

THE CASE OF THE BROKEN LOCK



*Friday, May 23, 3:25 p.m.
29A Main Street, The Diner*

It was a hot and sunny day. The first hot and sunny day we'd had in Iona in nearly two weeks. The kind of hot and sunny that makes your shirt stick to your back. The kind of hot and sunny that makes the air thick and hard to breathe. The kind of hot and sunny that makes you daydream about running down to the river and jumping in with all your clothes on. All the other kids in Iona were outside, soaking up the heat like a bunch of lizards, but not me. I was inside, tucked into the rear booth of The Diner, where not even the rays of the sun could touch me, nursing a root beer float and trying to ignore my throbbing left eye as it swelled shut. The place was empty except for the owner, Moses, who was in the back clinking dishes together. Empty wasn't unusual for The Diner, a place with no real name, set back a little from all the other stores on Main Street. But empty suited me just fine. I needed a little peace and quiet. That's when Sandra Kutcher walked into my life.

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Sandra was a tall twelfth grader, with long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was wearing a pink T-shirt that had "Doll" printed on it in sparkly letters, a white skirt and a pair of flip-flops that slapped her heels when she walked.

"I'm looking for Jack Lime," she said, before the door had a chance to close behind her. My eye started to throb a little harder. Members of the social elite at Iona High had been hunting me down all day. When they found me, it always meant trouble. I figured Sandra was just another angry grad looking for a chance to pay me back for breaking up Iona High's Prom King and Queen a month before the big night. Just one more kid from the inner circle who wanted to pay me back for showing the world the truth. Well, sorry folks, but showing the world the truth is my job.

"I'm Jack," I muttered.

"Oh, thank God I found you!" she said.

I was waiting for a slap in the face or maybe a kick in the groin, so, "Oh, thank God I found you!" was not the reaction I was expecting.

I thought we were alone until she started toward my booth, revealing a grim, ghostly boy standing in her shadow. He was short and doughy with a bowl cut of jet-black hair. He wore a plain white T-shirt, black jeans that were two sizes too short, white socks and shiny black dress shoes. All that black and white made him look like a triple-decker Oreo cookie. I wasn't even sure if Sandra knew he was back there until she slid into my booth and motioned him over with a wave. "Well, come on, Ronny," she said. "You're the reason we're here, after all." She

waited for Oreo to join us, then leaned across the table and whispered, "They told me you find things out."

"Finding things out is how I got this," I said, pointing at my shiner.

"Oh," she said, sitting back in the booth. Even disappointed she was drop-dead gorgeous. "But you can, like, find things out, right?"

Sandra was the type of girl who made boys do stupid things, even boys who needed to take a long hiatus from finding things out. Her silky blond hair, her sparkling green eyes, her lips covered in pink gloss. If she had asked me to pour my float over my head, jump through the plate glass window at the front and fling myself in the river, I would have done it. Long story short, I was falling for her, and I was falling hard. I took a swig of my float, set the glass back on the table and wiped my mouth with my napkin. "You might be able to convince me."

"Ronny's bike was stolen last night, and it's his birthday tomorrow, and he loves that bike because he's had it, like, forever, so he really wants it back for his birthday, and if you could find it, that would be just super."

Oreo said nothing. He just sat twiddling his thumbs.

"Sounds like an interesting case," I said. I was lying, but it sounded less harmful than snapping pictures of the captain of the football team (the Prom King) holding hands with one of his linebackers. Plus, I was ready, willing and able to do anything for this dame, including making ridiculous promises. "I'll tell you what. I'll find that bike, and I'll get it to you by tomorrow, or I'll personally buy Ronny a new bike."

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"Great!" she exclaimed, and started pushing Ronny out of the booth. They were halfway to the door when she turned back and added, "Oh, and by the way, Jack, can you get it to us by two? That's when Ronny's party starts. Thanks!" Then she was gone.

Was it possible to track down a missing bike in less than twenty-four hours in a town like Iona? Probably not, but I wasn't going to bore a girl like Sandra with anything as dull as "the facts" or "reality." She was the type of person who lived in a different stratosphere than the rest of us poor slobs. So I figured I'd better get cracking on the case.

I pushed the float away, slid out of the booth and headed for the door. I was just stepping outside when I realized I didn't know thing one about this case. I didn't know what the bike looked like. I didn't have a stinking list of suspects. I hadn't even asked a single solitary question. That's what Sandra did to me; she turned me into a slobbering amateur without a sweet clue how to investigate a case. I took a long breath, gathered my wits and marched back into The Diner. There was a pay phone on the back wall. I grabbed the phone book and flipped to K. Lucky for me there was only one Kutcher in town.



Friday, May 23, 3:56 p.m.
14 Mercury Lane, The Kutcher Place

Fourteen Mercury Lane was the typical brick-front split entry that infests this white-bread town we call Iona.

With its perfect lawn, tidy little garden and white picket fence, the Kutcher residence was just another paint-by-numbers suburban clone-home. I strolled down the walk and knocked on the front door. I have to admit, I didn't mind asking Sandra if she'd step outside to answer a few questions.

We all gathered in the driveway. Ronny stood off to the side, tracing imaginary lines on the ground with his shiny black dress shoes. Sandra stood beside me.

"Ronny always locked his bike to the fence," she said. She'd taken her hair out of the ponytail, and it hung in loose curls just below her shoulders. The way the sun was hitting her made her shine like an angel.

"Where exactly was it locked?" I asked.

She led me to the spot, and I took a close look at the fence. There was no damage to the wood or even to the paint.

"What kind of lock was it?" I asked.

"Just a regular lock," she said.

"A combination lock?"

"It was just a regular lock," she said in a tone that made me think she was getting annoyed by my questions, and when people get annoyed by my questions, I get interested. I learned at the school of hard knocks you can't cross anyone off your list of suspects, even if they're a dame and you've gone dizzy over them.

"One of those U-shaped locks?" I asked.

"Look," Sandra said, a flash of red in her cheeks, "we don't care about the lock. Ronny wants his bike back, not the lock, the bike! It's red with, like, a yellow banana seat, white streamers and a silver bell on the

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handlebars. We don't care about the lock. We can get a new one of those."

A kid that looked like an Oreo, riding around on a big yellow banana? The poor sap would have drawn less attention to himself riding a unicycle.

"Could I at least see the lock?" I asked, trying not to laugh.

"Why would we have the lock? They robbed us. Remember? Are you even taking this seriously, Jack?"

Before I had a chance to answer, Ronny spoke up in a voice so low he could've been singing bass in a barber-shop quartet. "It was a U-shaped lock, with a blue plastic covering."

"What?" I asked, turning to the kid. Was he just pulling my leg with that voice?

"It had a blue plastic covering," he said again. This was no joke; Ronny's voice was deeper than a foghorn on the fritz.

"Were you the only one with a key?" I asked.

Ronny nodded.

"Do you know anyone who would want to steal it?"

"If we knew who wanted to steal the bike, we'd, like, go find them ourselves," Sandra said.

"Maybe the Riverside Boys took it," Ronny said, ignoring her.

"Ronny," Sandra said, walking over to him and putting her hand on his shoulder, "those boys are too big to be interested in your bike. They couldn't even ride it."

"But they could sell it," Ronny said, obviously getting excited about being involved in a real investigation.

"At the Flea Market," I added, with a smirk.

"Yeah," Ronny nodded. "They'd sell it at the Flea Market."

FYI — The Riverside Boys are a bunch of high school thugs who get their kicks stealing stuff from honest kids like you and me. Then they unload the merchandise down by the Iona River on Friday nights. They call their little business venture the Flea Market. Real classy.

"Sounds like a good lead," I said, flashing Ronnie a "good thinking, kid!" kind of smile. But I had serious doubts that anyone, let alone the Riverside Boys, would get much on the black market for a bike with a yellow banana seat and streamers.

"No one would steal Ronny's bike to sell it," Sandra whispered, leaning close to me. "He got it for his seventh birthday, but he hasn't grown for, like, five years, so he can still ride it. He loves that bike so much that Mummy and Daddy can't bear to get him another one. But nobody else would want it. It's just some jerk out for a cruel joke."

She smelled like coconut sunscreen. I thought, for a brief moment, we made a real connection, but then it was gone. "Don't worry, Sandra," I whispered. "I'll find the bike, and I'll get it to you by two."

She smiled and squeezed my arm, sending the most pleasant electrical tingle through my whole body. "Let me know if you need anything else," she said. "Come on, Ronny, we have to set the table for supper."

I wandered down to the street and sat on the curb. I had less than twenty-four hours to find a bike that

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nobody in their right mind would want to steal. If I was going to crack this case, I had to stick to the facts:

1. Ronny's bike was stolen last night.
2. It was attached to the fence with a U-shaped lock.
3. The lock and the bike are gone.
4. Ronny loves his funny little bike.
5. Sandra's easy on the eyes.

(I couldn't help adding that last one. She really is a knockout.)

I walked back up the driveway and squatted by the fence where the bike had been locked. In my experience, and I've dealt with a few stolen bikes in my time, most bicycle thieves worth their salt would use liquid nitrogen to smash Ronny's lock to bits. It's easy, quick and quiet; you just dip the lock into the liquid nitrogen and then whack it with a hammer. The thing is, there's always chunks of metal and plastic left behind on the ground. Granted, it rained last night, but I'd still bet dollars to doughnuts there'd be a few pieces scattered here and there. But there was nothing, nada, *niet*. More importantly, if the perps smashed part of the lock or even if they used heavy-duty cutters, why would they take a broken lock with them? It was a small detail, but it bothered me.

All this speculation was adding up to bupkes, and I'm not a big fan of bupkes. The problem was I had nothing to work with except Ronny's crazy hunch that the Riverside Boys had swiped his bike to sell on the black market. It was probably a dead end, but it was something to go on, and I knew exactly who to talk to.



*Friday, May 23, 4:27 p.m.
2 Ganymede Court, Iona Elementary*

Missy King is Bucky King's little sister. Bucky is the Grand Poo-bah of the Riverside Boys. He's as big as an ox and twice as strong. He's the only kid in Iona who drives to school on a Harley, the only student who's taller than all of the teachers at Iona High and the only person I've ever seen who can smoke a cigarette and dunk a basketball at the same time. I couldn't just wander over to Bucky and ask him about stealing Ronny's dinky little bike without risking my life, but I could ask Missy. She owed me one.

FYI — Here's how my P.I. business works; you come to me with a problem like, "I think my boyfriend, the quarterback of the football team and the King of the Prom, is cheating on me. Can you follow him around and find out?" So I follow him around for three days, hiding in garbage cans and sneaking around in locker rooms until I find out he is cheating on you, and then you owe me one favor. I steer clear of cash because I learned the hard way that things can get very messy when you're dealing with dough. So I charge by the favor instead. For instance, the Queen of the Prom now owes me one favor, and it's going to be a doozy, because her boyfriend, or should I say ex-boyfriend, is the reason I'll be seeing the world out of one eye for a few days.

Missy owes me a favor, too. I helped her out of a tight jam about a month ago. Ms. Crenshaw accused her of stealing the marking sheet for a big math test. She was

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just about to get tossed out of school when I saved her bacon by proving it was Ben Snider all along. It had to do with some missing lunch money and a pair of dirty socks, but that's another story.

"Hi, Missy," I said, approaching the playground. Missy is built like an Olympic gymnast; short, but rippling with hidden power. She was hanging upside down on the monkey bars, her pigtails pointing at the ground like a couple of horns.

"Lime," she said, flipping off the bars and stamping toward me.

"I'm calling in my favor," I said, stopping her in her tracks.

She didn't answer. She just looked me up and down and smacked her gum a little harder.

"I'm looking for a bike."

"I didn't have nothing to do with it."

"So, you know something about a bike that's been swiped?"

"I didn't have nothing to do with it. Bucky took it. I tried to take it back."

"Don't make it hard on yourself," I said. "Just tell me where the bike's at."

"You calling me a liar?" she asked, jutting out her chin.

"I don't have time for your cat-and-mouse games, Missy. Tell me where I can find that bike."

"I tried to bring it back, but the stupid kid had a new one."

I ignored this. Missy is like the devil; she'll mix her lies with the truth. "Where's the bike?" I demanded again.

Without warning, she sprang across the few feet that separated us and kicked me, kung fu-style, in the

stomach. I crumpled to my knees, winded. Tiny black dots floated in front of me, and the world tilted. Through a haze, I saw her bolt across the playground.

I was having the second-worst day of my life; I'd been called a liar (even though I have the pictures to prove everything), I'd been beaten up by the quarterback of the football team and now I'd been flattened by a little girl. I figured it might be best just to lie on the ground and flop around like a fish out of water. But since when did I do what was best for me?

I heaved myself up, staggered across the playground and caught a glimpse of Missy's pigtails bobbing up and down on the other side of a fence as she raced across someone's backyard. Unfortunately, just as I was pulling myself onto the fence, my condition kicked in.

FYI — My condition makes me fall asleep at the worst times. I can't help it. The doctors say it's neurological, which means there's something wrong with my brain. The shrinks say it's all in my head, but not in my brain. The shrinks say it's because I haven't come to terms with my parents dying. I say I've come to terms with it all right — as much as a kid can come to terms with a thing like that — but I still can't help falling asleep. They tell me to meditate, to exercise, to try and stay relaxed. But when you just got your butt kicked and you're jumping over a fence trying to catch the prime suspect in a robbery investigation, it's hard to stay relaxed. So my condition kicked in, and I fell asleep.

I dreamed I was lying on the bottom of the river. A purple grizzly bear rode up to me on a bicycle. He rang a bell on the handlebars, but it didn't make any noise.

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Instead, a school of little fish, with sharp little teeth, came out of the bell and attacked me like piranha on the prowl. I tried to fight them off. I tried to bat them away, but I was tired, so tired. And that's when the bear got off the bike, waddled over and sat on my face.

I woke up gasping for air, but all I got was a mouthful of fur — cat fur, to be exact. A fat orange and white cat had decided to take a nap on my face while I was passed out. I swatted it away, sat up and checked my watch. Ten minutes had passed. Missy was long gone. I plucked cat hair out of my mouth and decided to head back to the Kutchers'.



Friday, May 23, 5:35 p.m.

14 Mercury Lane, The Kutcher Place

Standing on the Kutcher front stoop, I replayed what Missy had said. A bike had been snatched; there was no doubt about that. I didn't know where she was going with the whole "I tried to bring it back, but the stupid kid had a new one" spiel, but I had a hunch it was a smoke screen to keep her out of trouble. One thing I was pretty sure about — if the Riverside Boys had a hot bike, they'd be bringing it to the Flea Market tonight.

"Oh my God, Jack!" Sandra gasped, opening the door and breaking my train of thought. "What happened to your face?"

"Huh?" I said. I leaned to the side and caught a glimpse of my reflection in the window beside the door. I was covered in tiny scratches. The killer fish in my dream