



ONCE
UPON
A
CRIME

Anne Schraff

PAGETURNERS®

PAGETURNERS®

SUSPENSE

Boneyard
The Cold, Cold Shoulder
The Girl Who Had Everything
Hamlet's Trap
Roses Red as Blood

ADVENTURE

A Horse Called Courage
Planet Doom
The Terrible Orchid Sky
Up Rattler Mountain
Who Has Seen the Beast?

MYSTERY

The Hunter
Once Upon a Crime
Whatever Happened to
Megan Marie?
When Sleeping Dogs Awaken
Where's Dudley?

DETECTIVE

The Case of the Bad Seed
The Case of the Cursed Chalet
The Case of the Dead Duck
The Case of the Wanted Man
The Case of the Watery Grave

SCIENCE FICTION

Bugged!
Escape from Earth
Flashback
Murray's Nightmare
Under Siege

SPY

A Deadly Game
An Eye for an Eye
I Spy, e-Spy
Scavenger Hunt
Tuesday Raven



Copyright © 2017 by Saddleback Educational Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, scanning, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher. SADDLEBACK EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING and any associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Saddleback Educational Publishing.

ISBN: 978-1-68021-388-1
eBook: 978-1-63078-789-9

Printed in Malaysia

25 24 23 22 21 2 3 4 5 6

Chapter 1

Vivi Calderon was doing library research. She took a class on ancient history at City College. Her head nodded over a book about Crete. Then something odd caught her eye. She jolted to attention.

There was a middle-aged man at a nearby table. He was wildly thumbing through a pile of books. He went through one book after another. But much too quickly to be reading anything. It was a very strange sight. The man actually looked possessed. His hair was messy. His eyes were wild. But in contrast, he was very well dressed. He wore a nice suit, even if it was a little out of style.

Vivi had come to the downtown library with her friend Jamal Grey. Now she left her

table and went to find Jamal. He was taking a book from the stacks. She tapped him on the shoulder.

“What’s up, Vivi?” Jamal asked.

“I want you to come over to my table. Take a look at this oddball guy,” Vivi whispered. “It’s just so weird!”

Jamal and Vivi returned to her table. The two sat down and pretended to be reading books. But really they watched the man from the corners of their eyes.

“What do you think he’s doing?” Vivi asked quietly.

Jamal shrugged and grinned. “Must be a speed reader! That dude can read faster than I can blink.”

“I’m serious, Jamal. What do you think he’s really doing?” Vivi asked.

“Maybe he thinks somebody stashed some money in one of those old books. Maybe he’s trying to find it,” Jamal said. “I read about an eccentric old guy who hid

money in books. It was his weird way of getting people to read them.”

Suddenly the man looked up. He had heard the young people whispering. Now he reached up to smooth down strands of his hair. He looked over at Vivi and Jamal. The man’s burning black eyes reminded Vivi of a bird of prey. His eyes drilled into the young couple like a laser.

“Quick! Pretend you’re reading,” Vivi whispered. “Don’t let him see you looking at him!”

“He’s sure a mean-looking dude, huh?” Jamal whispered back.

Finally the man returned his attention to his own stack of books. From time to time Vivi stole a glance at him. Twice she caught him staring back at her. His suspicions had been aroused. He knew that Vivi was watching him. And that made her nervous.

“I’m out of here,” she said, getting up. “That guy gives me the creeps. I’m checking

out these two books. Then I'm leaving." Vivi walked to the desk. Jamal was right behind her. She checked out one book on Athens and one on Crete.

The friends walked home. The fog cast a blurry haze. Vivi liked the fog. The neighborhood was older. It was filled with aging apartment buildings and shabby shops.

To Vivi, the fog provided a welcome cover. She and Jamal both lived in the same old apartment building. Vivi lived on the second floor. Jamal lived on the fourth.

"Wow, Jamal," Vivi said. "It would be cool if there really was money stuck in some of those musty old books. Bringing home extra cash would sure help us out!"

Vivi's mother was a hard-working computer tech. She was raising three children on her own. Vivi, the oldest, was now a college student. The two younger boys were in middle school.

"Dream on, girl," Jamal said. "Rich guys

like to spend their money. They don't hide it in library books."

"Yes," Vivi said. "I'm earning my tuition making pizzas. But everything costs so much! I'd like to help out my mom. She's doing without things she needs."

"Yeah, I hear you," Jamal said. "My parents both work. We're hurting bad at the end of the month too. Money doesn't go very far when you're feeding three hungry kids."

Just then a creepy feeling came over Vivi. She glanced back. A man walked behind them. He looked like the guy from the library. Were they being followed?

"Jamal," Vivi said quietly. "When we get to the intersection, let's cross the street. I want to see if that guy is really following us. I'm sure it's that weirdo from the library!"

Jamal glanced back and nodded. "Yeah, it's him for sure. Funny that he leaves just when we leave, huh?"

The two crossed the street. The man did the same.

“Let’s duck into the deli up ahead. We can wait there for a minute. We’ll watch and see if he goes by,” Vivi said.

Vivi and Jamal went into the deli. They pretended to study the meat case. But they were really watching the front window.

Would the man pass by? He didn’t. Did that mean he’d gone off in another direction? Or was he out there waiting?

Chapter 2

Vivi stepped out of the deli. She looked around. “I don’t see him anywhere, Jamal. I guess maybe he wasn’t following us after all,” she said.

“Phew,” Jamal said. “I wouldn’t feel too good about being followed.”

“Me neither. I’ve got enough on my mind. I need to write this huge report. It’s about comparing the civilizations of Athens and Crete,” Vivi said.

“Didn’t you find anything about that online?” Jamal asked.

“Yeah, but I still needed these old books. I couldn’t find them anywhere but in the big downtown library,” Vivi said. “Our college

library doesn't have much on the ancient Greeks.”

Unlike Vivi, Jamal didn't go to college. He worked full time at the supermarket. Sometimes he talked about going to college. But his family really needed the money he made.

Vivi went to her apartment. Jamal went to his. In the old days, their apartment building had been a pretty nice hotel. Then it was remade into apartments. They weren't bad exactly. But she had always dreamed of living in a house. She wanted green grass and flowers.

Vivi actually hated many things about the apartment. But most of all she hated the lack of a yard. Her dream was to sit under a tree in her own yard with her dream dog. She wasn't even allowed to have a pet in the apartment.

She hated the smells in the building too. Everything that was ever cooked seemed to

linger in the hall. Fish. Chicken. Onions. Broccoli. Cabbage. The mix of odors hung in the stale air.

Vivi's mom was still at work. She put in a lot of overtime. Every penny counted.

"Hi, guys! Have you two already finished your homework?" Vivi asked her twin ten-year-old brothers.

"Maybe. Maybe not. You're not Mom," Pedro said.

"Yeah. Quit trying to be the boss around here," Luis agreed.

The boys resented it when Vivi tried to show authority. "I'm just trying to make sure you're doing what Mom wants," Vivi said. Then she walked into the kitchen. "Hey!" she called out. "I don't suppose anyone peeled the potatoes for dinner. Or made the salad."

"That's not our job," Pedro said.

"If you're home first," Vivi said. "It's

your job. Or maybe the cooking doesn't get done at all."

Pedro got up to get a drink from the refrigerator. Vivi jumped in front of the door. "You know the rules. No sodas before dinner. You can have one during dinner, but not before."

"But Mom makes us drink milk when we eat," Pedro said.

"Aww, mean old Mom," Vivi said. "She's just like the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, isn't she?"

Pedro walked back toward the living room. "Hey, Luis," he called out. "Who's that dude across the street? Why's he staring up here? Do you know him?"

Startled, Vivi stopped peeling potatoes. She joined her brothers at the window. The fog was really rolling in now. But she could see clearly. It was the man from the library! "That guy was in the library today," she said. "He was paging through books really

fast. I thought he followed me home. Wow! What could he be doing here?"

"What was he looking for in the books?" Pedro asked curiously. "Those library books are so dusty. Sometimes there are dead bugs inside."

"Yeah! One time I found a silverfish in our dictionary," Luis said. He grinned as if that had been a great discovery.

"I have no idea what he was looking for," Vivi said. "But I hate that he knows where I live! He really makes chills go up my spine. The guy's got scary eyes!"

"Cool," Pedro said in admiration. "Maybe he's a secret agent."

"Or maybe he's a hit man," Luis suggested. "But I guess he wouldn't be too smart. He's standing right across the street."

Darkness fell. It became too foggy to see much. But Vivi thought she saw the man walking away.

There was probably nothing to it. Maybe

the man was just one of many homeless people. Homelessness was a terrible thing. Vivi felt bad for those people. Most were harmless. Some lived in their own little world. The library was a safe place. People could hang out for the day.

After dinner Vivi started reading one of her books. It seemed ancient Athens was quite civilized. But the citizens of ancient Crete seemed to have more fun. As she turned one of the pages, a piece of violet paper fell onto her lap.

As usual he was awful at dinner. Embarrassed me in front of the snotty Beaumonts. He likes humiliating me. Oh, what a bed of pain I have made for myself!
-M

The note shocked Vivi. Who was *M*? Was she complaining about her boyfriend? What an odd thing to find in a dusty old book about the Greeks! Vivi put the note

back. Maybe it was a joke. Some student prank.



The next day Vivi went alone to the library. She needed more books. The books she had checked out had not given her enough information. Her report needed to be great. Ms. Grassville was her history professor. She had said that much of the final grade would depend on this report.

Vivi wished that Jamal could have come with her. But he was working late at the market. At the library, Vivi was almost afraid to look around. What if she saw the strange man again?

She took three books down from the stacks. The room was empty. Vivi sighed with relief. She reviewed the indexes of the books. Then a cold feeling came over her. Her skin pricked and tingled. Was she being watched?

She glanced nervously around. Oh my

God! It was him! The strange man sat at another table with five books beside him. Again he was turning the pages obsessively. She watched him. Each time he finished searching a book, he'd look around. Then he'd grasp the book's covers and shake it violently. Was something stuck between the pages? Such treatment did the books no good. But he seemed determined not to miss anything.

Vivi concentrated on her own books. She wanted to get what she needed and leave. As soon as she stood, the man got up too. In a panic, she felt blood rushing to her head. He was actually coming over to talk to her! The man drew closer. She noticed how awful he looked. He was very pale. It was like his skin had never seen the sun. He looked like a dead man.