped the Decoders before. He gritted his teeth and smiled. "Let's start at the beginning. Tell us about your grandfather."

Rosa fiddled with the ring on her finger again. It appeared to calm her nerves. "He moved here from Mexico around six months ago after his work closed down."

"What did he do for a living?" Jenny asked.

"He worked in a museum as a...*cómo se dice*...do...do..."

"Docent," Steve finished.

Rosa clapped once. "Yes. That's it. A docent."

Drying off the last of the spilled water, Matt made a giant pile of all the wet napkins. "What's a docent?"

Steve typed into his cell. "It's the person who gives tours at a museum."

"Well, that's a *docent* way to make a living." Matt burst out laughing.

Steve and Jenny groaned.

Rosa smiled.

"What kind of a museum did he work for?" Steve asked.

"A history museum. It had things from all over the world. My favorite were World War II things smuggled out of Germany."

Just then, Tyrone walked up and pointed to the pile of wet napkins. "What's up with that?"

Matt shook his head. "Don't ask."

Scooping the wet pile onto his tray, the owner promised to return with more water.

"What did your grandfather do once he moved here?" Steve asked.

"He found work at the Beachdale Museum. He even had some of the things from his old job sent here." Sadness spread across her face. "But then he got sick. We moved him to a nursing home where they could take care of him." Her eyes swelled with tears and she blinked several times. "He died two weeks ago."

Jenny reached over and gave her a quick hug. "We're so sorry."

After wiping her face with the tissue, the girl continued. "The day before he died, I went to see him. He gave me a music box and said I must keep it safe for him. He said inside was the key to great fortune."

"What did the music box look like?" Steve asked.

Rosa took a cell phone out of the back pocket of her jeans and showed them a picture of it. The red jeweled box had gold threading on it.

"Can you text that to me?" Steve asked.

She nodded and Steve gave her his number.

Tyrone walked up and placed four water glasses and straws down on the table. He

nudged Matt. "Think you can keep these upright?"

The brown-haired boy cringed. "Um, yeah."

After the owner left laughing, Matt cleared his throat and put a straw in his new glass. "What was inside the box, anyway?"

Rosa lowered her gaze and shrugged. "Nothing. It was empty. And when I told him that, he laughed and said again that inside was the key to great fortune."

Frowning, Jenny reached for a new straw. "But if it had nothing in it, then what did he mean?"

The Mexican girl sighed. "I don't know. My grandfather, when he got sick, it hurt his mind. Sometimes, he thought he was a young man again. Sometimes, he thought he was back in Mexico." Her eyes teared up. "I know he was not okay, but that box meant a lot to him. He asked me to keep it safe, and I failed."

As a tear rolled down her cheek, she pleaded, "You must help me find it."

Matt reached back to the booth behind them and brought over the napkin dispenser. He pulled one out and handed it to her. "We will."

Steve glanced up from his notes. "You said the box was stolen. What happened?"

Her eyes narrowed, a look of concentration taking over her face. "My father and I left Friday night to visit my *tia* in San Diego. We got back Sunday, two days ago, and found the house a mess, furniture turned over, papers thrown everywhere. The crooks stole many things, and the music box."

"Jerks," Jenny said in a huff and crossed her arms. "Did you call the cops?"

Rosa nodded. "Right away. They said it had probably been a 'crime of opportunity.' They had us make a list of everything taken. We couldn't believe our bad luck. First my grandfather, then this." She paused, inhaled a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly. "But then God smiled on us. The police found our stuff."

Surprised, Steve looked up. "Wait. The police found everything already?"

The girl smiled. "Yes. They found our stolen things at a pawn shop yesterday. Only the music box is still missing." She blinked several times. "I have to get it back."

Staring down at the notes he had typed, Steve bit his lip. How could everything have been recovered so quickly? Something felt wrong. "At which pawn shop did they find your things?"

She thought for a moment. "The police said they were at a place called Pawn Brothers."

He made a note. "And at what nursing home did your grandfather stay at?" Realizing the sensitivity of the subject, he added, "I know we're asking a lot of questions, but it's important for us to know every possible detail. We may have to go see these places for ourselves."

"Sunrise Acres." Her face lit up. "Um, my father and I are going there tomorrow to pick up my grandfather's things. Would you like to come?"

If her grandfather had left behind any clues about the importance of that music box, this could be their only chance to find them. Steve nodded. "Yes. That'd be perfect."

Rosa's phone beeped and she checked the message. "It's my father. I must go. I'll text you later about tomorrow." She stood and said good-bye.

Jenny waited until Rosa had disappeared out the door. “OMG. Matt, you are so crushing big time.”

Matt turned slightly red. “I am not.”

Knowing the direction the conversation would go if he didn’t intervene, Steve held his hand up. “Stop. We have a much bigger problem than Matt’s obvious crush.”

“It’s not a crush,” Matt mumbled.

Jenny frowned. “What do you mean? What bigger problem?”

Glancing around to make sure no one could hear him, Steve lowered his voice. “I don’t believe the robbery was an accident. I think the thieves wanted the music box.”

Matt’s eyes widened. “How do you figure that?”

“Think about it. Rosa said that the house had been ransacked. That’s not usually what burglars do. A typical thief takes what he sees and runs, unless he’s searching for something specific.”

“But the robbers took a bunch of stuff, not just Rosa’s box,” Matt said.

Steve nodded. “But if the music box had been the target, then it would make sense for the crooks to take other things to make it look like a regular robbery, or a ‘crime of opportunity’ as the police put it.”

After pushing a stray blonde hair behind her ear, Jenny shook her head. “But I still don’t get it. What makes you think they were specifically after the music box?”

“Because the crooks pawned everything else. Why not the music box?”

The girl shrugged. “Maybe one of the robbers liked it and wanted to keep it.”

“Or,” Steve said, “perhaps the thieves believed the same thing the grandfather did...that inside was the key to great fortune.”

“But it had nothing in it,” Matt said. “I mean, wouldn’t whoever took it have checked inside and saw it was empty?”

Sighing, Steve closed his notebook app. “I don’t know. But I do know one thing for sure, fortune or no fortune, our job is to track down that music box.”

Jenny nodded. “Okay. Where should we start?”

“Good question.” Steve did a search for Pawn Brothers on his cell. “I say we begin at the pawn shop. Perhaps the owner can tell us something about the people who sold him Rosa’s things.”

Swigging down one last gulp of water, Matt stood. “Don’t you think the police already did that?”

Steve headed toward the front door. “Yeah, but somehow I don’t believe the cops are going to share what they discovered with us. We have to find out the details for ourselves.”

After retrieving their bicycles from the bike rack, the trio headed toward Pawn Brothers to begin their investigation. Once inside, they waited until the man behind the register had no line and then asked about Rosa’s stuff and if the thieves had also pawned the music box

The cashier studied the detectives curiously. “What’s it to you kids?”

Jenny smiled. “You see,” she said sweetly, “Rosa Romero is a good friend of ours from

school. We're just trying to help her out." Her eyes grew teary. "I just can't believe those evil men took her music box. Her grandfather gave it to her on his deathbed." She dabbed her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt.

One thing Steve could definitely say about Jenny, she sure knew how to put on an act.

The man seemed sympathetic. "Look, it's like I told the cops; it was just the one guy and I don't remember too much about him. It was Saturday morning, we were super busy. He was a white guy, kinda chubby, with reddish-brown hair and beard. That's really all I can remember."

Something in his statement caught Steve's attention. "Wait. Did you say Saturday morning?"

The cashier nodded. "Yeah. Probably sometime around eight or nine."

"Okay, thanks for your help." Steve gave a quick wave and turned to leave the store.

Matt and Jenny followed.

Once outside, Steve faced his friends. "Did you hear that? The man pawned the things on Saturday morning."

Bending down, Matt picked up his bike. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that Rosa and her dad left Friday night. That means the robbery had to have happened either really late Friday or early Saturday morning. Whoever did this had to have been watching the house to know when it would be safe. That proves our theory that this wasn't an accident. He broke in, messed the house up, and then got rid of his stolen decoys fast before they were reported missing."

Matt's phone chimed. He checked the text. "I gotta go. Text me and let me know what time we're meeting tomorrow."

Splitting up, each kid headed home, agreeing to talk later and discuss a plan of action.

After dinner, Steve helped his parents set up a new laptop then retreated to his bedroom. Rosa had texted and asked them to come to her house at ten in the morning. Matt and Jenny agreed to meet at Steve's home first, then the three of them would ride over to Rosa's together.

Reclining in his bed, Steve pulled up the picture of the music box that Rosa had sent him. What was so important about that box that a burglar would be willing to ransack a house to throw off the police investigation?

He used his fingers to zoom the picture. The music box appeared to be somewhat fuzzy, like worn-out red velvet, with unraveling gold threading all over. The front of the box had a simple gold lock, but what caught Steve's attention were the designs on each side. They looked as though they had been added on, after the fact. The image on the left of the lock had two black lightning bolts, and the one on the right had a red square with a white plus sign inside it.

Steve frowned. The red square and white plus sign seemed familiar. He did a Google search and the results brought up the flag of Switzerland. He bit his lip. Perhaps the music box came from Switzerland.

Next, he did a search for the side by side black lightning bolts. When the monitor displayed the results, his eyes widened with surprise. Dual black lightning bolts were a symbol of the *Schutzstaffel*, or the SS, Adolf Hitler's elite paramilitary force.

Steve leaned back in his bed and stared up at the ceiling, a million questions racing through his head. Why would the music box have both SS and Swiss symbols on it? What did they mean? Why did the grandfather have this box in the first place? And why did he say that inside was the key to great fortune when he knew it had nothing in it?

