



ONCE  
UPON  
A  
CRIME

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**PAGETURNERS®**

# 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?