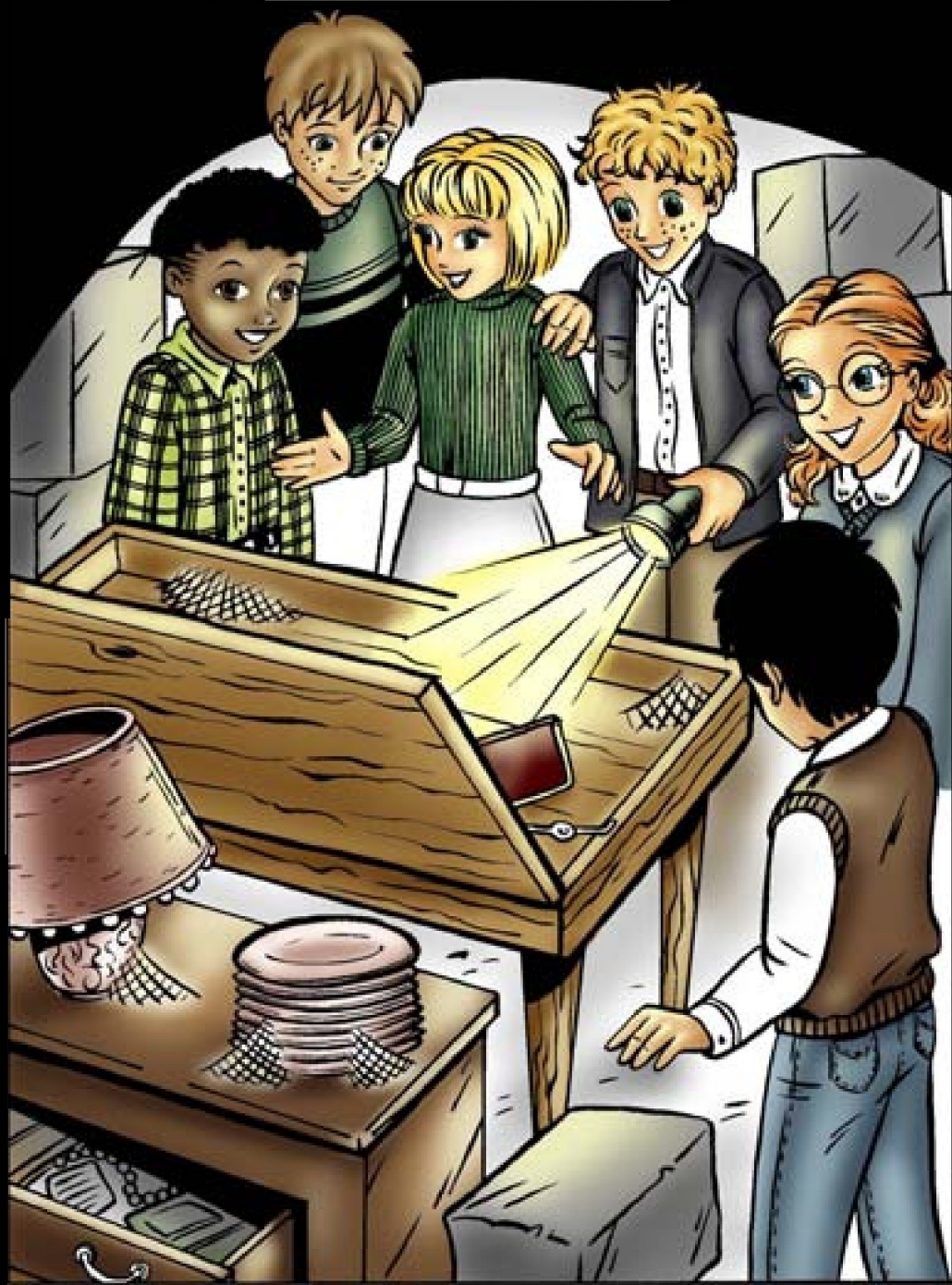


FIVE SQUAD



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FIVE SQUAD

The Mystery of the Gold Coins



issue 101



Where are you going?" Karen asked her four friends, as she caught sight of them down the sidewalk.

"To Gramps," answered Chris shortly.

"Why do you hang out with that old fool? Everybody says he has a few loose screws. They say he sees things that aren't really there, and the whole crazy deal." Karen made appropriate motions as she talked. She quickened her step to keep up with the others.

"You don't know him like we do. He's cool!" Ziggy exclaimed indignantly.

"Yeah, he's our friend. So don't call him names, okay?" Chris said, slowing down to emphasize his point.

"Okay, okay! Sorry! I didn't mean to offend. I don't know him myself. I'm just telling you what people say," Karen said defensively.

Karen had recently returned to Sheldon. Two years prior, her parents had moved to Clarksdale, a

city nearby, because of her father's work. However, with Sheldon growing and changing, her father was transferred back to Sheldon to manage the new branch the company had opened.

Leaving Sheldon had been difficult for Karen. She had to leave her friends, and all that she had known in Sheldon, and make a new start. Now she was back, and so much had changed. Sheldon wasn't the same. Even her friends' interests had changed. However, Karen was not deterred; she always loved an adventure, and was ready for whatever experience would challenge her next.

The five continued the quick pace to their destination. "You don't believe everything people say, do you?" Susan asked Karen.

"Not really . . . well, it depends. But tell me, why do you go there, anyway?" Karen asked.

"He has all this neat stuff from at least a hundred years ago. He's like a living time machine," Kento said.



Chris
(12 yrs.)



Susan
(12 yrs.)



Karen
(11 yrs.)



Ziggy (8 yrs.)



Kento
(10 yrs.)

Recommended age: 9 years and up. (May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

"Yeah," Ziggy added enthusiastically, "and he makes this great fruit shake with mango ice cream and . . ."

"And what's more," Susan interrupted, "he tells the coolest stories. He's been telling us about his life."

"How far did he get?" Karen asked curiously.

Ziggy explained most of Gramps' life in a long, high-speed, run-on sentence that would have given his English teacher a heart attack.

"Huh?" Karen said. "I didn't catch half of that."

"Oh." Ziggy paused, and then repeated what he had said a little more slowly. "Gramps told us how he was also an airplane mechanic for the air force in WW1. He also shot some tribe chief's cuckoo in the protected forest on an island in the Pacific 'cause he was hungry, and then he had to flee in a canoe to a nearby island to escape death. Shooting one of the chief's cuckoos was not good, you know."

Susan continued round two of the condensed version of Gramps' life. "He then started working at a steel mill in another country, which was kind of a dead-end job. One of his friends died in an accident at the mill, which got him thinking about everything, and then he cried out to God and got this big revelation thing, and he decided to be a missionary and . . ."

"And?" Karen expected more.

"That's as far as he got," Susan said, catching her breath.

"So if I want to hear the rest of the story I have to come with you, right?" Karen asked.

"Guess so," Susan said.

"Why not? It sure beats doing nothing all day," Karen decided, now committed to this new adventure. "Mind if I join you?"

"Sure, why not? You can meet him yourself and see what you think

of him, instead of listening to what everybody else says," Chris added.

"Do you really think the old man sees things?" Karen asked casually, trying not to sound too interested, nor to offend her friends in their admiration of Gramps.

"What do *you* think?" Chris replied with a question, wondering if she believed the town gossip.

"Nah," Karen answered, "he probably just thinks he does. Either that, or he's just lonely and he needs something to think about. How about you guys—do you think he sees stuff?"

"He's been telling some of the stuff he's seen—the visions, as he calls them. And well . . . it's pretty cool. To tell the truth, I've been having a few different dreams lately, too," Chris said.

"You guys too?" Karen stopped walking, with arms akimbo*, pressing her point home. "Have you flipped?"

"You might say that," Kento concluded, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But it's sort of like what Gramps says . . . just flip on the switch and receive messages from the big 'I Am.'"

"How do you do that?"

"It's easy. Anyone can tap into the source, if you know what I mean," Chris explained.

"Not exactly," Karen said, realizing they were talking about something her brain registered nil on.

"It's quite awesome, actually. We'll tell you more about it some time," Susan offered.

"Yeah, you do that."



For the past year the four friends had frequented Gramps' house. Susan lived a few houses down from Gramps' place. Her grandfather and Gramps had been friends



***akimbo:** with hands on hips

for many years, until her own grandfather had died earlier in the year. Susan's grandfather had taken her to meet Gramps often, or Colin, as her grandfather referred to Gramps—Colin Hedgcome.

Other than Susan's grandfather, no one else in Sheldon was interested in Gramps. To them he was a crazy old man who lived on his own. Seems he had come out of nowhere with his wife, Maureen, and when she died, people saw less and less of Gramps.

Susan had always been fascinated by Gramps though. She listened to his stories with an acute interest, not willing to miss a single detail. It was her enthusiasm that had brought her friends—Chris, Ziggy and Kento—to meet him. At first the three weren't too sure on visiting the "local crazy man," as Kento had put it. But it wasn't long before Gramps had found a way into their hearts. His warm smile, interesting lifestyle, and compelling enthusiasm, made every story he told more intriguing than the last. It was as if the listener had experienced it for himself or herself.

Gramps' life had been given one other special touch—his love for Jesus. He never failed to talk about the miracles he'd known—the big ones and the small ones. His enthusiasm for Jesus had an effect on his little group of followers, The Squad, as he called the four kids visiting him.

Gramps had taught them all about prayer, giving examples of its power, using incidents in his own life where prayer had seen him through. Sometimes he'd tell them about the dreams he'd have about Heaven, or about Maureen. He taught them verses from the Bible, and encouraged them to pray. Positive motivation was Gramps' theme; he would rally the four to give more of their time to helping



others and learning more about Jesus. And the enthusiasm had caught. They visited Gramps every day, learning more with each visit.

Time with Gramps was the highlight of the kids' day; they never knew what to expect. And Gramps loved to keep them in suspense.



The white front gate that started Gramps' property was just up ahead. They pushed it open and walked up the pathway and through the garden, which was comprised of different trees and flowers that Gramps had collected on his travels. There was a clove tree from Zanzibar, beech trees from Bulgaria, and various types of orchids from El Salvador.

There was an arched red bridge over the small pond that stood in the center of a Japanese garden. Pink water lily blossoms floated on the surface, and orange and white koi* swam serenely in the water.

Ziggy happened to have part of an old stale donut in his pocket. He crumbled it into the water and the five watched as the fish clustered together, eagerly gobbling it up.

They climbed the steps to a modest two-story house. The house was nothing exceptional, except for the bright blue paint job and the giant sequoia* that stood in the back yard, towering high above the roof. Preparing to knock on the door, Chris raised a large ring, which ran through the nose of a sculpted bronze tiger.

"That's spooky," Karen said, staring at the fierce-looking tiger.

"Gramps picked it up on one of his trips to

***koi:** fish from the carp family

***sequoia:** large Californian evergreen tree, also known as a Redwood



Tibet," Chris explained.

"Oh," Karen said.

Chris banged the knocker twice.

Frisky, Gramps' Labrador retriever, barked a friendly greeting from the window. He was Gramps' only live-in companion.

Gramps moved the curtain aside to see who was at the door. He smiled to see his young friends. Slowly, with great effort, he opened the door and greeted them warmly. Gramps had lost most of his hair, but made up for it with his long, luxuriant, white beard. Though he was a little bit feeble, his cheery countenance compensated for any lacks in the physical.

"It's The Squad," Gramps said, then noticed Karen, who had never been there before. "Hmmm . . . with a new member?"

"Karen's an old friend," Susan said. "She just came back to Sheldon a week ago."

"Well, I'm glad you brought her with you. Another member to The Squad . . . the Five Squad!" Gramps smiled at the thought. "That has a nice ring to it."

"Not bad," Chris agreed, as he walked into the house.

"We just came over to see how you're doing," Kento said.

"How kind," Gramps said, stepping aside so the other kids could enter.

"We're real interested in hearing the rest of your story, Gramps. You've got the best stories to tell," Ziggy said.

"You're a kind squad," Gramps chuckled. "I'll continue the story soon enough. Make yourselves comfortable. I'm just in the kitchen. I figured you'd be back today, so I whipped up one of my favorite drinks . . . avocado shake!"



"See, I told you he's cool," Ziggy whispered, as he nudged Karen. Karen nodded.

As they walked to the living room, Karen glanced inside the rooms they passed. *Interesting house*, she thought. Her eye caught a display of various musical instruments in one room—a sitar, a ukelele and different African-looking drums. *I wonder where he got all of those strange musical instruments?*

Her interest to know more about this peculiar old man was heightened.

Frisky was busy trying to get all the pats and strokes that he could from each one of the children.

The five scuttled about, finding their seating of choice. Gramps talked as he poured the ice-cold, creamy liquid into their tall glasses and added a straw. "I learned how to make this on one of my trips to Indonesia. Blend avocado, shredded coconut, sugar, cream, shaved ice, and there you have it. One of the best drinks known to man—no chemicals at all—just pure nectar from God!"

As they were drinking, Gramps continued telling his life story using photographs of his missionary adventures. Everyone walked up to the framed pictures, which hung around the room, to get a better look.

"And here I am with Maureen," Gramps said with a twinkle in his eye, pointing to a picture of him many years younger and his wife.

"She was pretty," Karen remarked.

"Maureen was a real angel! And I'm sure she's even more beautiful now in Heaven."

Gramps continued with his story: "Here we were doing a school program in India. They had to carry their water very far every day, so the Lord helped us construct a mechanism that brought the

water straight into the village center.”

“What’s with the snake?” Chris asked, pointing to the next picture on the wall.

“That’s an African rock python that decided to join the Bible class I was giving in Cameroon,” Gramps explained.

“Cameroon?” Ziggy asked, pronouncing the name like he had never heard it in his life.

“It’s in West Africa,” Gramps said.

“Oh, that’s the country that’s west of east Africa,” Ziggy said with mock confidence, trying to save face after his former show of ignorance. Everyone smiled at the attempt.

“Right. This next picture is when we were feeding the homeless in Mexico. We got some of our friends to take over the ministry when we left.”

He continued with several other pictures until he came to a beautiful painting which was hanging over the mantelpiece. With vibrant colors the artist had depicted Jesus descending from the heavens to Earth.

“And here is the One Who made all my life’s adventures possible: Jesus,” Gramps said, gazing at the picture.

“Wow, the picture seems so real,” Susan said.

“It’s funny you mentioned that. The other day the picture *did* seem to come to life—and He told me that I was going Home soon.”

“Home? I thought that this was your home,” Karen asked, with a puzzled look on her face.

“Our Home forever—Heaven. Jesus told me that I would meet Maureen there soon.”

“Gramps, don’t go yet,” Susan said softly.

“Afraid I’ve got to. Like the old song goes,” Gramps started singing a blues number. “You may be young, you

may be old. You may be rich, child; you may be poor. But when the good Lord gets ready, you got to move. You got to move, move, move, you got to move.”

After repeating the chorus a few times everyone sang along, accompanying him by clapping spoons and tapping their hands on the coffee table for rhythm. At the end of the song they all had a good laugh.

When things got quiet again Gramps asked, “Okay, enough about me. What have you guys been doing?”

“Kento’s building a go-cart for the big community ‘Back to the 50s’ race,” Susan said. Kento nodded his head in agreement.

“Is it up and running yet?” Gramps asked.

“I’m learning a lot from building it. But I’m having a hard time getting the steering to work.”

“I have just the thing that might be able to help you with that—pulleys.”

“How’s that going to help?” Ziggy asked.

“First let’s see if I still have those pulleys. Come on, follow me to the attic.” Gramps led them all upstairs, pausing every few steps to catch his breath. The squeaky stairs were dull and unvarnished and smelled strongly of cedar. At the top of the stairs they stopped by a large, white door. Frisky followed close behind.

“Where is the attic? Chris asked. “I don’t see any door leading up through the ceiling.”

“Things are not always as they appear. You don’t think a crazy old guy like me would have one of those boring attics at the top of his house, do you? No siree, something a bit more eccentric in my case. It’s behind this door.”

Gramps turned the shiny, brass key to open the door. When the door





swung open he reached over and pulled on a rope. A wooden bridge descended, connecting the house to the giant sequoia in the back yard.

"This way," Gramps said as they all ventured out onto the walkway. "Be careful; it may wobble a bit with this many people on it."

Gramps pointed up to the rope that ran through a wheel, which had let the walkway down. "That's a pulley," he explained. "It's a rotating wheel with a grooved rim. A belt or chain rests in the groove which enables the pulley to change the direction."

"Oh, I see," Ziggy said.

After a short walk they arrived at the trunk of the sequoia and opened another door that was cut into the bark. If anyone passing by did not look closely, they wouldn't be able to tell it was a door at all. The inside of the tree was completely hollowed out, and the children looked inside in awe.

Gramps switched on a light. It revealed a small room, about eight feet in diameter, full of boxes set on dusty shelves. There was also a ladder, which led to a second floor.

"Here's my attic," Gramps said proudly.

"Cool place, Gramps," Chris said in admiration.

"Can we look around?" Karen asked, poking her head inside the door.

"That's what attics are for," Gramps reassured her with a smile.

"How did you make this room inside the tree?" Kento asked curiously.

"It came with the house. No one really knows, although there are all kinds of stories about how it got here. One story told is that a pioneer dug it out a long time ago to escape an Indian attack. Some

others say that it was struck by lightning which burned a hole into the trunk, but the tree kept growing. Others say it was a fungus that caused it. And then . . ." Gramps paused for effect, "there's even an ancient legend that it was a dragon's den."

"Wow!" the five exclaimed.

Gramps looked at Frisky and asked him: "Now, where did I put those pulleys? Let's see . . ."

Frisky tilted his head and then barked two times. Gramps continued looking through some dusty, wooden boxes that were full to the brim with all kinds of metal and electronic parts, trying to find the pulleys.

Meanwhile the others lost no time exploring all the old artifacts that filled the room. Chris strummed on an old Nigerian zither* that sung a most unusual resonating chord. Susan picked up a newspaper from the late 1800s that was a faded yellow-brown. She read out loud: "Get a truss*. Marcus Abercrombie says, 'I have a truss that helps cure ruptures. No steel band around the body. Holds any rupture.'"

Susan looked up, puzzled. "What's a truss?"

Gramps looked puzzled too. "I can't say I know," he said. "It's probably something like a pair of underwear, only sturdier."

Everyone giggled.

Ziggy mounted an old rocking horse. The rusty springs creaked under his weight. Karen had found an old manual typewriter with the brand name "Mercury" written in gold letters. She pushed a few keys, which got stuck in a central clump. She untangled them and said, "Ancient! Imagine trying to type a letter with this."

***zither:** *An musical instrument composed of a flat sound box with about 30 to 40 strings stretched over it and played horizontally.*

***truss:** *A truss is worn to help hold in and support a hernia, which is the protrusion of an organ through the wall of a cavity.*

"I banged out many a missionary newsletter with that stubborn beauty," Gramps said, reminiscing.

Kento was going through a box of Maxfield Parrish* reproductions, and several assorted canvases that were either unfinished or had been deemed unworthy of hanging up.

"Oh, here are the pulleys I was talking about. I'll make a drawing to show you how to use them for your go-cart steering wheel," Gramps said, as he handed the two pulleys to Kento, and then took a pen and pad from his shirt pocket and sketched a diagram of how to use the pulleys.

"Check out this ancient gramophone*, " Susan called. "Gramps, does it still work?"

"There's only one way to find out. Let's try this record." Gramps took a dusty 78-rpm* black record and set it on the turntable. He cranked up the handle on the side, which powered it. Then he carefully set the needle on the spinning disc. A scratchy song came warbling out of the large, ornate brass horn: "When I was just a little girl, I asked my mother: 'What will I be? Will I be famous? Will I be rich?' Here's what she said to me: 'Que será, será! Whatever will be will be; the future is not ours to see. Que será, será. What will be, will be.'"

The song continued for a while longer, until the record came to a crackling end and Gramps lifted the needle up and said thoughtfully, "This song is talking about not worrying about the future. A good idea, if you ask me. But, you know, there is one way to see the future."

"How's that, Gramps?" Chris was curious.



"God can show us the future. You remember that verse I taught you last time from Jeremiah?"

"Call unto Me . . . that one?" Kento asked.

"Exactly," Gramps said. "Will you finish the verse, Susan?"

"Call unto Me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not," Susan recited.

"What's 'thou knowest not' mean?" Ziggy asked.

"Like Jesus showed me that I am going Home soon," Gramps answered.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment. No one wanted to think about Gramps leaving them just yet. Kento thought he would do everyone a favor by saying something to change the subject.

"Gramps, you could have a garage sale of this ju . . . I mean . . . stuff." Kento barely caught himself.

"Could do. Don't know why I've kept all this stuff; maybe because selling it would be like selling my memories. Besides, I don't think I would get much for any of it—do you?" Gramps asked.

"Look at this painting. You could probably get a good price for this," Kento said, pointing to a large painting of a muscular, dark-skinned angel handing a young man some coins. The angel towered over the man who was kneeling in front of him. The man had his hands outstretched to receive the coins. The angel was lit up by little dashes of bright white light outlining his figure.

"Ah, that is a special painting. I was planning

***Maxfield Parrish [1870-1966]:** American painter, best known for his posters, illustrations and murals.

***gramophone:** an old record player

***rpm:** Abbreviation of revolution per minute; in this case how fast the record turns.

on cleaning it up a bit and reframing it, but I'll probably never get around to it."

Everyone gathered around the painting to get a closer look. "Looks kind of supernatural," Chris said. "What does it mean?"

"I found it at a garage sale. I thought it was quite unique. It seemed to have something more to it than just being a nice picture. I asked the Lord about the meaning and He showed me that the coins are like our faith in God, which has been passed on to us. Thinking about it now, I should give this picture to you guys." Gramps handed the painting to Chris. "You can hang it in your hang-out. What's it called, 'The Shack,' or something? It's up to you."

"Uh huh, it's 'The Shack,'" Kento answered.

"We couldn't take it from you. It's so special to you," Susan said.

"Really, it's for you now! It's been sitting up here for so many years, at least it will add a nice decoration to The Shack. Also, I can't take it with me. I won't need it, since where I'm going I'll probably be able to see this angel for myself," Gramps said with a laugh.

"Thanks, Gramps. We'll hang it up in our hang-out," Chris said.

"That reminds me—there's something else I wanted to give you. Something very special, indeed!" Gramps unlocked a trunk in the corner of the room, and pulled out a small wooden box, a little less than a foot long, six inches wide, and about three inches high. He paused before opening it; he enjoyed keeping them in suspense, their faces lit up and animated as they tried to guess what the box might contain.

"Is it a musical instrument?" Chris asked.

"Something to eat?" Ziggy asked hopefully.

"Hmmm . . . a new invention?" Kento asked.

"I know . . . a case for an antique book?" Susan asked.

Karen looked intensely curious. "Is it a . . . oh, I don't know. Show us, please!" she pleaded.

"Ha! Enough speculation. Some good guesses, though," Gramps said with a laugh. "Let's have a look, shall we?"

Frisky gave a bark of agreement.

Gramps opened the lid to reveal twenty gold coins of various sizes set snugly in red velvet.

"They're so shiny!" Ziggy exclaimed.

"Wow, I've never seen coins like these before!" Chris said in amazement.

"What's that writing on them?" Susan asked, picking one up for a closer look.

"It's Latin—the language the ancient Romans spoke. These coins are very old, and very valuable," Gramps explained.

"Where did you get them, Gramps?" Kento asked.

"My father gave them to me. He got them from his father, who had gotten them from his father, and on the line went. They've been passed down from generation to generation. If I recall correctly, it's been ten generations so far. There are twenty coins altogether. I don't have any kids to pass them on to, and so I want to give them to you, to care for and pass on in time."

A draft of wind opened the creaking door, startling the little group. "Oh, my, it's already dark!" Gramps exclaimed. "You'll need to head on back home soon. Chris, since you're the eldest, I'm making you the steward of the coins. I hope you will value these coins I'm entrusting to you," Gramps told them.

"Before you go, let's pray to-





gether." Gramps gathered the children into a circle. "Dear Lord, thank You for these wonderful children, all of them. Thank You for the love they've brought into my life, and for the enjoyable times we've had together. Go with them now, and keep them safe. Help them, too, to treasure these coins that I've passed on to them, and to be good stewards over them. In Your Name I pray. Amen."

"And be with Gramps, too," Zippy added. "We always have such good times with him, thank You for that. Amen."

The five echoed his "Amen," and soon set off for their homes.



The following day they returned to Gramps' house and banged the knocker, but there was no answer. They could hear Frisky's frantic barking coming from somewhere. Despite their repeated knocks, there was still no answer.

They had just turned to leave when a neighbor approached them.

"You've come to see Mr. Hedgcome?" the neighbor asked.

"Yes. But he doesn't seem to be home. Do you know when he'll be back?" Kento asked.

"I'm afraid he passed away in his sleep last night—just after midnight, according to the doctor."

The children were shocked, and immediately looked downcast at the news.

"No!" Chris exclaimed.

The neighbor continued, "Sorry, my boy. And I'm sorry to have broken it to you suddenly. I guess you were his friends."

"We sure were," Chris said.

Frisky was barking louder now than ever. "I just came here to take care of the old man's dog, and bring him to the city kennel," the neighbor explained.

"Oh, please don't do that! We'll take care of him," Susan pleaded.

"I don't know . . ."

"Please, sir!"

"I guess it would be all right."

The neighbor put Frisky on a leash, which he handed to Chris.

The children thanked him and, holding Frisky securely, made their way despondently* back down the street the way they had come.



Later on that day, everyone got together at The Shack to discuss what to do.

"I always liked going to see Gramps," Susan said. "He was like my grandfather after mine died. When we were with him it seemed time went by so quickly."

"He was so nice, and taught us so many things," Kento added.

"I only just met him, but he wasn't weird at all," Karen said. "Maybe he was different, but not crazy like everyone said. I wish I could've known him better."

"I'm sure he's happy now. Probably feeling a lot better than before," Chris said, trying to comfort them—and himself.

Ziggy had been listening silently to everyone's views on Gramps, and finally gave his opinion: "Gramps was the greatest, the most interesting and fun person I've ever known. I'm going to miss him."

"Yeah," the other four agreed.

The Shack went quiet for some time, as they all thought about the recent death of Gramps and how it had altered their lives. Chris finally broke the silence.

"What are we going to do about the coins?" Chris asked.

"Gramps said they were valuable, right?" Karen offered.

***despondently:** very sadly

"What are you trying to say . . . that we should sell them?" Kento asked.

"I didn't say that. But it would be nice to know *how* valuable the coins are," Karen retorted. "We own the coins now. At least we could take them down to a coin dealer and see what they're worth."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to find out, so we can see what we have," Chris said.

"Fair enough," Kento said, and Ziggy agreed. Susan just shrugged.

"Which shop are we going to?" Ziggy asked.

"Don't know," Chris said, "I've never been to a coin store before. They didn't interest me until now."

"We could always look it up in the phone book," Karen offered. "They'll have an address in there."

Kento put a thick phone book on the table and the others gathered around.

Susan flipped through the pages to the correct section. "Coins Ahoy," she read.

"No," Chris said. "A corny name to give a shop."

Susan continued: "'Only Coins,' 'Coin World' and 'Collector's Haven.' That's all they have down here."

"Coin World sounds the best to me," Karen said, and the rest agreed.

"I'll just jot down the address on this paper," Susan said. "I think there's a bus that takes us right to Crispen Avenue, where the shop is."

"Let's go!" Ziggy said enthusiastically.

With the coins in hand, the children boarded a bus that took them to a rundown area of town. After asking directions they found the freshly painted shop they were looking for. The shop seemed oddly out of place with its white walls and gaudy, framed windows, in what was otherwise a drab and dirty district.

"Doesn't look like the best part of town," Kento said cautiously.

"But the shop looks okay," Chris suggested. "We just want them to tell us how much the coins are

worth."

"We've come all this way. It'll be too late to go to one of the other coin shops before it's dark," Karen sighed. "And who says the others are going to be any better?"

"Let's just do it," Chris concluded.

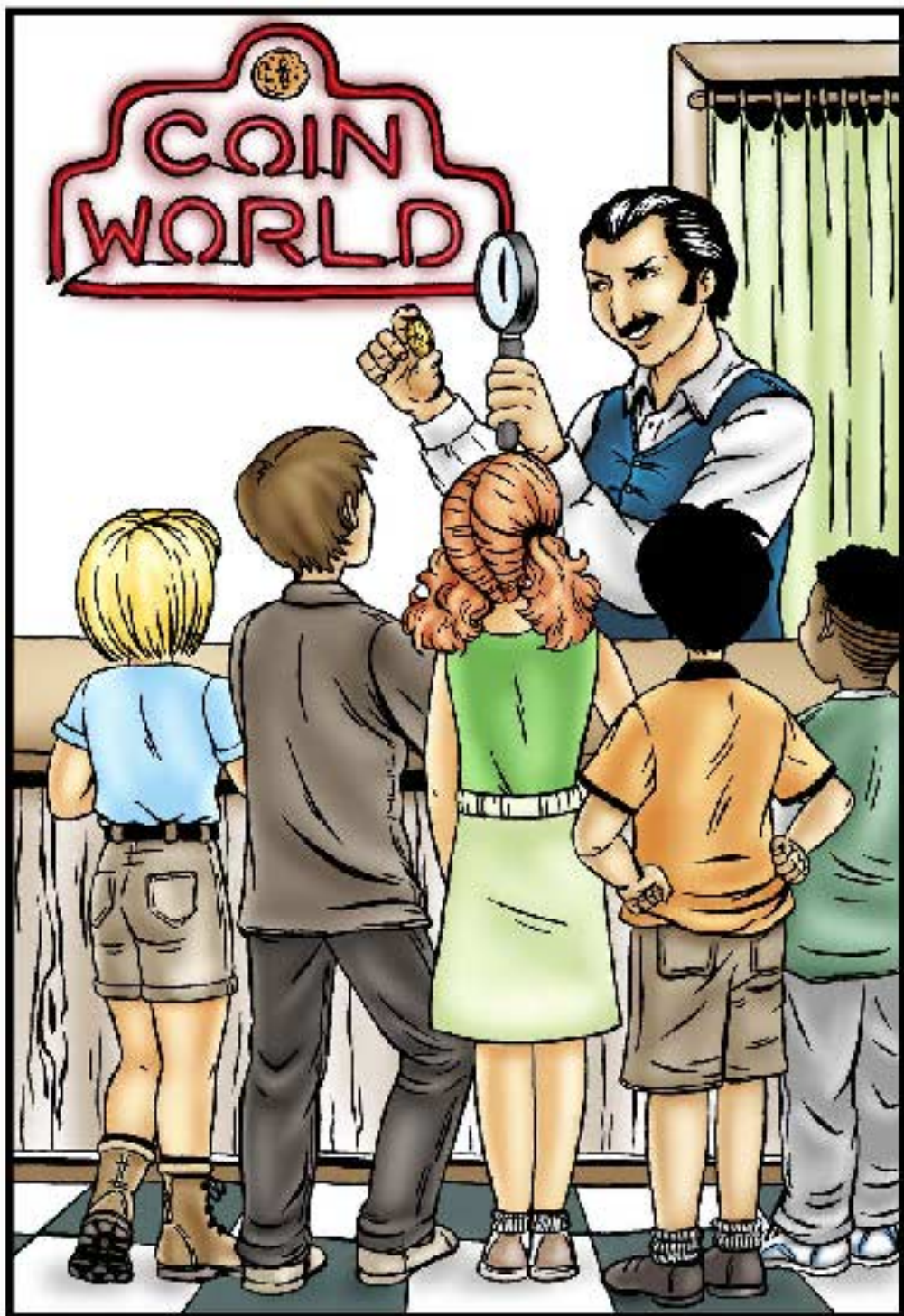
"Wait! I think we're forgetting something," Susan called, stopping them from entering the shop. She hadn't been sure about doing this from the start. Something didn't seem right. And worse, she kept thinking that they'd forgotten something. Then she remembered what Gramps had repeated on numerous accounts. "Pray always," he had reiterated. But now they were forgetting to do just that.

"What?" the others chorused, when Susan had not pursued her train of thought.

Susan suddenly became embarrassed. She blushed, wondering what they'd think of her. *It was one thing when it was coming from Gramps to remind them to pray, but from her? She screwed her face up at the thought. And besides, we're just getting them priced. That's all.* She shrugged and her gaze dropped to the sidewalk. "Nothing," she replied shyly. "I...oh, nothing!"

A buzzer announced the kids' entrance as they opened the door to Coin World. The manager came out from behind a curtain with a suspiciously insincere smile plastered on his face. He wore too much hair grease, and a thick mustache hid his upper lip. The vest he wore was strained at the buttons by his bulging paunch*. His eyes were small, dark and beady, and offset by his nose that was oddly crooked from having been broken several times. People around these parts knew him as Skeets Manchester, but no one really knew if it was his real name or not. That was just one of his many secrets. Whoever he was, Frisky showed his dislike immediately by a

***paunch:** large stomach



series of menacing growls.

“Frisky, stop growling,” Ziggy commanded, as he held him back on his leash. After a tap on his snout, Frisky reluctantly quieted down.

“And what may I do for you, boys and girls?” Skeets asked, with a defined accent.

“We have some coins that someone gave us, and we were wondering if you could look at them?” Karen said.

“That’s our business. So let’s see them.”

Chris pulled out the wooden box from his backpack and placed it on the glass counter, carefully opening the lid. The owner picked them up one by one, held them up and then examined each of them carefully under his magnifying glass for a long time. He referred to some books on his shelf. After nearly a half hour he put his magnifying glass down on the counter, and looked closely at the five friends.

“Where did you say you got these?” he asked.

“From an old man, who was a good friend of ours.”

“Was?”

“He passed away.”

“Sorry. So he left the coins to you?”

“Yes.”

“Where did he say that he got them?”

“He said that his father gave them to him.”

“Excuse me, but why are you asking all these questions?” Susan asked.

“In my business, you can never be too careful.”

“Well, how much are they worth?” Chris asked.

The man paused momentarily, placed his forearms on the glass counter and leaned forward. He shook his head and smirked. “I must say these are very good fakes . . . very good fakes, indeed. What did this old man do for a living?”

“He was a missionary,” Chris explained.

“He traveled all over the world,” Ziggy added.

“Ah, that explains it then. The natives of these

foreign lands are always trying to pawn off bogus coins on travelers. These coins are barely worth the metal they’re made of. If you know what I mean.”

“No, we don’t, sir,” Chris replied stiffly. “Gramps told us that these coins are very valuable, and that they’ve been passed on for several generations in his family. They should at least be worth money for how old they are.”

“You’re a smart kid, but gullible*. Yes, if they had even been passed on for whatever number of generations . . . ”

“Ten,” Susan interrupted.

“Ten, whatever,” Skeets said, showing a flick of irritation. “My point is, old men often make up stories. They start going crazy and telling you things that never happened. And I’m telling you, these coins are no less than ten years old, and certainly not from ancient Rome.”

“Gramps wasn’t crazy,” Ziggy said defensively. “Just because he died, doesn’t mean he couldn’t think properly.”

“Look, if you want I’ll do you a favor. I’ll buy these coins from you . . . as a favor, only. This old man seemed a pretty important person to you.” Skeets’ words were smooth and defined, and a grin played on the corners of his harsh mouth. “I’ll give you twenty bucks for them. I could use them for my display window. It might attract some customers.”

“Only twenty? But Gramps told us they were very valuable.”

“Obviously he didn’t know his coins very well. On the other hand, I am an expert in the field, and I’m telling you, you won’t get money from anyone for those coins. They’d make a fantastic decoration, though.”

“We weren’t planning on selling them, mister,” Susan said resolutely. “Even if they’re not worth

***gullible:** easily tricked

anything to you, they're worth something to us."

The others nodded in agreement. "Susan's right," Kento piped up. "At least they'll remind us of Gramps, even if you say they're not worth much money."

A scowl creased Skeets' forehead, but he replaced it quickly with a hollow smile. "I was only trying to help. But seeing as you've affirmed your decision to keep them," he said sternly, "that concludes our business. Have a good day, children."

He opened the door and ushered them out. His final words held a warning to them, as he spoke them slowly and clearly: "And next time, don't waste my time." As the kids walked down the street, Skeets shut the shop door, turned the "open" sign over, placed the key in the door and locked it. The shop was closed.

"Children," he muttered, as he went to the back of the shop. "They have a way of getting on my nerves, even when I'm in a good mood."

"CLIVE!" he bellowed, as he pulled the separating curtain aside. A tall, muscular man stood up immediately from his seat, where he had been drifting in and out of sleep. Clive grunted his acknowledgment. "Get Harrison to follow the kids that just left the shop. They're headed south on Crispin Avenue. I want to know where they're going."

"Why do . . ."

"JUST GET TO IT!" Skeets shouted. "I don't see the need for you to question orders."

"Yes, boss," Clive murmured as he exited the room.

"Imbeciles*! All of them!" Skeets muttered, enraged till his face was flushed red and his eyes flashed like piercing knives, should anyone catch his glare.



◆◆◆

The bus ride back was a silent one, dispelled only by a few disappointed whispers. Chris had not released his hand on the backpack that the box of coins was in. His mouth frowned, his knuckles went white as he tightened his grip of the backpack. "Worthless, huh?" he muttered in disappointment. "I doubt it."

As Susan stared out the window, she followed the passing trees with her eyes, but she sat like a statue, unmoving. Her mind churned in thought. *I wonder why I thought we shouldn't go into the shop. The man was not nice at all, but nothing happened. I was just getting all worried and thinking we might lose the coins. But they're not even worth money, so the guy said. I didn't like him at all. I . . .*

"Susan!" Karen called, shaking her.

"What?"

"I've called your name like three times. Come on, it's our stop."

"Oh, thanks." Susan said, as she rose from her seat and followed the others out of the bus, then paused for a moment as the bus drove off. "I miss Gramps," she whispered.

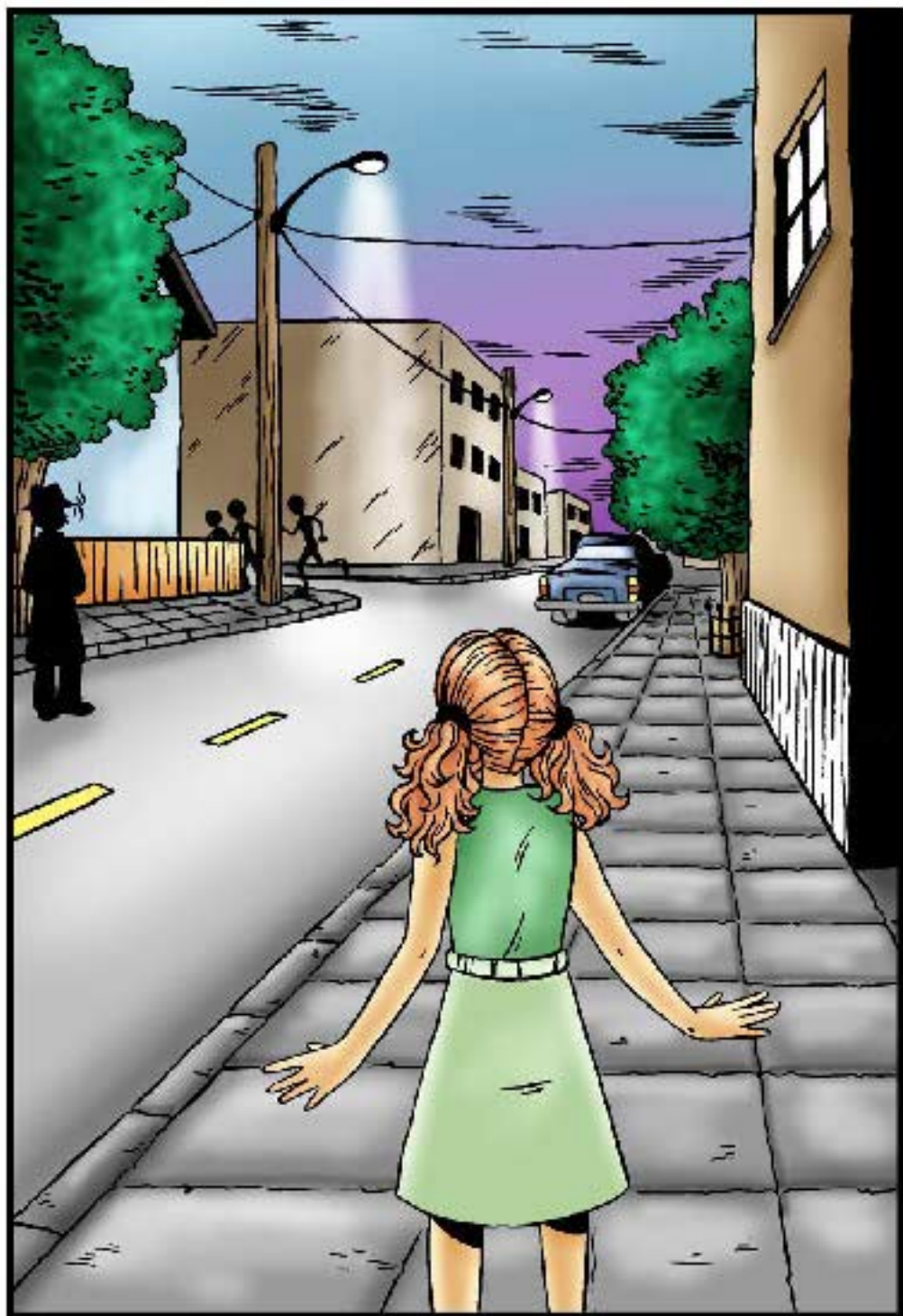
"Susan," Karen called again. "What's wrong with you? Aren't you coming to The Shack with us?"

"No, I think I'll just go home now. See you guys tomorrow."

"Sure thing," Karen said, as she ran after the boys.

The four bounded down the sidewalk towards Chris' house, where their hang-out stood at the back of the property. Their mood had changed, and they

***imbecile:** offensive term used as an insult on someone's level of intellect



chattered on about different things.

No one had seen the gaunt* man exit the bus with them; nor had they seen him enter at the same time that they did.

Susan had been walking in the opposite direction, when she heard a whisper in her head. *Turn around.*

“Huh?” she questioned aloud.

Just turn around, the thought persisted.

She stopped walking and turned in time to see the last of the four figures as they turned the corner. “What now?” she muttered angrily to herself. Suddenly a thin, gangly* silhouette emerged from behind a tree, not far from her friends, checking the silent street to see if anyone had followed him. He paused as he looked in her direction. Susan ducked into a nearby gateway, holding her breath. Realizing it was her own gate, she ran to the door and ushered herself in.

“Susan?” her mother called.

“Yes, it’s me, Mom,” she said, as she dashed up the stairs to her room, wondering if she’d be able to get a glimpse of the man from her bedroom window.

Looking down at the well-lit street from her second floor bedroom it was not hard to see the man. It looked like he was following her friends, but then he seemed to stroll carelessly across the road, away from them. She waited at her window, expecting to see him again, but he never showed himself again.

“It’s dinnertime,” her mother called, breaking Susan’s gaze from the window.

“Coming,” she replied.

What’s up with me? Susan thought, as she made her way downstairs. *I have this feeling like something bad is going to happen, but I don’t know*

what. And then I start thinking that everything we do is going to cause something bad to happen. That’s so stupid. She shrugged and pushed the thought from her mind.

But as she lay in her bed that night thinking about everything that happened that day—hearing about Gramps’ death, the idea to price the coins, the caution she had felt, the unkind shop owner, the voice that had caused her to turn to see the man. “That man,” she whispered. “I must just be getting bored, he didn’t even follow them. At least I didn’t see it. He turned off to a different road.”

No, she thought. *It’s just been a long day, and I’m tired.* But she soon found the words Gramps had told her once, “Just because it doesn’t make sense, doesn’t mean that the voice you hear whispering in your heart is wrong. Sometimes God speaks to us, telling us to be careful or to not do something, and we are wise to listen to that voice. Otherwise, we may have unexpected troubles to deal with.”

Oh dear, I hope nothing bad is going to happen because we didn’t pray before we went off to that shop. It would be terrible if anything happened because I didn’t speak up.

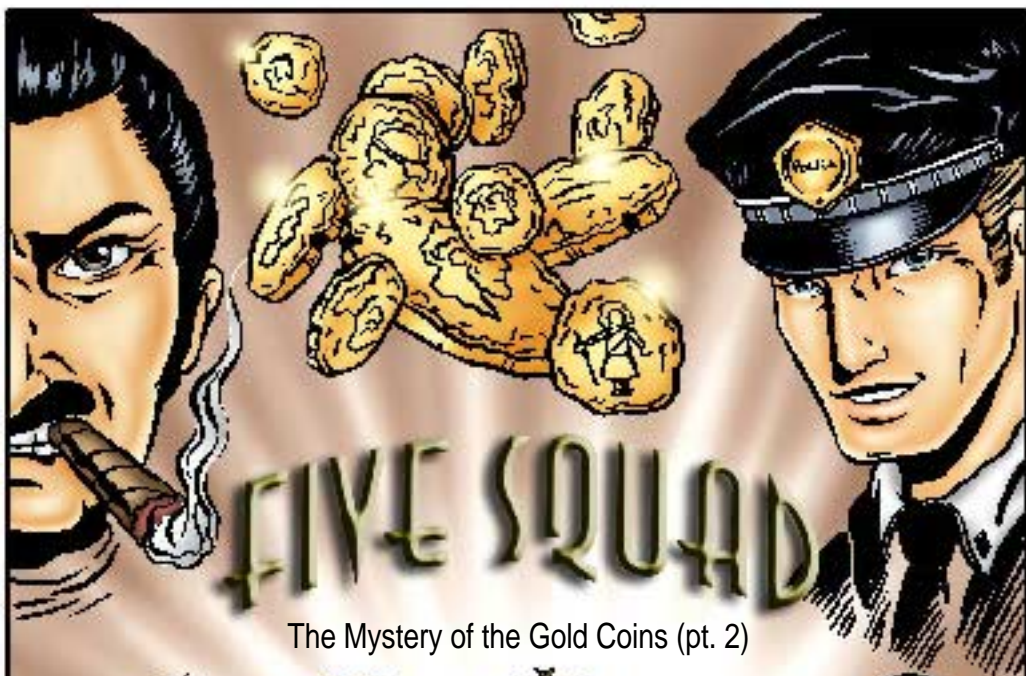
“Please, Jesus,” she prayed. “Help me not to be afraid to say something to my friends, even if it seems corny or odd. I’m sorry for not listening to the voice that told me we should pray before going into the shop. Help me not to make that mistake again. Amen.”

As she closed her eyes to sleep, she could hear Gramps’ voice in her mind quoting his favorite Bible verse: “All things work together for good.” He had repeated it many times over the years that she had known him. And with that thought she fell into a blissful sleep.

***gaunt:** extremely thin and bony
***gangly:** awkwardly thin and tall

To be continued...





FIVE SQUAD

The Mystery of the Gold Coins (pt. 2)



issue 103



so far...

Five Squad—Chris, Susan, Ziggy, Kento, and their newest addition, Karen—had spent the day with Gramps, an old man who had been a missionary in his younger years. Gramps had given Five Squad a box with twenty ancient coins. The five returned the next day to visit Gramps, but found an empty house. A neighbor told them that Gramps had died in the night. Sadly they returned to their clubhouse, The Shack.

When giving the coins to the kids, Gramps described them as “very old and very valuable”; however, when they went to get them valued, the brusque owner of Coin World told them they were worthless. The five set off back to their homes; they hadn’t noticed the figure following them. But Susan felt something wasn’t right.

That evening at the clubhouse when Ziggy, Kento and Karen had left, Chris sat down in front of the table that stood against the boarded wall of The Shack. Removing the wooden box from his backpack, he placed it on the table, opened the lid and studied the coins in their red velvet lining. After a few moments of studying them he put the box in a chest that stood in the far corner of the small hut. All their clubhouse valuables were put in there—not that there were many—they were more like memories. And even though these coins had been deemed worthless, they were a treasure, because Gramps had given them to their group, and Chris was now responsible for them. Now that Gramps had died, their worth had just doubled. They were a remembrance of Gramps.

Chris shut the clubhouse door and locked it. The wind bustled, sending the autumn leaves hurtling through the air. The wind and leaves were dancing, it seemed. Chris walked the rest of the path quickly, running from the chill in the night breeze. He had not seen the shadow that stood nearby, nor the curl of smoke that rose from the cigarette held in the man’s fingers.

When Chris had entered the house, the man

removed a cell phone from his coat pocket and dialed quickly. He put the phone to his ear and took another draw at his cigarette. “What next?” he asked lazily.

“Did you find the place?” the voice inquired on the other end.

“A pathetic hut. Do you want me to do anything?”

“Listen carefully, I’m not going to repeat myself. There was a small wooden box in the boy’s backpack, with twenty coins inside of it. Get it for me. And don’t mess up, or I’ll have you for it.”

“Consider it done,” the man said, as he squashed his cigarette butt with the heel of his boot.



“They’re gone!” Chris shouted, after scouring the small chest for the wooden coin box.

“Are you sure you put them in there?” Ziggy asked.

“Of course I’m sure.” Chris was frantic.

“Where could they have gone?” Susan questioned.

“I don’t know. I put them in here after you guys left, and I locked the . . . Oh, no!”

Recommended age: 9 years and up. (May be read by younger children at parents’ discretion.)

"What?" the other four chorused.

"Look at this. I didn't realize it before." Chris held up the padlock.

"What?" they all asked again.

"It's been opened."

"Yes, of course," Kento said with a note of confusion in his voice. "You opened it."

"No I didn't." Chris checked his pockets. "I don't even have the keys with me. They're in my bedroom. But I know I locked this last night."

Kento picked up the padlock, fidgeting with it. "It's broken. Look here, someone's forced it, the keyhole is all scratched, and it doesn't close."

"Isn't that the new lock we just bought?" Susan asked.

"Yes, and it was working just fine last night!" Chris said exasperated. "And now the coins are missing. What are we going to do?"

The clubhouse went quiet, as the five stared at each other. Their gaze lingered on the chest for some time. Finally Susan ended the silence.

"I was hoping something like this wouldn't happen after yesterday," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" Karen inquired.

"I should've told you then, instead of thinking you'd laugh or . . ."

"Tell us what, Susan?" Chris interrupted.

"Oh," she sighed and covered her face with her hands, and then looked up at the expectant group. "Before we went to that shop, Coin World, I had this feeling that something wasn't right.

Actually, I started having it before we even left the clubhouse. Something didn't seem right. Then just as we were standing outside the shop, I remembered what we'd forgotten."

"That's when you told us to wait or something," Kento filled in.

"Yes. I remembered we hadn't

prayed, something Gramps had told us to do before we began anything, remember?"

The others looked downcast. "I didn't even think of it," Chris muttered sullenly.

"Me neither," Kento said.

"But that's not all," Susan went on. "Remember, Karen, you had to call me several times before I answered when we were on the bus?"

Karen nodded, as did the others.

"Well, again, something didn't feel right. I didn't like that man at the shop, and I was suddenly missing Gramps. But when you guys went back to The Shack, and I started on my way home, something whispered for me to turn around. Finally I did, and I saw this man behind you. I thought he was following you, so I ran to my bedroom to get a better look, but then he suddenly turned down the other road. So I figured I was just imagining things."

"But," Chris said, tapping the table as he was thinking, then he blurted out, "That road has a pathway that leads right back to the road we were walking down, just ten paces further."

"Did the man see you, Susan?" Ziggy asked excitedly.

"I thought he did, which is why I quickly ran to my house."

"You can't see that path from your bedroom," Kento offered. "Plus, that tree next to your window would have blocked you from seeing further down the corner."

"Yeah," Susan answered. "I stayed there for a bit, but Mom called me to dinner."

"I wonder who he was, and if maybe he took the coins," Chris scratched his head, as he verbalized his thoughts. "Whatever are we going to do?"

"Wait," Susan blurted out.



"There was something else. Just before I fell asleep, I was praying and I remembered something Gramps always said, that verse he used to repeat over and over, 'All things work together for good.' I went to sleep right after that, but I felt so much better. I was worried before that, that something was going to happen."



"I don't know what good can come out of this," Karen muttered.

"I don't either, but there must be something. We just need to find it."

"We should pray, like Gramps told us to do when we don't know what to do next," Chris said.

They held hands while Chris prayed. When they had finished, no one spoke; they just sat, thinking about the whole scenario that had taken place. But something was different. They were doing the right thing by praying, and it felt good.

"Every time I think about the coins, I'm always reminded of that man's face at the shop. He really wasn't a nice guy," Ziggy said in concerned thought.

"I wonder . . ." Chris' voice trailed, and the others sat silently in anticipation. "No one else knew about the coins," he continued. "Did you guys tell anyone?"

"No," they all answered.

"So then why would anyone break into a kids' clubhouse, huh?"

"Isn't it strange how that Mr. Manchester said the coins were not valuable, but Gramps had told us the exact opposite?" Karen raised the question. "If only we had some way to know."

"They have books about old coins in the library," Kento declared. "We could always go see if they have them in there."

"Yeah, let's do that!" Ziggy jumped up with excitement.

"Wait," Chris said, placing his hand on Ziggy's arm. "We'd better remember to not make the same mistake we made yesterday. We should pray first."

They bowed their heads as Ziggy said a prayer for their venture to the library.

"I feel so much better doing it this way!" Susan exclaimed with a smile.

"Me too," Ziggy said.

"I wasn't too sure about going to the library, because I didn't think it would do anything for us," Susan said. "But after we prayed I felt like we should go, at least so we can know, and stuff. After all, that's why we went to that shop in the first place."

They all agreed and set off for the nearby library.



"I found it!" Susan declared ecstatically. "It's a book about ancient coins."

"Are our coins in there?" Karen asked, as the others gathered around.

A woman at an adjacent table hushed them with a near interminable* "shhhh," and the five apologized, and continued in whispers.

"You'll never believe it." Susan opened the book to a page that had a color photograph of an ancient coin. "Doesn't this coin look familiar? Just like one that we had—a Roman coin. It says that this one coin alone is worth 100,000 dollars!"

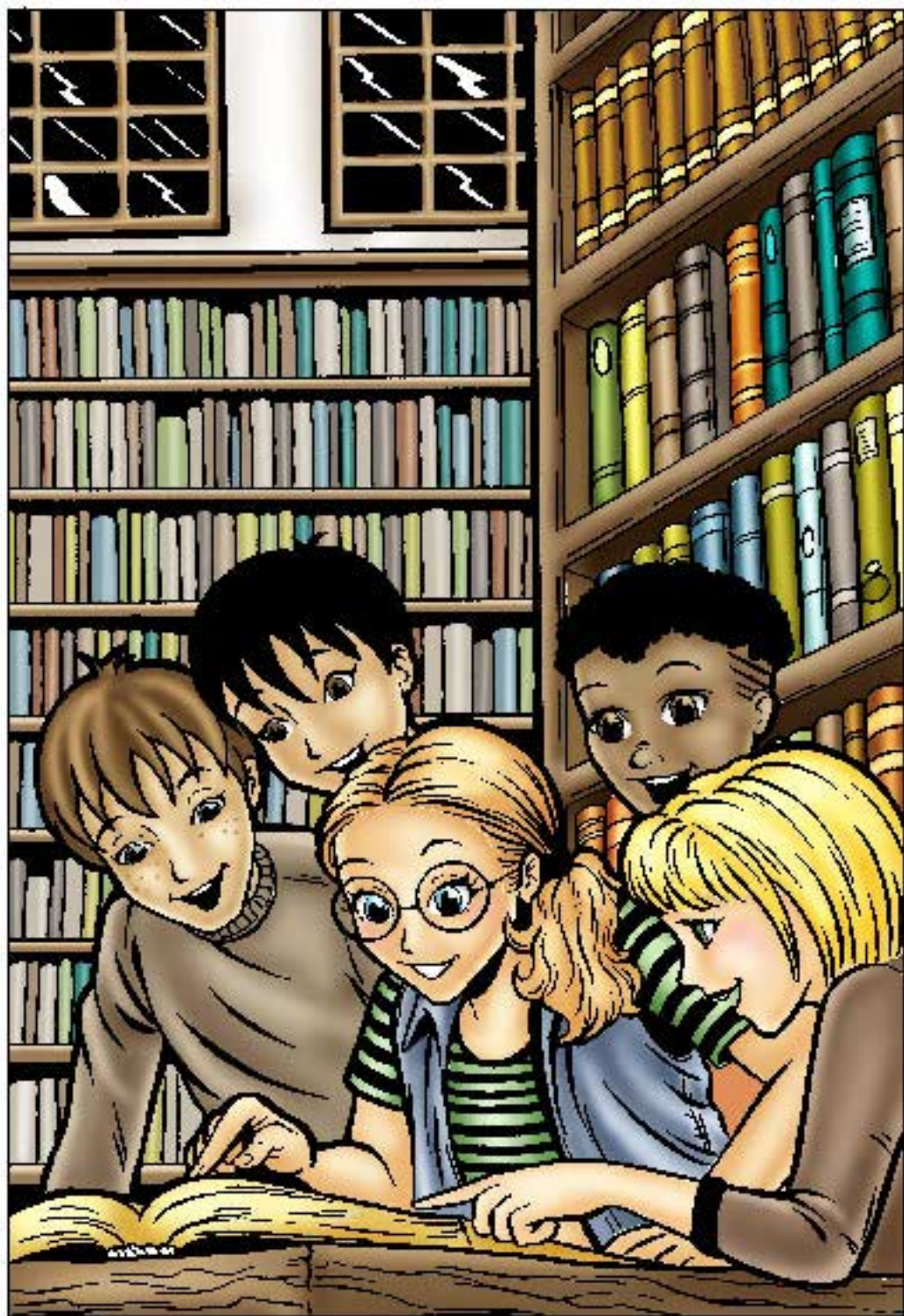
"100,000 dollars?" they chorused.

"That's if they're real. If the shop owner was right, about them being fakes, then they're not worth anything."

"But then why would they disappear?" Ziggy asked.

"I don't know. I'm just presenting the other

**interminable: unending*



side." Susan closed the book and took it to the library desk to check it out. The others followed her out of the library, quickly making their way back to Chris' back yard, where The Shack stood.



"Let's just say that Mr. Manchester stole them, or had someone steal them from us, how would we get them back?" Karen asked, as the five held their investigative discussion.



"We could call the police, and tell them our coins got stolen and who we think did it," Ziggy offered.

"The police?" Kento asked, as he fiddled with the painting Gramps had given them along with the coins.

"It was just a thought."

"Well, maybe if we had something more to go on," Susan suggested. "But I don't think the police would believe our story. We don't even have proof that we own the coins."

They weren't getting anywhere just sitting around, and a sunken feeling had settled over them.

"People, look at this," Kento cried excitedly, as he waved an envelope over his head.

"What's that?"

"It's an envelope I found in the back of the angel painting. I was just adjusting the string to hang it, and I saw a corner of this envelope sticking out," Kento said, as he pulled some photos out of it and a receipt. "It says it's an official appraisal* of the coins, and there are photographs too."

"Guess this proves they weren't fakes, like Mr. Manchester said they were," Chris said gloomily.

"But where are they? Maybe we should go back to Coin World and check the place out." Susan threw out the idea.

"It won't be that easy," Kento said. "You can't just go in there and say we think he stole our coins. It doesn't work like that."

"I know. But I have this feeling that Mr. Manchester has something to do with this."

"We could always just go that way," Chris proposed.

"Sitting around here isn't going to make the coins reappear." Ziggy shrugged.

And they set off once again in the direction of Coin World.



"And what brings the lot of you back here?" Skeets asked. "Did you decide that the twenty bucks was tempting for those worthless coins?"

"Actually sir," Karen narrowed her eyes as she addressed him, "those 'worthless' coins, as you call them, went missing. Someone's taken them."

"Ha!" roared Skeets. "That's so sad. You're saying that someone *stole* your metal collection? Oh, that's a good one!" And he erupted into another fit of laughter.

"We don't find it so funny, mister," Chris said sternly. "Those coins were not worthless like you said they were. And we have proof of that."

"Proof, huh? Well, let's see it."

"I don't think so." Susan was direct as she stepped up to the counter. "We just came here to find out if you've seen them, seeing as you're the only other person outside of our group who knows about the coins."

"Are you accusing me of having something to do with your missing coins, kid?" Skeets eyed her

***appraisal:** document proving the value of an item

fiercely. "That's not a nice thing to do. But," he sighed and relaxed his scowl. "I understand how terrible this must be for you. Unfortunately, I am not able to be much of a help to you, seeing as I have not seen your coins since you left my shop yesterday."

"Is that really the truth?" Kento challenged, emerging from the back of the group, and pointed his finger at Skeets. "You told us the coins were worth nothing, when actually they're very valuable. How do we know you're not lying now?"

"Kento," Chris whispered, pulling on his arm. "Don't get angry, it's not going to help anything."

Kento retreated, but his face flushed red. His eyes were squint, and his lips flattened by his anger.

"Disrespectful children annoy me," Skeets said angrily. "You asked me your question, now off with you. I don't have time for your offensive accusations. Now get out of my shop. And don't come back to my shop, ever! Do you understand?"

They hurried from the shop and down the street, not looking back.



When they got back to The Shack to talk about what to do next everyone was downcast, even Frisky.

"Guys, I'm sorry for getting all upset like that in the shop," Kento apologized. "I don't like that guy at all. And if you ask me, he probably is the one who took the coins."

"That's okay, Kento," Ziggy said. And the other four agreed.

"He's an easy man to dislike," Susan chimed in. "He's not honest. And when you anger him, he only seems to get worse."

She shuddered. "He gives me the creeps."

"So what are we going to do now?" Chris asked.

The only answer was silence. No

one had a clue of what to do.

Kento still held the envelope that had the coin appraisal in it. He pulled out the papers to look at them again. "Hey, I never saw this before! There's a note from Gramps in here," Kento said, pulling a slip of paper from the envelope. It was written in Gramps' neat cursive handwriting.

"What's it say? Read it, will you?" Susan asked eagerly.

"Okay." Kento started to read slowly, making each word count.

To the Five Squad,

Even if it looks like you have lost everything, there is always a way to get it back. It is never too late to do the right thing. The answer is just a phone call away.—Jer.33:3.

Love,

Your Gramps

"That's pretty cryptic. But it's almost like he knew we were going to lose the coins," Ziggy suggested.

"What's that part about the telephone?" Karen asked.

"Remember Gramps told us about knowing the future by asking God about it? That's what this is saying," Chris answered.

Kento remembered the verse clearly. "Oh, that's right. He said that God's telephone number is Jer.33:3—'Call unto Me, and I will answer you, and show you . . . great and mighty things, that thou knowest not.'"

"We sure didn't pray at the beginning," Susan said. "We just acted on impulse."

"I guess we can ask now. Maybe He still has something to say. Let's try it," Chris suggested.

The response was unanimous, and after a short prayer everyone got



quiet, waiting for the Lord to show them what to do next. Even Frisky was respectfully curled up in a corner quietly.

After a few moments of silence, Chris began. "I got this feeling that we should go back to the shop, and look in the back, that we'll find something that will help us get the coins back, but that we need to be careful, because we'll be on dangerous territory. Especially after our last meeting with Skeets."

"I was reminded of this Bible story I read one time. I just don't see how it goes with things now," Susan said hesitantly.

"Tell us!" the others said eagerly.

"Okay," Susan replied. "Like I said, I'm not sure what it means, but I just remembered it so clearly."

"What was it?" Chris asked.

"It's when Jesus said that some of his enemies were like white tombs, looking real beautiful on the outside, but inside were full of dead men's bones, and yucky stuff like that." (See Mat.23:27.)

"Whoa ... that *is* pretty different. I wonder what it could mean?" Chris pondered aloud.

"If it's of any help, the outside of the Coin World shop is painted white," Karen suggested.

"And the owner wasn't honest. He gave me the creeps," Ziggy added.

"Guys, if we found out that he's doing something illegal, we might be able to get the police in there to arrest him. Then we could get our coins back," Kento said.

"It's not that simple," Chris said.

"Maybe not," Kento offered. "But I didn't like that Mr. Manchester. And we've got to think of *something* to do."

"I wonder what Gramps would've done in a situation like this?" Ziggy said.

"Wait," Susan said. "Just because things have gone wrong

doesn't mean there's no way to make them right. Let's just each pray and think for a little."

Everyone was quiet again, trying to think how to find the missing coins.

"I have this real strong feeling that we need to go back to the shop," Chris said again. I know it sounds risky, but if we set up precautions, like just two of us go, and the others keep watch from a distance."

"I was thinking the same thing, and ... " Susan paused. "You know I was telling you about that voice that told me to turn around last night, well I heard it again, it said to pray and go."

"Let's pray then," Kento said enthusiastically.

After the prayer they agreed that Chris and Susan should go first, being the oldest of the group. The other three would stay not far behind.



It was late afternoon when they reached the shop. Chris and Susan led the way, with the other three following at a distance.

"Let's go around the back," Chris whispered.

The alley behind the shop was narrow. They managed to find a doorway to hide in. There the two waited for some time until the dusk shadows settled.

"Maybe nothing is going to happen today. We could try again tomorrow," Susan whispered, obviously disappointed.

"Let's just give it a little more time."

Just then a black Cadillac pulled up nearby.

"Wonder who that is," Chris said.

A man wearing sunglasses and a long, black overcoat emerged from the car. He handed a large package to another man who had come from the back entrance of Coin World.

Chris and Susan looked at each



other.

"This could be interesting," Chris said.

"I'll write down the license number," Susan whispered. She pulled out a pen and wrote the number down on the palm of her hand. "Let's wait until he's gone inside, then we can look in the trash can by the shop and see if there's anything interesting left in there," Chris suggested.

"Do you think that's smart?"

"Don't worry, we'll be careful," Chris reassured her.

"If you think so," Susan agreed reluctantly.

Gingerly they approached the garbage cans and each lifted one of the lids. There were papers scattered in the inside.

"A ton of papers is all I'm finding. Most of them are ripped and I can't read them," Susan said.

"Check this, something about horse gambling. And something about Columbia," Chris said as he picked up and read some of the receipts.

"This one is for a money deposit in a bank in the Cayman Islands. Wonder what this all means," Susan said.

"Probably something illegal," Chris concluded.

Just then there was a noise at the back door and it swung open; a man emerged. Susan gasped. It was the same gaunt figure she had seen following the four the night before. Realizing that they had been discovered, Chris and Susan turned to escape, but instead they rammed into a huge bruiser, who stood on the other side of the trash cans. He grabbed each of them in his monstrous arms, and shook them until they stopped fighting for release.

"What are you kids doing snooping around here?" he asked angrily.

"We were just trying to find cool stuff in your



garbage," Chris said lamely, trying to find something that would get them out of the mess.

"Really? And did you find anything you were looking for?" the human bulldog asked.

Chris shook his head.

"It's him," Susan whispered.

"Him who?" Chris asked.

Susan nodded her head in the direction of the thin man who stood nearby. His bony fingers awkwardly held a cigarette close to his mouth. His hand shook slightly. Susan caught his eye, and an eerie smile spread across his face. Susan shivered. The man turned his back and exhaled a breathe of smoke.

"Take them to the boss," he told the other man who still held the kids in his unforgiving grasp. He then turned and walked down the alley, away from the shop.

The reluctant pair were dragged into the back room and plunked onto two chairs that were back to back, while the huge man stood menacingly nearby to make sure they didn't get up. "Boss," he called, "I got something for you."

"It'd better be something good, Clive. I don't have time for your 'discoveries' these days," Skeets Manchester said, as he entered the room with a scowl wrinkling his forehead, and his dark eyes squinted.

"Just caught these kids snooping around out back. Said they were looking for cool stuff," Clive chuckled.

"Cool stuff, eh?" responded Skeets. "But aren't you the kids with those coins? I clearly recall telling you not to come back to my shop, did I not?"

"You took them!" Susan screamed. "We want them back!"

Skeets answered calmly, "So sorry, kid—things



don't work like that in this world. I must thank you, though, for making me fabulously wealthy!"

"You sold them?" Chris asked, hoping he hadn't heard correctly.

"We're going to sell them tomorrow night," the bruiser said.

"Zip it, Clive! Don't tell them nothing. It ain't their business!" He then turned to Susan and Chris. "So you think you're going to find something in the trash, huh? Let's see about that. Search them," he told Clive, while he pulled a cigar from his vest pocket.

Clive searched their pockets, pulling out little scraps of paper. When he'd finished frisking them, he plopped them back on their chairs and scrutinized the papers he'd collected from them. "Looks like receipts, banking bits and pieces, and a few other pieces of kid junk. Oh, and she's got a license number scribbled on her hand."

"Don't tell me, Clive, that you dumped those papers out back!" Skeets hollered. His face flushed with fury. "Don't you ever learn, you dimwit?"

Skeets' rage switched off instantly as he turned to the two kids, and a sly grin played on his mouth. "But that wasn't very smart of you either, was it? Sticking your nose in other people's business, eh?"

He came close and lifted Susan's chin to get a closer look. "Now then, didn't your parents ever teach you anything? Silly kids, thinking you found something on me! Who's ever going to know now?"

He turned to Clive. "Take our little friends downstairs to the tunnel."

Clive grabbed Chris and Susan roughly by the arms, opened a door in the room and as they walked down the stairs he would occasionally shove them to get them moving faster. At the bottom of the stairs he pressed a button on a wall, which slid open to reveal a dark tunnel with doors leading to many rooms on both sides. The lights flickered on,

and Clive pushed the kids further down the tunnel. Finally he opened another door and threw them inside. There was a foul smell in the air, and Susan and Chris started coughing immediately.

"We're going to keep you here for awhile till we figure out what to do with you."

"How long will that take?" Susan asked.

"No telling. We never did figure out what to do with our last guests," the bruiser said, with a guffaw. To him it was just another cruel game.

The door slammed shut, and Chris and Susan were plunged into absolute blackness. In the darkness Chris and Susan prayed that they would live through this ordeal. Even though they were tired, thirsty, and very uncomfortable to say the least, they tried to stay cheerful by singing and quoting anything that they could remember.



"They've been caught!" Kento said frantically. Ziggy, Karen and him had watched Susan and Chris being dragged off by a huge man.

"What can we do?" Karen said desperately. "We've got to think of something fast."

"But what?" asked Ziggy.

"I don't know . . . maybe it's time to get on the phone again?" Karen suggested.

"Right, let's do it," Kento said.

They prayed, got quiet and waited for direction. Ziggy spoke up first, "You know the verse, 'He shall give His angels charge over thee'? Well, that and a picture of a policeman came to mind when we were praying. I think it's time to call the police to help us find Chris and Susan."

"I agree," Karen confirmed his statement.

"Maybe this trouble is going to help us to catch these crooks and get our coins back, somehow," Kento said.

Frisky barked eagerly in agreement.

"That would be nice. Let's hurry. I saw a police

station a couple streets down," Ziggy said, as they hurried down the street.

"You know, I'm starting to like this stopping-to-hear-from-God thing. It's pretty cool!" Karen said excitedly, as she ran with the others.



Kento, Ziggy, and Karen boldly stepped up to the police desk, with Frisky following close behind.

"No dogs allowed," the police officer said, lifting only an eyebrow in acknowledgement of the kids.

"Oh, but where do we put him?" Kento asked.

"You can just tie him outside, we just can't have dogs at the station. So what do you kids want?" the officer asked.

Ziggy took a deep breath and started his explanation, complete with hand movements. "Two of our friends are in super big trouble because they were captured by a mean man at Coin World, who stole our ancient coins from us. They need rescuing right away. We've got to get there quick before something bad happens to them and . . ."

The officer looked up from the paper he was reading, "Friends? Which friends? Just the facts, kids, just the facts. You know—names, ages, addresses, boring stuff like that."

Ziggy was too worked up and emotional to answer many questions, so Karen gave the police officer all the details he needed.

He picked up the phone, and dialed a number, "See if you can get a search warrant on this place, what's it called?"

"Coin World. That's spelled C-O-I-N . . ." Ziggy spoke up.

"Thanks," the officer replied politely, and then continued on with his phone conversation. "The name seems to ring a bell, check up on it, will you."



Ziggy, Karen, and Kento arrived at Coin World with three police officers, to see if they could find Susan and Chris.

A hastily-written sign on the front door read, "Closed—on vacation."

"We saw them last around the back of the shop, before the guy dragged them in." Kento directed the officers to the back entrance.

Frisky was already running to the back, barking all the way. He jumped on the door, scratching frantically. The others reached the door a few moments later. The door was closed as well. The trash cans were overturned, and garbage spilt from them.

"Doesn't look like there's much going on here," a Lieutenant Gibbs said.

"Check this out," his partner called, picking up a wallet.

"That's Chris' wallet!" Kento exclaimed. "Check." He took the wallet from the officer's hand and fumbled through it, retrieving an identity card. "Chris Fulton. Just like we said."

The lieutenant looked concerned. "Did you get the warrant, Hooper?" He asked the other officer.

"Yeah."

"See if anyone's inside. But first lets get the kids back to the car, where Warren can keep an eye on them. We don't want any unnecessary trouble."

Though Karen, Ziggy and Kento protested, they acquiesced, realizing that their cooperation was needed, if the police were to help them.

Officer Hooper knocked on the door several times, calling loudly: "This is the police. Open the door! We know you are in there!" There was no answer.

"Open up or we will have to break the door down," Hooper called out.

Ziggy overheard his words, and asked Warren, who was in the car with them, "Will they really break down the door?"

"Perhaps. Maybe if they don't open it and they're actually in there," he responded.

A shuffle of feet and some voices were heard, and then the bolt was lifted and the door opened.

"What can I do for you?" Skeets asked nonchalantly.

"We are looking for these two missing persons—a boy named Chris Fulton and a girl named Susan Grimbaldi. They are about twelve years old. Have you seen them?" The lieutenant asked, as he held up a photo for the owner to look at closely.

"We received a report that they were seen being hauled off through this back entrance. Do you know anything about that?"

"Can't say that I do."

"Hmmm, is that the case! Funny, because I have three witnesses who followed the two missing children here," the lieutenant said, pointing to the three kids sitting in the police car.

"Those kids again!" Skeets exclaimed.

"So you *have* seen them before," the lieutenant said.

Skeets was immediately on the defensive, "They came with some worthless coins the other day. And then again today, they returned, with some accusation or another, when their coins went missing. Terribly rude children, if you ask me. I sent them away, and asked them not to return. Is that a crime?"

"Where are our friends?" Karen yelled from the car. The officer held his hand up, and Karen calmed down.

"Do you mind if we look around?" Lieutenant Gibbs asked.

"Of course not. I have nothing to hide."

"Warren, keep the kids and the dog in the car while we go in to search the place," the lieutenant called out.

Karen, Ziggy and Kento waited for close to an hour until the police finally returned.

"It looks clean," the main officer said. "We searched everywhere."

"There must be some mistake," Karen said.

Frisky was now barking loudly. Kento held the dog back the best he could but finally Frisky bowled him over and began to dash madly towards the open back door of the shop.

Frisky ran as fast as he could into the store.

"Maybe he's looking for Susan and Chris!" Kento exclaimed.

"Let's go. Follow that dog!" the lieutenant yelled.

When everyone caught up with Frisky, he had settled himself in front of a section of the wall where there was a bookcase, and was barking furiously. Skeets Manchester tried to kick him away, but the dog kept coming back to the same section of wall.

"What is behind this bookshelf?" the officer asked.

"A wall. Cement, and then some more cement," Skeets Manchester said with a smirk.

"Examine this area carefully, Hooper."

"Hey, look at this, lieutenant. Looks like there's something behind this bookshelf." After searching for several minutes they found a small crack along the side of the bookcase that they forced open with a crowbar.

"Look, a tunnel!" Gibbs said.

"Well, I'll be!" Skeets offered lamely. "And all this time here I never even knew it existed!"

The two policemen were so preoccupied with their discovery of the tunnel that they failed to notice that Skeets was slowly making his way to



the stairs to escape. Clive stood between Skeets and the police.

The lieutenant called on his radio for backup.

Frisky was now barking loudly at Skeets Manchester and grabbed ahold of his pant leg. The dog wouldn't let go, no matter how hard Skeets tried to shake him off.

"Skeets is trying to get away," Kento suddenly called out, having run in after Frisky. The other two had followed as well.

At that moment Clive pulled out a gun and fired at the police. The bullets zinged past them.

"Get down!" the lieutenant called out to Ziggy. The other two also got the message and quickly hugged the floorboards behind an overturned table.

Skeets had managed to shake the dog off of him and was running up the stairs, with Clive close behind. The police tried to follow, but Clive turned every few seconds and shot at them.

The lieutenant pulled out his gun and returned fire. A bullet caught Clive in the lower leg and the big man fell hard. Within seconds the lieutenant had confiscated Clive's gun and handcuffed him.

Officer Hooper ran to catch up with Skeets. He made a flying leap and they both fell down in a heap on the floor. After a struggle Hooper got the advantage over Skeets and snapped handcuffs on him too.

"You kids will pay for this," Skeets shouted.

"I wouldn't get into that. You have a lot of explaining to do, Mr. Manchester," Lieutenant Gibbs warned him.

Once backup arrived, the two men were taken to the police station. While several of the other police busied themselves by further checking Coin World, Ziggy, Karen, and Kento took off down the tunnel to try to find Chris and Susan.



As they followed the tunnel they called every few feet and listened. Soon they heard a banging on one door and some muffled yells.

They unlatched and finally opened the door. Chris and Susan came out into the hallway and blinked as their eyes adjusted to the light.

"Are we happy to see you!" Chris said, as they all exchanged hugs.

"So are we!" the three exclaimed.

"It's a good thing you came when you did. No telling what they would have done to us," Susan said.

"We'll need to take you down to the police station to get your statements and the full story of what happened from each of you. Then we'll take you home," Gibbs said, as he joined the others.

After Five Squad had gone through the different questions the police asked of them, Gibbs and Hooper drove them home. As they left they told the five kids, "Tomorrow morning we will come by to see how you're all doing, and also in case we need any other information that may have slipped our minds today. Could everyone meet at Chris' house at 10:30?"

"Sure," they agreed.

Chris spoke up: "Lieutenant, could we ask you a favor?"

"What's that?"

"Were the coins found?"

"We haven't found anything yet. But we're looking."



At exactly 10:29 a.m. Lieutenant Gibbs and Officer Hooper appeared at the front door of Chris' house. The five were sitting around the living room, and quickly got up to greet the officers.

After a lengthy interrogation, the police were



satisfied with the information they had gathered from the kids, and were going to do a further investigation into Skeets Manchester's affairs. The two got up to leave.

"Thank you for your help in breaking this case, we've been after Skeets for some time. We may need you to testify at the court hearing. We'll see," the lieutenant said.

"Sir, did you find the coins?" Susan asked.

"The coins? I almost forgot," the lieutenant said with a smile. He nodded to the officer with him, who went out to the back trunk of his car and pulled the familiar box out of a large bag. He came inside and handed it to the lieutenant.

"We found them. Apparently you have yourself quite a treasure here. I'd be careful where you put them next."

"Thanks, sir!" Chris said, as he gladly received the box.

"Now, be careful with them. They may not be so easy to get back next time," the lieutenant said.

"Believe me, we will," Chris said. The others voiced their wholehearted agreement.

Frisky also barked his agreement. Everyone laughed.

"I'm amazed at how it all seemed to work out for you kids," Lieutenant Gibbs stated. "You're very lucky children."

"Actually, sir," Susan replied. "It's only because we prayed when we didn't know what to do that helped us. It's what Gramps, the man who gave us the coins, taught us to do."

"Well, then I have to say that you children have a fine treasure in your prayer, and in your coins!" the lieutenant exclaimed. Officer Hooper nodded his head in agreement.

The members of Five Squad looked at each other and smiled. It couldn't have turned out better.

dad speaking...

When I was with you often the Lord gave me very vivid dreams, illustrations that would help me to understand a situation. Or sometimes the dreams were used to explain a problem that we needed an answer for. In the dreams I often played a different role. In some of the dreams I was a refugee, fleeing and running away, in other ones I was a child, and still in others I was somebody important. The Lord spoke to me in different ways through these dreams, using them as parallels to help me understand a situation. And after the dreams the Lord always gave me an explanation for them, which I would then pass on to you.

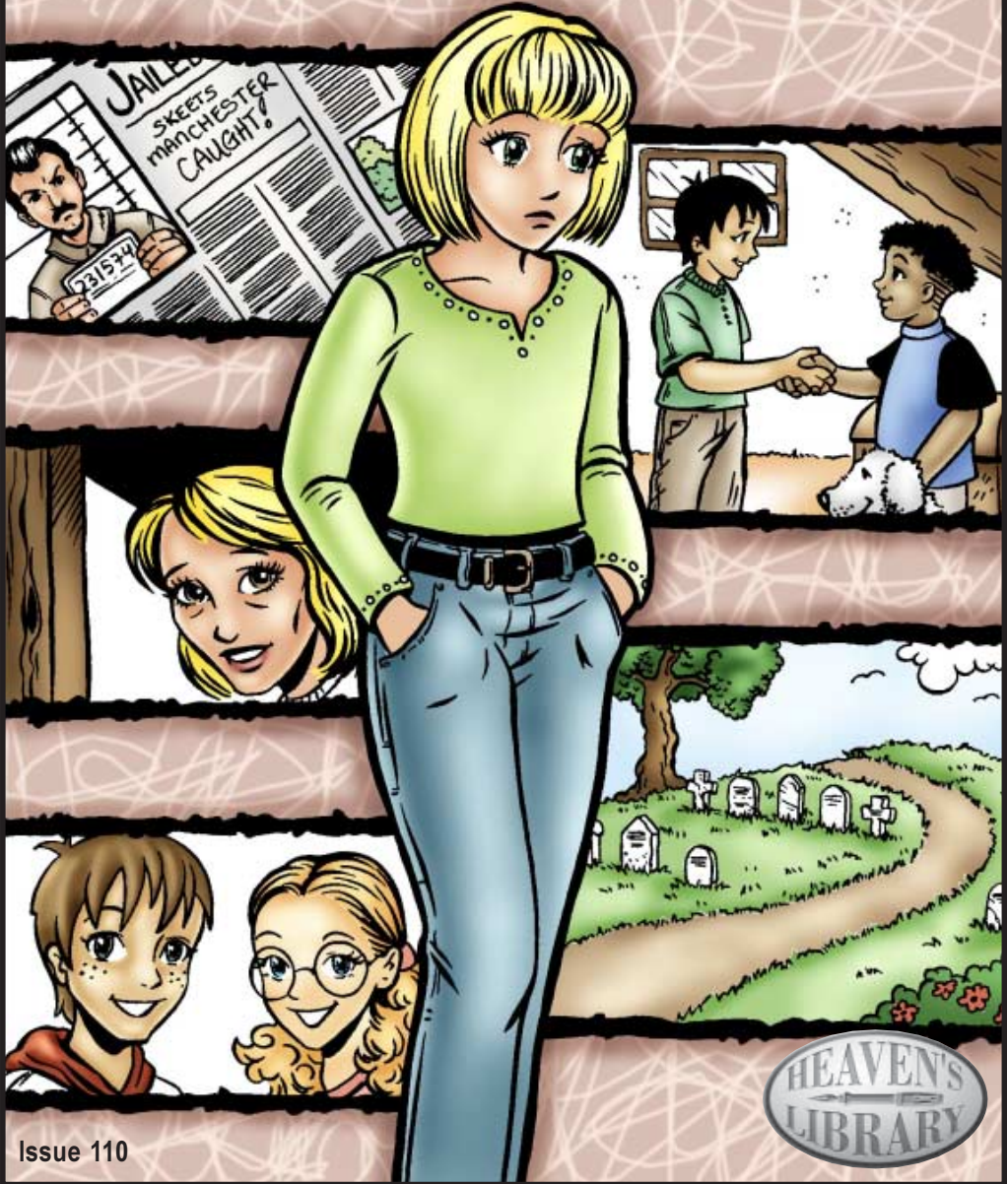
The children receiving these valuable coins from the old man represent how you have had invaluable jewels passed on to you through the Word that your parents have taught you. But at times it's easy to not think of them as valuable, and so you do not care for them as much. But if they were to be taken away from you, as in your Bible or Word books being taken from you, like the coins were stolen from the children in this story, suddenly the value and worth of them would become apparent.

In this story there is the monetary worth, and the remembrance of their Gramps. But for you the treasure is much more valuable. There is no money equal to the precious treasures that have been passed on to you within the Word. Nothing at all. And one day you'll be glad you treasured them and did not allow the Enemy to steal them from you, because of your ignorance.

Treasure the Word, and you'll find it bringing new meaning to your life. *(End of message.)*

FIVE SQUAD

Karen's Ordeal



Issue 110

the story so far...

In their last adventure, Five Squad were involved in the hunt for Skeets Manchester, who had organized the theft of a valuable case with twenty Roman coins, given to them by Gramps before he died. They successfully identified Skeets as the coordinator of this crime and were able to find the coins, thanks to the help of the city police.

Look at this photo in the paper of Skeets Manchester being led away in handcuffs to prison!" Chris exclaimed.

"Scary! Quite the scowl," Kento remarked, peering over Chris' shoulder to get a better look.

"You know, guys, sometimes I feel sorry for him," Susan said, as she came over to look at the picture with the rest of them.

Ziggy waltzed over and commented nonchalantly: "I don't feel a *bit* sorry for him. I think he got what he deserved."

"Who knows?" Susan replied. "Anyone can change. Remember that story Gramps told us about the criminal who found Jesus and changed his life."

Ziggy shrugged his shoulders. "I guess so, but it seems hard to imagine Skeets Manchester ever changing."

"Check this out! It even mentions Frisky in the newspaper article. Look, 'Dog assists in the arrest of a wanted criminal!'" Chris said, stroking the hero of the day and scratching behind his ears. Frisky barked in appreciation.

"Read us the whole article out loud, Chris,"

Kento said.

Chris read the newspaper article aloud to the others. They savored hearing the recap of every detail of their last adventure.

"I don't know about you, but I'm sure glad that Skeets is behind bars," Kento said with a sigh of relief, as the tale came to a close.

"I'm glad you put the coins in the safe in your parents' house, Chris—just in case one of his crooks tries to steal them again," Ziggy said.

"And may I be an old man before Skeets ever gets out again," Kento added.

"How much time in jail was he sentenced to?" Susan asked.

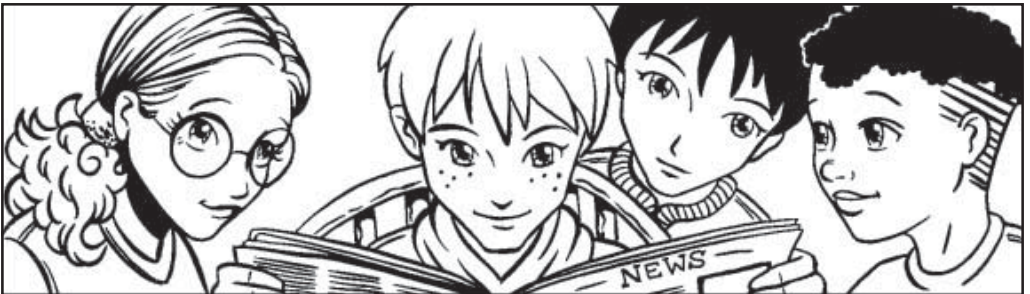
"The article didn't say. The sentencing trial will be next week," Chris said, pasting the article in Five Squad's scrapbook.

"Guys, why don't we play a game tonight or something. Anyone interested?" Ziggy asked.

"What game were you thinking of playing?" Kento replied.

"Pictionary?" Ziggy suggested.

"Not for me, thanks. I'm not in the mood for art



Recommended age: 9 years and up. (May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

at this moment. I only just finished my last school art project, and I'm not so good at drawing to begin with," Kento said.

"Maybe there's something else we could play," Chris suggested. "Hmmm, what about a card game or something?"

"I don't think we have any cards here," Susan said. "We had them at my house last, and I don't think we ever brought them back."

"Doesn't seem like there's much else to play at this point," Ziggy said, with a sigh and a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"I guess not," Kento said in agreement.

The clubhouse went silent for a few moments. Finally Ziggy ended the silence. "Has anyone seen Karen around?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. I haven't seen her since Gramps' funeral," Kento remarked.

"Oh dear, I meant to tell you guys," Susan said. "See, she usually sits next to me in school, but I haven't seen her since school began this week—three days so far. So I asked one of my teachers if she knew anything about where Karen was, and she said that her mother wasn't well, and so Karen was staying at home for a few days. Or something like that."

"That's sad," Ziggy said.

"Did you go to Karen's house to see her, though?" Chris asked.

"Yes, but when I went by there earlier this afternoon she wasn't there either," Susan said. "Her mother said that she had gone out in the morning and hadn't returned yet. I think her mother was a bit worried."

"I wonder why she didn't say anything to us about her mother being sick," Kento questioned thoughtfully.

"Maybe she wanted to think things through a bit. But I say we figure out where she is and how she's

doing," Susan said determinedly.

"Hmmm, where to look?" Ziggy asked, scratching his head.

"Let's split up and check different places where she might be," Kento suggested. "You know, her favorite hangouts. She's got to be somewhere."

Everyone agreed with the idea, and Chris put their plan into organized action. "Kento, how about you check at her house again. Then check all the regular places around that area where she likes to go—the roller rink, any stores around there—places like that.

"Ziggy, why don't you check with the manager of Ice Cream Palace to see if she's been there lately."

"Sure. I was getting hungry for some ice cream," Ziggy said with a playful grin.

"On second thought, maybe we should pair up, just to be safe. Kento and Ziggy, you could make a team. Oh, and why don't you take Frisky with you?"

"Sounds good. Two gets it done better," Kento said to Ziggy, as they gave each other a friendly handshake that involved a couple of hand flips and thumb wiggles.

"And three is better yet," Ziggy replied, as he stroked Frisky, who was now barking excitedly. He could tell he was about to get some action.

Chris turned to Susan. "You want to be my partner?" he asked.

"Sure. Where were you thinking of looking?" she asked.

"I thought of the park and the roller rink."

"Sounds good to me," Susan agreed.

"Let's meet back here at six,"

Chris said.

After saying a short prayer for their safekeeping and that they would find Karen soon, the two teams headed their separate directions. However, finding Karen turned out to be not nearly as easy as they had thought.

After more than an hour of look-



ing, Chris and Susan wondered if they would ever find Karen. They sat down on a deserted park bench, trying to figure out where to look next.

"We're getting nowhere," Chris said, "and we've run out of places to look. Got any ideas?"

Susan hesitated a moment, and then said, "Not really. And you might think I'm being weird or something by saying this, but..." She paused and then went silent.

"But what? Come on, Sue, what are you thinking? Tell me, we're friends."

"Well, it seems like we're making it hard on ourselves by trying to do it all on our own instead of asking the Lord to help us."

"You're right," Chris agreed. "Let's ask the Chief Detective. Like Gramps said, 'The eyes of the Lord are in every place.'"

No sooner had Chris closed his eyes than a picture came to his mind.

"I see a picture of a hill and the phrase comes to me. ... 'She is visiting me.'"

"What does the hill look like?"

"I see some bushes and some flowers and..." Chris' voice trailed off.

"And what?"

"Gravestones!"

"Spooky. What's it mean?"

"Of course!" Chris clapped his hands in sudden realization.

"Of course *what!*?"

"Karen must be visiting Gramps' gravesite at the Hail Mary Hill Cemetery."

"What have we got to lose? Let's go have a look."

Chris and Susan found Karen on the top of the hill crying. She saw them coming and tried to wipe her eyes and straighten her hair a little.

"Uh, hi, guys," she said, smiling weakly.

"Karen, we've been looking everywhere for you!



We've missed you. What are you doing here?" Chris asked.

"Nothing. I'm just visiting Gramps."

"But why are you crying?" Susan asked.

"Oh, it's just that my eyes hurt," Karen said, pretending.

"We heard that your mother was sick," Chris said. "So sorry about that."

Karen buried her face in her hands and couldn't hold the tears back any longer.

"Are you okay, Karen? Why don't you tell us what's up?" Chris said, placing his hand gently on Karen's knee.

After a moment's silence Karen sighed. "It's probably going to sound real stupid to you."

"Why?" the other two chorused.

"Last week I came home and I found out that my mom is sick ... real sick."

"I'm so sorry," Susan said quietly, as she put her arms around her friend."

After a moment's pause, Karen continued. "She has cancer. The doctors say that she only has a year to live—two at the most," Karen said in between sobs.

"Oh dear. But you know, people have recovered from cancer before. Who knows? Miracles still happen today," Chris said hopefully.

"Do you think so?"

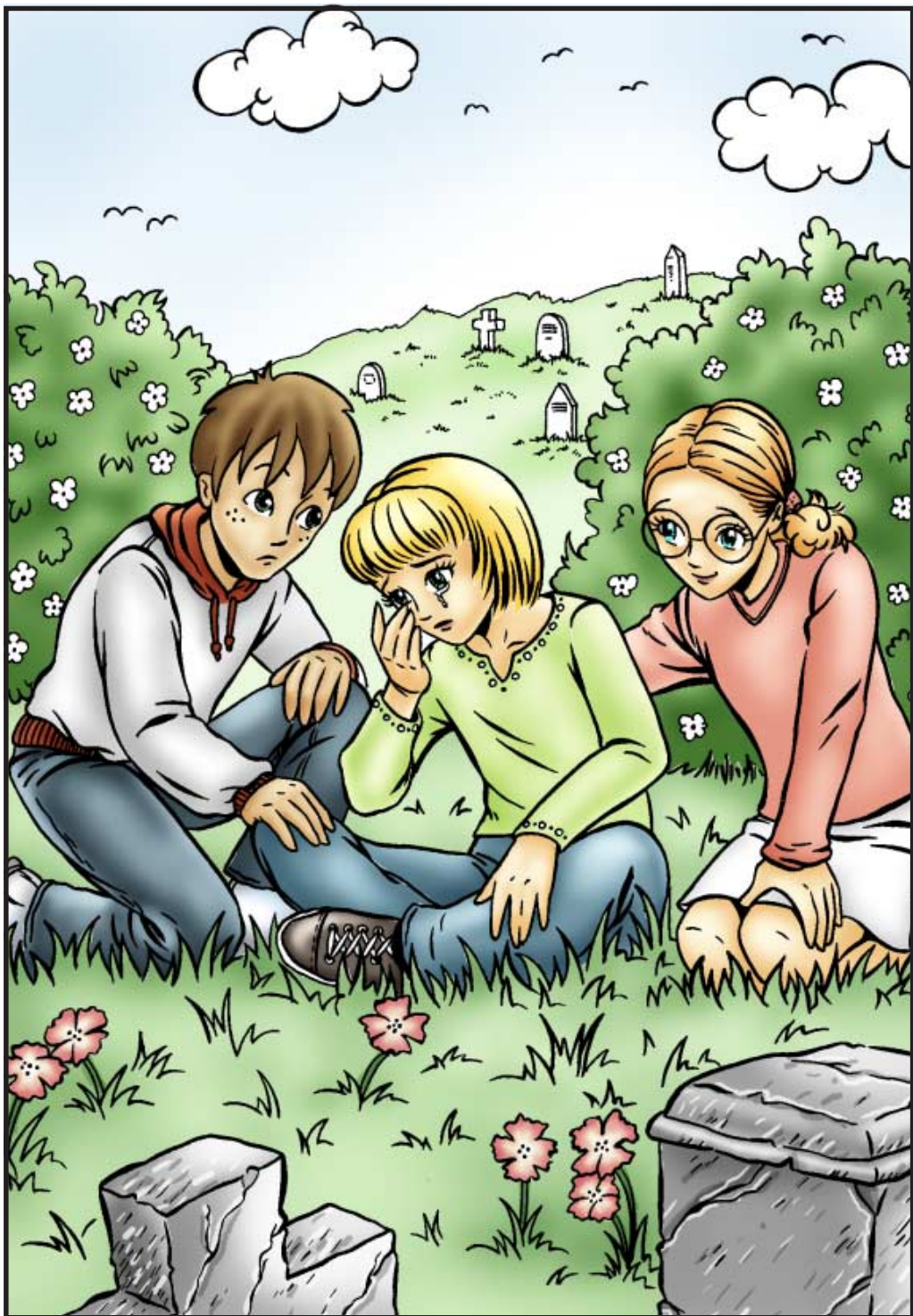
"I know so. There are all those stories in the Bible of people getting healed from all kinds of diseases."

"I suppose. But that happened a long time ago."

"Gramps told us about a lot of people he saw getting healed," Susan said.

At the mention of Gramps, Karen began crying again.

"Is there anything else you want to talk about?" Susan asked, terribly concerned about her friend.



Between sobs, Karen managed to answer. "I wish Gramps hadn't died so that he could still help us. Maybe he would know how to get through this. I miss him."

"I felt the same way about Gramps," Susan said. "But then I had to ask myself what I was sad about, because he's so much happier in Heaven, I'm sure."

"I miss him too," Chris said, with a slightly perplexed look on his face. He faced Karen. "If you don't mind me asking, why do you miss Gramps so much if you only met him once?"

Karen answered, "I know. It doesn't really make sense, but Gramps was so amazing. I never met anyone like him before. He was so kind to us—giving us those coins and all. And he taught us some really cool stuff. And I liked the stories you guys have told me about him."

"Gramps sure was an incredible guy," Chris said.

Karen continued. "I just wish that he was here so that he could tell me what to do about my mom."

"Karen, have you ever thought that maybe Gramps is looking out for us and helping us right now?" Susan suggested.

"You mean like a ghost?" Karen asked.

"Like a ghost, I suppose—a friendly ghost, of course," Chris said.

The thought of Gramps being a friendly ghost made the three laugh a bit, which came as a welcome relief for Karen. Then there was a moment of silence.

Karen brushed a straying tear from her cheek. "It doesn't seem fair that she has to be so sick. Why her? Why *my* mom?"

"I know how you feel," Chris said comfortingly. "You see, my real dad died when I was younger in a very bad accident. I was seven when it happened. I was so angry that he died, but my mom told me all



about how happy he was in his new life in Heaven. Of course, I thought it was a bummer, because I didn't have a dad any more, but she said that God would take care of us. And just a while after that, Jack showed up, and he's been like my dad ever since."

"I didn't know about your dad, Chris. I'm so sorry," Karen said in response. "But I don't really want another

mother."

"Your mother is very special," Susan said. "And you don't know for certain that she's going to die from this cancer. You have to think otherwise. Maybe God will do a miracle and heal her."

"We should definitely pray for your mother every day," Chris said.

"How is your dad taking it?" Susan asked.

"He's being so brave. Both my parents are taking it so well. They say we're just going to have to take it as it comes."

"I know what you mean," Susan said sympathetically.

There was another short silence as everyone had run out of words.

"Hey," Chris said suddenly, "the sun's just about gone. We shouldn't hang around here much longer. Why don't we all go to the Shack for a bit, play some games and stuff?"

"I'd like to, but I've got to study for my history test. I missed a couple days of school and I have to catch up."

"I've got an idea then," Chris said. "We can help you study, then afterwards we could ask our parents if we could watch a video."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Sure, you're our friend," Susan said with a smile.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Chris said. "Friends are meant to be there for you at all times—especially

when things get tough.”

Susan and Chris smiled and said in unison, “That’s us!”

“Who’s that running toward us?” Chris said, as he squinted to make out the figures heading in their direction.

“It’s Frisky leading Ziggy and Kento!” Susan exclaimed, as their friends came into sight.

Frisky was so glad to see them that he jumped all over Karen, barking his friendly hellos.

“Whew, we finally found you guys. Are we glad to see you!” Kento said in between pants. Ziggy took another thirty seconds to catch up with him.

Amidst several huffs, Ziggy asked, “Are you okay, Karen? Is everything under control?”

“We’re fine,” Chris said. “How did you find us?”

Kento and Ziggy related how they had looked in several places and hadn’t come to any conclusion of where to search next, when they asked the Lord, and He directed them to the cemetery.

The five set off for the Shack to study for the upcoming history test. Later on into the evening they watched a video as they ate some delicious homemade pizza Chris’ mom had made, complete with all the toppings. To go with it, they drank some cold and creamy avocado shake (like Gramps had taught them to make) that Susan whipped up with a little help from Ziggy.

The five friends were happy to be together again.

Six months later...

“Susan! Chris! You’ll never believe it!” Karen was running down the street, waving her arms at the two who were slowly wending their way down the sidewalk. Upon hearing Karen’s ecstatic call, they stopped and turned to find out what the elation was all about.

“What’s up?” Susan asked. “You look

real happy.”

“Oh, I am! I am!” Karen responded, nearly jumping up and down in happiness. “Remember I told you that my mom was going for a checkup today to see how the treatment she’s undergoing is working? The doctors had said that it was a pretty important checkup, because it would determine whether the medication was working or not.”

“And?” Chris asked, hoping Karen would get to the point quickly.

“She’s better!” Karen exclaimed.

“Really? Oh wow, that’s great news!” Susan said.

“The cancer’s not totally gone. It’s in remission*. She’s getting better though, and the doctors think she’s going to get over it. Rather than the cancer spreading, it’s gotten smaller, and has even disappeared altogether in some parts.”

“That’s a miracle!” Chris exclaimed.

“You bet it is,” Karen added with a smile. “Last night I was worried about the outcome of my mom’s checkup, afraid the cancer might have gotten worse! Then I got even sadder when I started thinking of what would happen if my mom were to go to be with Jesus. But then I was reminded by what you told me, Chris, about the Lord replacing what has been taken away, and that she would definitely be healthy and happy up in Heaven if she died, and I started feeling better.

“I then prayed and asked for a peaceful sleep and that whatever would happen with my mom, that I would trust Him to take care of me. I never slept so well! And now look, Mom’s getting better!”

The three of them hugged and let off a round of happy exclamations. They soon continued on their way to relate the happy news to their other friends.



*remission: the slowing of a disease

meet the squad...



CHRIS FULTON - 12 years old

Chris is the eldest member of the Five Squad. He maintains the Squad's clubhouse, known as "The Shack," in his large backyard in a quiet, well-to-do suburb of the growing town of Sheldon. He is an attentive student at school, and enjoys music and related subjects. Among the Squad he is generally one to take initiative when things start going wrong. He has a level head, knows how to pull the team together when they start to run wild with differing opinions or ideas, and is regarded as the natural leader of the group.



SUSAN GRIMBALDI - 12 years old

Susan was the one who first brought the Squad together by inviting them along on visits to see Gramps, a nearby neighbor and old friend of her grandfather's. She has a sympathetic nature, and loves reading and poetry. Susan has a keen sense for detecting trouble, though she is often shy or uncertain about voicing such feelings until she can pin down a specific reason for them.



KENTO YAMAZAKI - 10 years old

Kento is an adventurous boy with a talent for building and inventing things. He loves being outside, and doesn't like sitting still for too long, unless it is to study something for his inventions. He is best friends with Ziggy, who joined the Squad together with him. Kento also has a temper that easily flares up when something bothers him.



ZIGGY LOMACK - 8 years old

As the youngest member of the Squad, Ziggy has an inquisitive nature. The world is full of surprises for Ziggy, and he loves to learn about anything and everything. He loves nature, animals, the outdoors, and all sorts of other Boy Scout things—that is, so long as they don't take him too far away from a place where he can get something to eat, which is his next favorite pastime.



KAREN DALE - 11 years old

Karen is the newest member of the Squad, having joined them just before Gramps' passing. She comes from a well-to-do family who recently moved back to Sheldon from Clarksdale. She is smart and a good student, with a good business sense and some knowledge of computers and a host of other modern high-tech devices. She is still learning, though, that the ways of the Spirit can often be much more reliable than any of man's worldly wisdom or technology.

FRISKY - Labrador retriever

Frisky became an honorable sidekick to the Squad after Gramps, his former master, passed away. Welcomed into Ziggy's home, this yellow-coated Labrador retriever has proven himself a valuable member of the Five Squad team.

FIVE SQUAD

Kidnapping in Clarksdale



Issue 113



It was the first day of spring break, and a warm and sunny one too—just what Chris, Susan, Kento, Ziggy, and Karen had been praying for all week. If the weather was good, their parents had promised they would be allowed to go camping. The children had been a little worried when it started raining late Friday morning, but by Saturday afternoon the rain had stopped and the sky had cleared.

Now the Squad was camped out under a group of trees in the middle of Pine Ridge Forest, an hour's drive outside of their hometown of Sheldon. While they had brought enough supplies to last them through the week, Kento and Ziggy were intent on trying to “survive” for as long as they could on what they could find and catch in the wild.

“There are so many things you can catch in the wilderness,” Ziggy had said as they were traveling to their camp an hour earlier.

It didn't matter that this “wilderness” was little more than an untamed forest about an hour from home, and that the local ranger would be dropping by to check on them from time to time,

as their parents had arranged. To Ziggy it was still a forest full of adventures waiting to be found and secrets waiting to be discovered—a wilderness challenging him to the very best of his survival skills.

The sun was now beginning to set as the group sat around a small campfire surrounded by a circle of stones, munching sandwiches that the girls had prepared while the boys had been setting up the tents.

Kento pulled out his little radio and tuned it to the local news broadcast. He set the radio down next to him and reached for another sandwich.

“I thought you were going to be catching all your own food on this trip!” Karen taunted him with a teasing smile.

“Well, we haven't exactly had time to go out trapping yet,” Kento said.

Ziggy, quick to agree, reached in and grabbed two sandwiches at the same time, stuffing a bite of both into his mouth.

“Hey Zig, take it easy,” Chris said with a laugh. “We're out here to relax. Those sandwiches aren't about to get up and run off like scared rabbits.”



Recommended age: 9 years and up. (May be read by younger children at the parents' discretion.)

"Shhh!" Kento said, picking up the radio and turning up the volume.

There was a bit of crackling before the announcer's voice became clear.

"...the Clarksdale Police Department is continuing to hunt for clues in the Farell kidnapping case. It has now been two days since Jason Farell was first reported missing..."

"Jason?" Karen gasped.

The others looked at her.

"Who's J—" Chris started to ask, but Karen quickly raised a finger to her lips and turned her attention back to the radio.

"...So far the only sign of intention or demand that the Farell family has received from the kidnappers was a Polaroid picture of their son tied to a chair with duct tape covering his mouth. The Farell family owns several businesses, including the Farell Jewelry stores. It is not hard to imagine that the ransom demand will likely be astronomical. In other news today..."

As the news broadcast moved on to items of lesser interest to the Squad, the others all turned to look at Karen.

"Who's Jason Farell?" Chris asked again.

"I used to go to school with him in Clarksdale. I didn't really like him. He's one of those rich kids who thinks the universe revolves around himself. I don't think he had any real friends. Not surprisingly, I guess. He's very snotty, and acts like he's better than everybody else. I doubt many kids there are feeling sorry for him. He's probably getting what he deserves."

"That's not a very nice thing to say," Susan answered. "Who knows what could be happening to him right now?"



"Oh, don't worry," Karen said. "His parents are so rich, they'll probably pay the ransom right away to get him back. I don't think he has anything to worry about."

"I'm not so sure about that," Chris said. "I've heard of plenty of kidnappings where the person never came back even after large ransoms were paid. We should pray for him."

"That sounds like a good idea," Susan agreed. "Dear Jesus," she prayed, "please watch over Jason and keep him safe. Help the kidnappers to make their demands known soon, and send the Farell family a sign that You will bring Jason back to them safe and unharmed."

"Amen," all the others chimed in.

Shortly after, the campfire was carefully extinguished, and the five headed to their tents for the night.

* * *

The next morning Kento and Ziggy were the first to emerge from the tent they shared with Chris. Both had nearly empty backpacks strapped to their back and a couple of stuffed pouches hanging from their waists.

"So you really think we're gonna catch anything?" Ziggy asked.

"Sure we will. We'll show Karen. She's not gonna tease us about eating her sandwiches anymore. Wait and see. She'll be begging us for a taste of the fresh barbecued fish we'll be having for dinner."

"Good ... so long as it doesn't take too long. I'm already starving!"

Ziggy turned to Frisky, who was also awake at this early hour of the morning, and had watched the boys climb out of the tent

with all their gear.

"Here, Frisky! Here, Boy!" Ziggy called.

Frisky jumped to life at this call from his young master, and came bounding over to where the boys stood, his tail wagging wildly as Ziggy petted him.

"We're off for the hunt! Wanna come with us?" Ziggy asked the dog.

Frisky gave a quick bark, and then dashed ahead of the boys into the forest.

They spent more than an hour roaming about, looking first for this, and then for that, checking their books and charts to identify any edible nuts and berries, and especially looking out for any that were described as poisonous. By and by they came to the river that ran through the heart of the forest, where the boys quickly set to work constructing several fish-traps from bits of rope from their pouches and gathered sticks. These would be placed along the river's edge, and would hopefully catch them some fish before the day was over.

They were distracted by a sudden loud bark from Frisky, and looked up to see him dash wildly into some bushes.

"Frisky!" Ziggy called.

"What do you think he's up to?" Kento asked.

"Maybe he's picked up an animal's scent,"

Ziggy answered.

Kento and Ziggy looked at each other for a moment, getting the same thought at the same time. "Cool! A hunt!" they exclaimed in unison.

Both boys broke into a run, following the sound of Frisky's barking. Finally, huffing and puffing, they found Frisky barking and pawing frantically at a small hole in the ground.



"Hey, Frisky, let it go!" Ziggy called out to him.

"That animal's never gonna come out of there as long as you keep barking at it!"

Frisky pulled back, and walked back to Ziggy's side with a dejected whimper.

Ziggy looked up to see if he could get a sense of where they were. There was a small dirt road a short distance away that looked like it led back to the main road. That would certainly make it easier for them to find their way back to the encampment.

"Ziggy, look here," Kento called suddenly.

Kento was crouched on the ground, inspecting a scrap of paper.

Ziggy walked over. "What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. It looks like part of a letter, but there are so few words it's hard to tell anything else about it. Just 'I wish I' and 'just want' and 'nobody seems'—the others I can't make out."

"It sounds sad, whatever it is," Ziggy commented.

"I suppose it does," Kento answered, shrugging his shoulders, and letting the scrap fall back where he had found it.

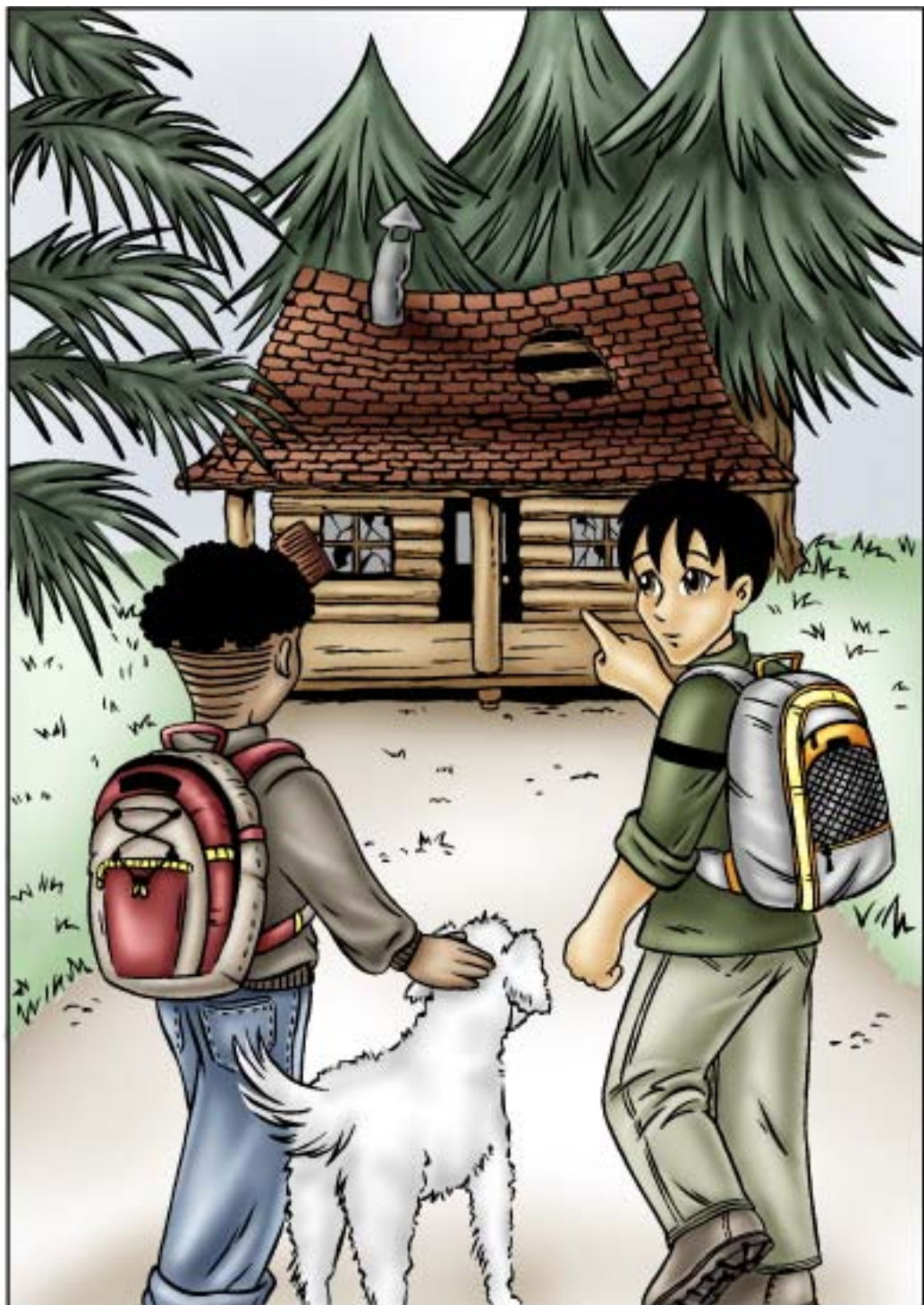
"We should probably pick it up," Ziggy suggested. "I'm sure the ranger would appreciate some help keeping the forest clean."

"I guess so," Kento answered, picking the piece back up again.

A short distance up the road, Ziggy caught sight of another piece of paper.

"Here's another one," he said, picking it up and stuffing it in one of his pouches that was now empty.

"Look . . . there's more in that direction," Kento said as he pointed down a small trail to the side. "Some people just throw



their trash anywhere. Sure takes away from the feeling of adventure. You think you're out in the wild, away from civilization, and then you find trash like this. It's such a shame."

"Well, let's just pick these up and head on back to camp."

But with each new scrap they picked up, they would see another one, further down the path.

"It's like a treasure hunt—only it's a trash hunt," Kento said.

"You think there's anything at the end of it?" Ziggy asked, suddenly curious.

"I don't know," Kento answered. "But there's one way to find out."

By the time they had reached the end of the paper trail, Ziggy's pouch was full of the scraps, and the boys found themselves in a small clearing. In the middle of the clearing stood an old logger's cabin, primitively built, and now dilapidated and deserted.

"Guess we've found our treasure," Kento said, a little disappointed at the empty shack they had stumbled across.

"Maybe now that we've got all these bits of that letter, we can put it together and find out what it was about," Ziggy said, still excited about the potential for adventure.

"It's probably nothing," Kento said with a bored sigh. Even Frisky looked disappointed with where this little hunt had led them. He nudged Ziggy back towards the path they had come from, as if he was eager to get back to the camp.

"Okay, let's go. My scotch tape is back at the camp anyway," Ziggy said. And so the boys turned around and headed back to look for their camp and to find out

what the rest of the Squad was up to.

* * *

"There's a date on top of one of the pages. Looks like this was written almost a week ago," Ziggy said, looking over the two scotched up sheaves of paper that he had managed to piece together.

"What about a name?" Chris asked.

"No. It's not finished. It looks like it could be an essay or something, written in silver ink," Ziggy answered.

"Funny that it's not all soggy. After all, it rained not too long ago," Susan said from over Ziggy's shoulder, where she was glancing at the paper.

"Maybe there are other campers in the forest, though the ranger did tell us we had the whole place to ourselves," Chris said.

"Silver ink?" Karen asked, coming over as well.

"Yes. Why?" Ziggy asked.

"Oh, nothing," Karen answered. "But it would be an amazing coincidence."

"What would?" Kento and Susan asked at the same time.

"Well, it's just that Jason Farell always used to write with a silver pen in class," Karen answered.

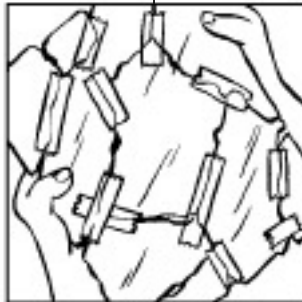
"The kidnapped kid?" Ziggy whispered, his eyes wide. "You think it could be from him?"

"I doubt it," Karen continued. "We're nowhere near Clarksdale. What does it say?"

Ziggy handed Karen the scotched bits of paper.

Karen scanned over the page, stopping at a particular sentence and reading it aloud.

"I wish I could find someone to be friends with, not like the other kids who just want to be



around me because of money. There are times when nobody seems to care who I really am, what I really feel inside. If they did, maybe they wouldn't envy me so much."

"Poor kid," Chris said. "I wonder if it's anyone we know."

"It could be anyone. There are at least seven schools that I know of in Sheldon, and plenty of rich kids in them," Karen answered.

"Like Jason?" Ziggy asked again.

"I don't think this could be Jason. Jason loves to make people envy him. Even his silver pen, he was always flashing it around, bragging that it was actually made of real silver. He never let anybody else borrow it or even touch it."

"But did it write in silver?" Kento asked.

"Yes, he had silver ink refills for his pen," Karen answered.

"Well, whoever wrote this sounds like they could use a friend," Susan said.

"What was it that Gramps used to say about things happening by accident?" Chris asked.

"Nothing happens by accident to those who are God's children," Kento quoted.

Chris continued. "I get a feeling that whoever wrote this could use our help. Maybe we should go back to this logger's cabin, and see if we can find any other clues about who might have written this."

The others quickly agreed, and set about zipping up their tents and getting ready for the half-hour hike by the road to where the old shack was.

Before setting out, the group gathered together to pray. It was a habit for them now. Ever since their adventure with Skeets Manchester of Coin World, they had been very mindful of not going anywhere, or setting off on any new



adventures, without first praying that Jesus would go with them.

"Dear Jesus," Kento began, "maybe You had some purpose in letting us find these scraps of paper. We don't know what or who we'll find when we go back to this cabin. But if there is something You want us to do about this letter,

and whoever wrote it, we ask that You'll help us to find out what it is."

Karen continued, "And protect us as we hike through the forest. Help us not to get lost, or to get bitten by any dangerous insects or spiders."

"And help no raccoons to break into our camp looking for food while we're away. Amen," Ziggy said, ending the prayer.

"Amen," the others echoed.

There was a moment of silence before Susan spoke up.

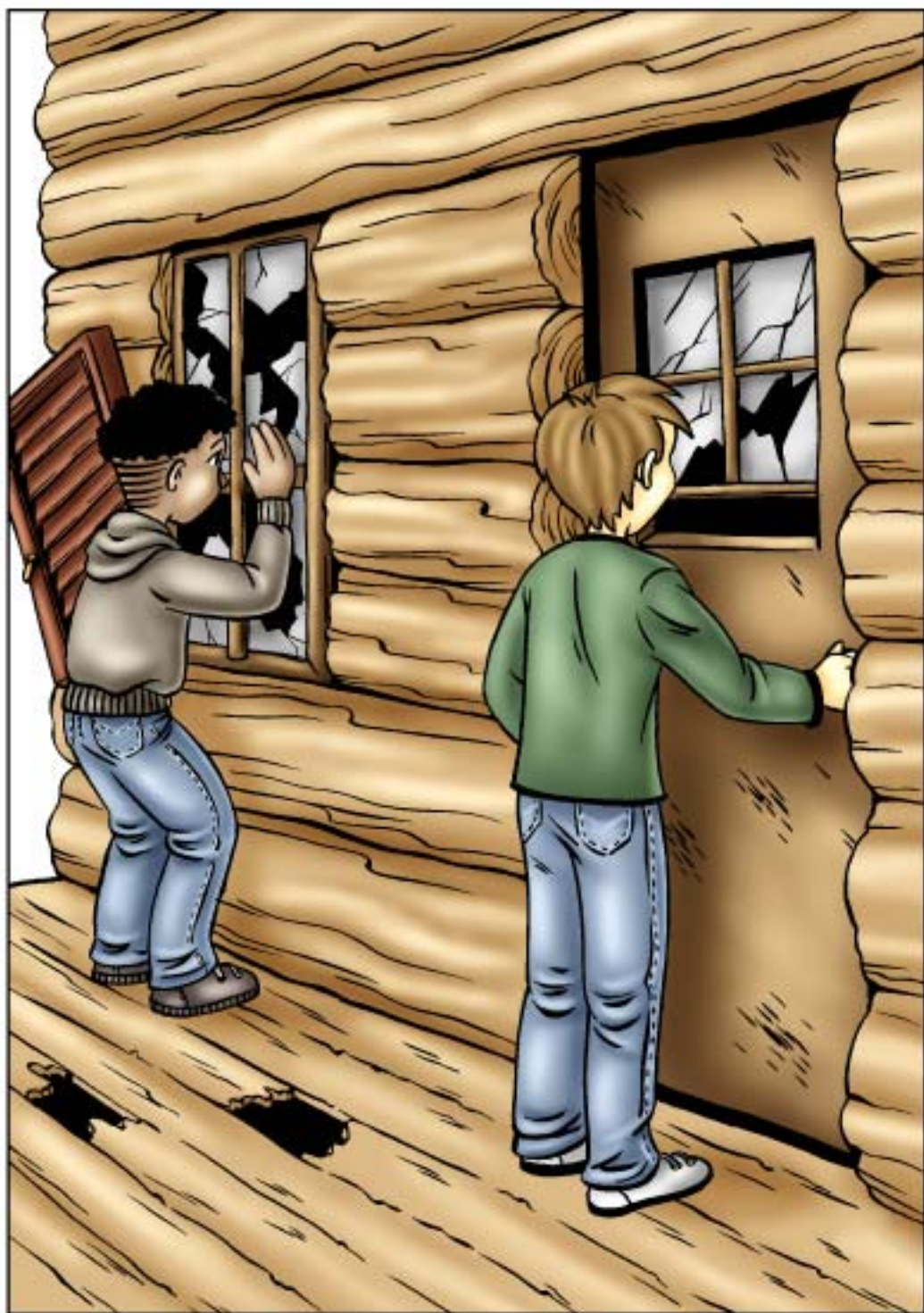
"For some reason I keep thinking of this verse that Gramps used to quote, something about walking circumspectly, because the days are evil."

"Circus Speckly?" Ziggy asked, his eyes wide. "What does any of this have to do with a circus? Is there a circus in town?"

"Not that I know of," Chris answered with a small laugh. "Circumspectly," Chris continued, pronouncing the word slowly for Ziggy's benefit, "means to be looking around, keeping an eye on things, and being careful about where you go."

"I keep thinking of that other verse you told me about, Susan," Karen said. "You know, the one about all things working together for good. I have a feeling that whatever we're going to find, it's going to be good for something—or someone."

"Then let's go, and let's be careful," Chris said.



* * *

"This is the path we found the papers scattered along," Kento said, stopping to the side of the main path and pointing to a small trail that led deeper into the section of forest they were standing in front of.

"It hardly looks like much of a trail, but it's obviously been used a few times," Chris said.

"The old cabin is at the end of it," Ziggy answered, leading the way along the small trail. Soon the team arrived at the dilapidated old building. The front porch by the main door looked like it was about to collapse, and the doorframe did not look like it would be holding the door steady for much longer. There were a few partly broken windows all around the shack, and a patched roof with a crooked and rusty small chimney pipe poking through the top of it.

"Let's look around, and see if we can find anything interesting," Chris said.

"I don't know what you expect to find," Kento answered. "I mean, it's just an old cottage, and it looks like it hasn't been used in years."

"But this is where the paper trail ended, right?" Karen asked. "So somebody else has obviously been here recently, and we're trying to discover who."

Ziggy had already carefully crept across the front porch to try the door. Though it felt loose on its hinges, it was still locked. If he would force it, he would most likely break the door, and since they didn't know who this cottage belonged to, they decided not to try it. Some of the glass in the windows was broken. Even though Chris tried to reach through an open part of a window to undo a

latch, the window wouldn't open, so there was no easy way inside.

But from what they could tell through the dusty and broken windows, the shack was largely empty, with only a few bits of old and dusty furniture visible inside, and nothing in the cupboards, that seemed to have lost their doors and shelves years earlier.

So the kids soon turned their attention to the outside of the building and the small clearing that surrounded it.

Suddenly there was a loud gasp, and everyone turned to look at Susan, who was crouching on the ground just around the side of the front porch.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed.

"What?" the others asked in unison, running to her side.

Susan stood up, holding a scuffed-up silver pen in her hand. On its wide clip, a name was clearly and ornately inscribed: Jason Farell.

"Let me see!" Karen said, taking the pen. "I can't believe it.—It was Jason!"

"So what are we going to do?" Kento asked, looking back and forth from one to the other.

"We're going to get out of here is what we're gonna do," Karen answered. "If those kidnappers have anything to do with this place, I don't want them to find us here."

"I guess this must be their hideout," Chris said.

"We should tell the police what we've found here," Kento suggested.

"And we'd better stop touching that pen and put it in a plastic bag like detectives always do on TV," Ziggy suggested, pulling a hidden sandwich from his pocket,



and opening the plastic bag it was wrapped in.

Karen raised her eyebrows at the sight of the sandwich, but decided it wasn't the moment to tease Ziggy about eating only "wild" food.

"Here, use this," Ziggy said, shaking the crumbs out of the bag and handing it to Karen.

Karen slipped the pen inside the bag, and slipped the bag inside her pocket.

"I suggest we cover our tracks here as much as possible," Chris suggested. "Then let's get going. The sooner we get back to camp, the better I'm going to feel."

* * *

Back at camp, the Squad sat around discussing what to do next.

"We need to alert the police as quickly as possible," Susan said.

"I agree," Kento added.

"Two of us could bike to the ranger's house, and have him phone the police and tell them what we've found," Chris suggested.

"Good thinking. So who's going to go?" Karen asked.

"I suggest Chris and Kento.—They're fastest on the bikes," Susan suggested. "The rest of us can wait here."

"Sounds good to me," Kento said.

After a quick prayer for safety, the two boys set off while Ziggy and the girls decided to play a quiet board game among themselves.

The boys were back half an hour later.

"How'd it go?" Karen asked.

"The ranger isn't there—at least we didn't see his Jeep, and there wasn't any sign of him around the station. We're going to bike to the



bus stop and catch the next bus back to Sheldon. It'll probably take a few hours, but at least we'll get there, and we can personally show the police our evidence. But if the ranger shows up here in the next hour, tell him what we found, and have him phone the police and tell them to

be expecting us."

"Okay," Susan answered. With that, the boys dashed off on their bikes again.

After they had left, there was a short silence. Then Ziggy said, "I'm going back to the cabin."

"What?" Susan asked.

"Maybe the kidnappers will come back, and we can see what they're up to."

"Yeah, or they can kidnap you too," Karen said.

"I wouldn't go that close," Ziggy protested.

"With my binoculars I can keep an eye on the place from a safe distance, like up in a tree where they'd never think of looking."

"Then I'll go with you," Karen said.

Susan looked a little nervous. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea," she said.

"Don't worry, we'll be careful," Ziggy said.

"Yeah, Ziggy knows how to survive in a forest—don't you, Ziggy?" Karen said. "We'll be fine."

"So what am I supposed to do, then?" Susan asked.

"You just wait here for the others to get back," Karen answered.

"Frisky will stay here and keep an eye on you—right, Frisky?" Ziggy said.

The dog gave a quick bark, then sat beside Susan.

"Uh . . . okay," Susan said weakly.

Karen dashed into her tent and slipped on

a pair of brown pants and an old army-green sweatshirt.

"Be careful!" Susan called after the two as they walked into the underbrush that surrounded their camp.

"We will," they called back. Within moments they blended into the surrounding forest, and were gone.

"Oh, Jesus," Susan whispered in the quiet that followed, "help them to be careful, and keep them out of trouble."

The silence answered her with a comforting thought that brought peace to her heart: "I will care for My Own!"

* * *

"Give me a leg up," Ziggy said, standing by a tree he thought would be suitable for spying on the cottage.

Karen pushed a knee against the tree's bark, cupped her hands together, and gave Ziggy the push he needed to clamber up to some low-hanging branches.

He perched himself there as comfortably as he could and pulled out the binoculars. Karen was soon perched on a set of branches on the other side of the tree trunk.

"What are you doing up here?" Ziggy asked with surprise.

"What? You think I can't climb a tree as well as you? I'm not about to let you have all the fun! Let me have a turn with those," she said, reaching for the binoculars.

"Whatever," Ziggy answered, handing the binoculars over.

From her spot, Karen could see the cabin clearly through the binoculars.

Karen's attention was suddenly

drawn to a small, ground-level grate built into a small wall of cemented rock that seemed to be part of the foundation the cabin was built on. She thought she had seen some movement, and sharpened the focus on the binoculars to get a better look.

"Ziggy," she whispered. "I saw something move underneath the house."

"Underneath the cabin? What do you mean?"

"Shh!" she hissed. "Something . . . or someone . . . is there—in the basement."

"It has a basement?" Ziggy asked in surprise.

"Here, take a look—at that grate in the stone wall on the side of the house."

Ziggy took the binoculars and focused on the spot Karen had pointed out.

"You're right," he said. "I saw something move, too. We've got to get a closer look!"

"What? Are you crazy? What if it's the kidnapers?" Karen asked, almost frantic.

"And what if it's Jason, trapped there by himself, locked up, and this is our only chance to rescue him?" Ziggy persisted. "I'm not saying I'm going to break down the door just yet. I'm just going to sneak over for a closer look."

Karen was about to answer, but Ziggy had already clambered down from the tree. Karen quickly followed, and the two of them made their way closer to the cabin.

"I don't see anybody around," Karen whispered as they drew closer through some bushes to the side of the cottage where they had seen the grating.

"Stay here and keep watch," Ziggy commanded. "I'm going to crawl closer."

He quickly got down on the ground, snaking underneath the





bushes until he was almost right next to the grate. Then he pulled himself out and crawled right up to it.

Karen heard his short gasp and without thinking, ran over to get a look for herself.

"It's him!" she almost shouted, peering through the grating and seeing a blindfolded figure stumbling around inside, his hands tied and his mouth taped. "He's alone! We've got to help him!" Karen called out.

"The opening to the basement must be inside!" Ziggy said, and dashed to the front door, followed closely by Karen. With a quick heave, they threw themselves against the door. It splintered loose from its lock, and opened with a loud crash.

They looked around quickly, and after some searching found a hatch underneath a rug next to the table. Within moments the latch was open, and Ziggy and Karen clambered down the ladder into the dark room.

Jason was startled by the sudden noise and pulled himself to a corner like a frightened animal.

"Jason . . . it's me, Karen—Karen Dale—and Ziggy. We're friends. We've come to rescue you."

She spoke softly as she approached him.

Jason shrank further back into his corner.

Ziggy looked around the room. There wasn't much in it but empty, old and dusty shelves, a rough mat in the corner, and scraps of food scattered all about. He kicked around the dirt on the floor a bit. Then his eyes caught sight of something interesting. He bent down to get a closer look, and saw an empty syringe. He looked further and saw several other syringes lying around on the floor.



His attention was turned back to the others by a loud and sudden yelp.

"OWWWW!"

Karen had pulled the thick band of tape from Jason's mouth, and now moved to the knots of rope binding his hands.

As soon as Jason's hands were free he rubbed his sore mouth.

"You could have been a little more gentle," he murmured, as he looked up to get a better look at his rescuers. "Where am I?" he asked, once his eyes had adjusted enough to allow him to see Karen and Ziggy.

"We're in Pine Ridge Forest, a ways out of Sheldon," Karen answered. "We're camped nearby, and Ziggy here with Kento, another friend of ours, followed a trail of shredded paper that led us to this place."

"You found those?" Jason asked. "I wondered if that would work. It was as much a chance that people could have thought those scraps were garbage."

"Well, we never imagined they had anything to do with you," Ziggy replied. "At first we did think someone had just carelessly dropped their trash, but we followed the paper trail and that's what led us to this cabin. So we went and got Karen and the rest of our friends and came back here looking for clues, and found your pen lying outside. Some of our friends have already gone to contact the police. They should be here in two hours or so."

"Two hours?" Jason blurted out.

"Sheldon isn't that close to here, and the ranger wasn't home. They took a couple of bikes to the nearest bus stop," Ziggy explained.

"One thing's for sure," Karen said, "your kidnapers sure chose a good spot if they were looking for remote. I bet they weren't counting on a few friendly campers being somewhere nearby. But speaking of camps, we'd better get you to ours. There's no telling when your kidnapers might. . ."



All three suddenly fell silent as the noise of an approaching car sounded through the small basement room.

Ziggy dashed to the grate as they heard car doors opening and slamming, and footsteps running towards the shack.

"It . . . doesn't look like it's the police," was all Ziggy could say before a dark shadow appeared over the hatch above them, and a figure dropped down into the basement room.

The man scanned the room and immediately caught site of Karen and Jason in the corner, and then Ziggy by the grating. A pleased smirk formed on his face.

"Well, well, what have we here?" he said with a sneer.

A second figure climbed down after him.

"He's still here, Wilma," the man said, "and it looks like he's made himself some friends."

The woman who had dropped in after him sighed. "Great, more hostages—just what we need," she muttered. She pulled a gun from out of the back of her jeans and pointed it at them. "Okay, no funny moves. We're all going upstairs, and then we're going for a ride. We'll think about what to do next once we're away from this place."

* * *

"Where are Ziggy and Karen?" Chris asked, hopping out of the police car to find Susan sitting dejectedly in the empty camp.

"I don't know," Susan answered as she shrugged her shoulders and tussled the hair on Frisky's head. The dog gave a short whimper.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Kento asked, his voice frantic.

"They left to keep watch on the cabin, in case they'd see anything. They're probably still there."

Lieutenant Gibbs stepped out of the car.

"Hello, Susan. It's good to see you again. I understand you guys might have helped to crack another case."

"We'd better get going," Chris said. "It looks like Ziggy and Karen were hoping to crack the case by themselves."

Lieutenant Gibbs nodded. "Just show us the way."

The boys got in the police squad car with Lieutenant Gibbs and Warren, and Susan and Frisky jumped into Officer Hooper's car. Kento quickly directed Warren along the road and path that led to the cottage.

* * *

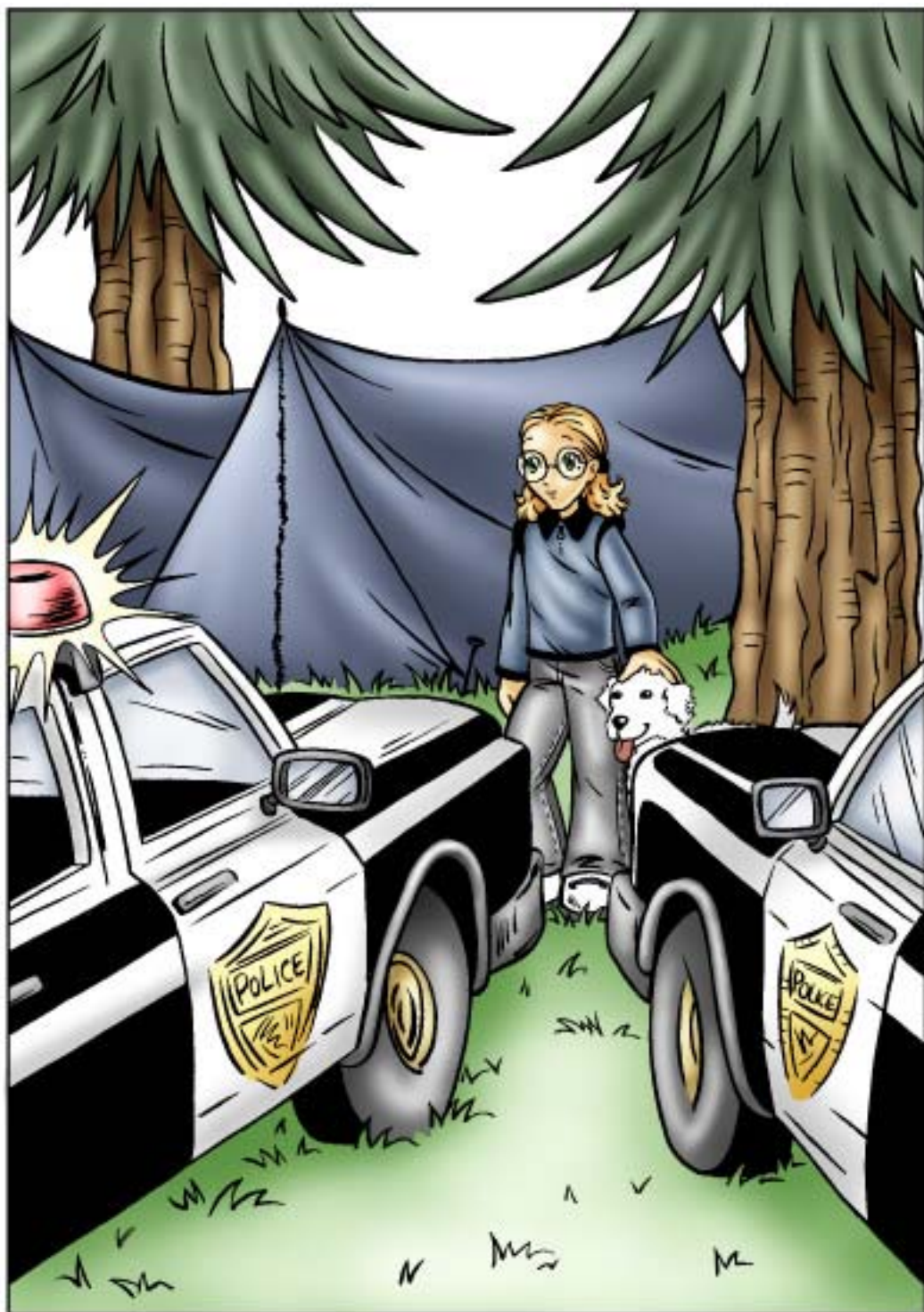
They all saw it at the same time—the splintered, broken door, the muddy tracks of a car that had taken off in a hurry, and signs of a scuffle in the leaves on the ground.

Officer Hooper and Chris did a quick search around the outside of the cabin, while Kento and Susan followed Lieutenant Gibbs into the shack, where they quickly discovered the open hatch to the empty basement.

"Karen! Ziggy!" Kento shouted.

There was no response.

"Whoever was here, they've left now," Lieutenant Gibbs said.



Officer Hooper and Chris soon joined them, and Officer Hooper's attention was soon drawn to the syringes on the floor.

He slipped his hand into a latex glove and picked up the syringe, carefully sniffing the remains of one. "Some sort of drug," he said. "They've probably been keeping their captive under sedation. We'll have to get this potion analyzed by the lab."

"The real question is," Gibbs continued, "where did they go, and when? How far could they be by now if they left by car, which it appears they did?"

Kento was looking around the room himself.

"Officer Hooper, may I borrow your flashlight?" he asked.

"Sure," Hooper said, handing it over.

Kento moved back to the corner he had been studying, just under the grate.

"I think I've found something," he said.

"What is it?" Gibbs asked, coming closer.

"There's something drawn in the dust here, sort of hasty. It's a line of dots and dashes . . . Morse code or something, it looks like."

"Ziggy!" Chris said immediately.

"Can you read it?" Hooper asked as Chris crouched at the spot.

"There isn't much. It looks like random letters and numbers. Not a message at all.

"Letters and numbers, you say?" Hooper asked. "Could it be a license plate number? There was obviously a car out there. Maybe your friend saw it, and left us a clue."

"Two zero five, KXZ," Chris read aloud.

"Sounds like a license number to me. Let's go!" Gibbs ordered.

One by one they left the basement. Gibbs was the first back at his police car, and he began speaking into the radio.

"Station code 12. Hideout of Clarksdale kid-nappers located. They have fled the area, presumably in a vehicle. Need roadblocks along a 30-mile radius from Pine Ridge Forest. Check for license number two zero five, KXZ—that's two zero five, kilo x-ray zulu. Advise caution. They may be holding children as hostages. Recommend approach procedure 4-12."

"Roger," a tinny voice on the other end of the radio said, confirming the call. "That's roadblocks around Pine Ridge Forest on the lookout for vehicle bearing the license number two zero five, kilo x-ray zulu, procedure 4-12. We'll get right on it!"

"Thank you," Gibbs radioed back, then hung the microphone back up, but left the frequency open so he could monitor the progress on the roadblocks.

"Well, children, you'd best hop in. We've got some reports of missing children to fill in, and parents to notify."

* * *

"What now? A roadblock? I can't believe this," the man in the front seat said as he opened the glove compartment and pulled out a gun.

"Put that away, you fool!" Wilma shouted, as she slowed the car. "We have no idea what they're looking for. Let's stay calm, and if things get hot we'll just step on the gas and break through the barricades."

The man stuffed the gun under his seat, where he could get to it fast in case he would need it. He shot a quick glance back at the two drugged children draped over each other on the back seat. They looked like they were sleeping as peacefully as ever.

Within moments, the car pulled to a halt in front of the two police cars and several metal barricade fences. A policeman walked up to her window, while another man with a dog began circling the car.

Wilma rolled down her window for the officer who was now peering into the car.

"Good afternoon, officer," she said casually.

"Good afternoon, ma'am, sir," the officer responded politely, bending down to look at the other occupants in the car. "Where are you headed?"

"Back to Hallewick."

"Hallewick? That's quite far from here."

"Yeah, it sure is. We've been camping here with our niece and her friend. They're pretty tired, though—were up almost all night stargazing. They've been sleeping solid for the past hour. Is there a problem, officer?"

"There could be. We're on the lookout for an escaped convict. He is most likely armed and dangerous, and might try to use this road to get somewhere."

"We haven't seen anyone, but we'll keep a lookout."

"See that you do—and don't pick up any hitchhikers, especially not with those kids in the back. You never know who it could be."

"Thanks, officer. We'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"Very well. I won't keep you any longer, then," the officer said with a polite smile. "Have a good trip, and drive carefully."

The officer stepped back and waved for one of the other policemen to remove the barricade fences. The man with the dog had also finished his circle around the car, and gave the first officer an all-clear sign.

Wilma rolled up her window and inched her car slowly past the barricade. At last, the barricade was behind them, and out of sight.



She heaved an audible sigh of relief. "There—that wasn't so difficult, was it?" she said, with a condescending glance at the man next to her.

"I guess," the man answered, casting a nervous look out the back window, then at Ziggy and Karen on the back seat. "Funny, though," he continued. "That officer didn't even think it suspicious that these kids don't look one bit like us, or that we were ending our vacation when spring break is only just beginning."

"You worry too much, Doug. We're through, we're on our way, and who knows who we've picked up now, and what sort of ransom we could get for them if we play our cards right."

"I'm sure that's good and all, but you'd better step on the gas, because as soon as these kids are reported as missing, that officer is going to know exactly what way we've gone."

"Oh, step on the gas, huh, and risk getting pulled over for speeding? Forget it, Doug. Just let me do the thinking and planning on this, okay? Those Farells are going to pay for having fired me and for ruining my profitable career of house-keeping. . . ."

With a little inventory stealing on the side, Doug thought to himself with a smirk.

" . . . and nobody—not these darn kids, and not you—will stand in my way. Do you hear?"

"Whatever you say, Wilma," Doug answered. "You're the boss." *As long as you give me my share when we're all done with this,* he added mentally.

For the next half-hour the only noise was the drone of the radio as Wilma and Doug listened carefully for any mention of missing children, or updates on the Clarksdale kidnapping case. But there were none.

In the middle of an advertising jingle, however, both Wilma and Doug became aware of a new sound—a steady hiss that seemed to be coming from one of their tires. Before either of them could say anything, there was the unmistakable sound of the wheel rim riding on pavement.



while the officer was talking to the driver. Then once they left, the police radioed ahead for reinforcements to be waiting at the next service station."

Chris picked up the story. "So when the car got close to the station, the helicopter with us in it wasn't too far behind. Gibbs acti-

vated the remote, the tire deflated, and the lady got out to go to the service station . . ."

"Where the police were waiting to arrest her," Susan added enthusiastically.

"Then when the guy got tired of waiting and stepped out of the car to check up on the lady, the police got him too, and the rest of you were safe," Chris said, finishing the update.

"Too bad we were asleep for it all," Ziggy lamented.

"How about Jason? How's he?" Karen asked.

"He'll be fine," Lieutenant Gibbs answered, walking into the room just then. "In fact, here he is right now."

"Hi Jason," the five chorused.

"Hi guys," Jason said. He hesitated a moment, then continued, "I . . . I just wanted to say thank you for saving my life."

"It was Jesus who saved your life," Susan answered.

"We probably didn't make all the best moves, and we forgot to ask Jesus about everything," Karen added. "Like we probably shouldn't have gone into the cabin on our own. That wasn't super smart. But Jesus worked it all out in the end. This whole adventure could have ended badly if we hadn't prayed."

"Well, in any case, thank you for what you did."

"So you'll be going back to Clarksdale now, I imagine?" Karen asked.

"No!" Wilma shouted, slamming her hands onto the steering wheel as the car came to a stop on the side of the road. "Just what we needed!"

"Look, up ahead!" Doug said, pointing to a building just up the road. "Looks like a service station."

"I'll go check," Wilma said. "You stay here, and be careful. And if anyone asks, the back trunk is jammed, all right? We can't get anything out of there."

"Got it," Doug answered.

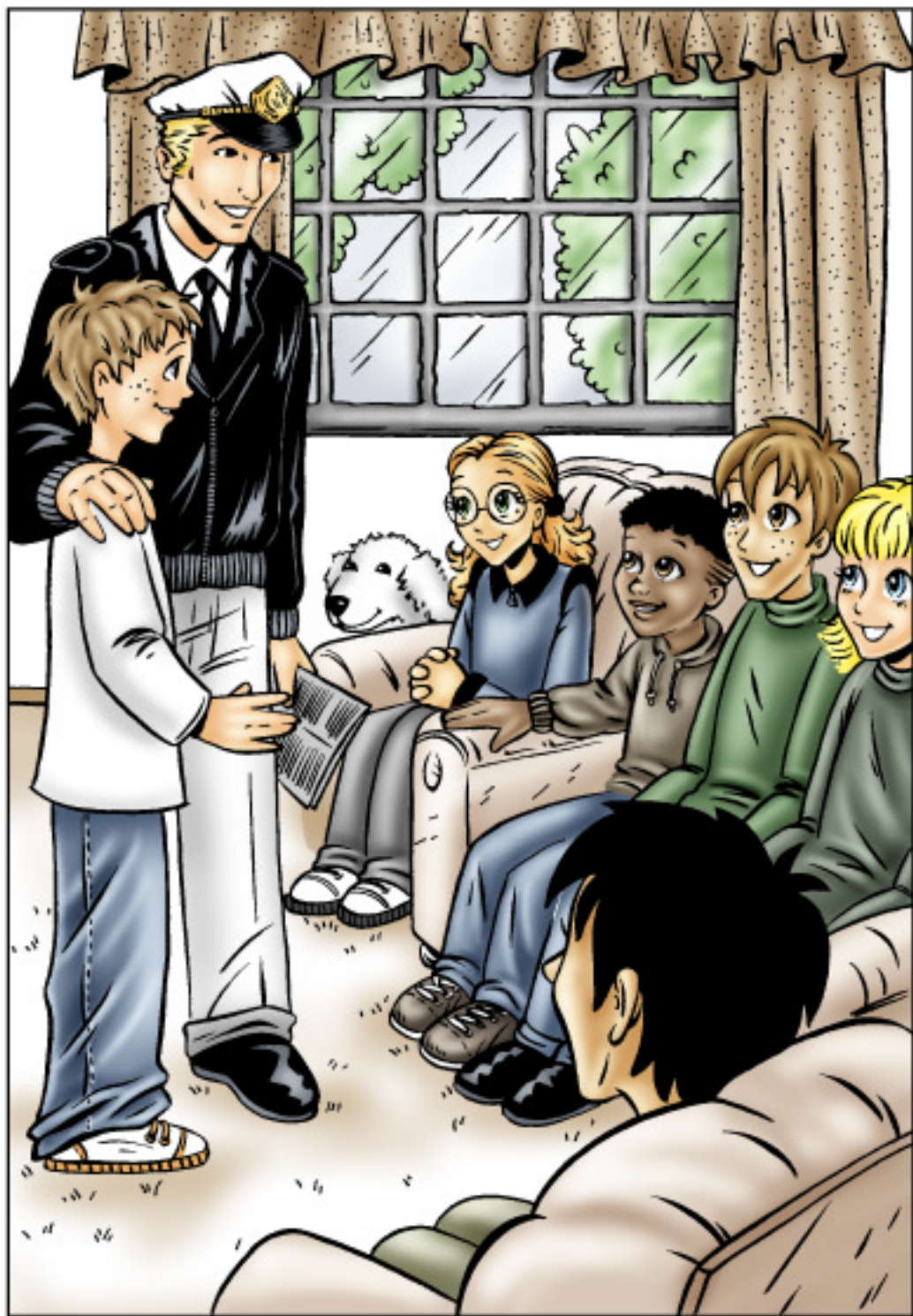
Doug's eyes followed Wilma as she walked across the street and a short distance down to the service station. Through the trees he could make out when she stepped inside. Then he waited . . . and waited . . . and waited.

* * *

"The coolest part was riding in the helicopter," Chris told Ziggy and Karen with a smile on his face when they were together again at the police station.

"Yeah, we had to go with them to identify you and make sure they'd gotten the right car," Susan chimed in.

"I had no idea they had remote control tire-popping devices," Kento added. "It's really neat. We found your Morse code message with the car's license plate, and so when the guys at the roadblock saw the car, they recognized it right away. But since there were kids in it, they couldn't risk arresting the kidnapppers directly. So one of the men attached this device to the car's wheel



"Yup. My parents are flying in by helicopter to pick me up. I'm sure they'll probably give you guys quite a reward for helping in my rescue."

"Our biggest reward is knowing that you are safe again," Karen answered.

"Thanks," Jason said.

Karen looked down, bit her lip, then looked up again.

"There's something I've got to tell you, Jason," she said.

Jason looked up at her.

The sudden silence only made Karen more self-conscious, but she knew what she had to say.

"I'm sorry," she finally blurted out.

"Sorry?" Jason repeated. "Sorry about what?"

"I'm sorry I thought you were nothing but a jerk before. I hardly got to know you when we went to school together in Clarksdale, and it wasn't right for me to judge you like I did."

Jason's face grew a little red, and then it was his turn to look away. He cleared his throat.

"It's not the first time I've been called a jerk. I guess I haven't been very nice. The way I was in school, I would have never made friends with people like you. But now I see that friendships are about a lot more than money and who's cool or not. I hope. . ." Jason hesitated, turning to look at all the members of the Squad who had by now circled around him. "I hope you'll let me consider myself your friend."

"Of course," they all chimed in.

* * *

A few weeks later the Squad was gathered together in the Shack, when Chris heard his mom call from the house.

"Chris, there's a package for you!"

Chris quickly headed over to the house.



Within a few minutes he came running back, a box in his hand.

"What is it? What is it?" the others called out as he approached.

"It's for all of us," Chris answered, "for the Five Squad."

"From who?" Ziggy asked.

"Not sure . . . but it's post-marked from Clarksdale."

"Clarksdale?" Karen asked.

"Well, open it!" Susan squealed.

The box was quickly opened, and inside were six long, smaller packages, individually wrapped, and each bearing a name—Chris, Susan, Kento, Ziggy, Karen, and Frisky.

The small packages were quickly opened, and inside was a silver pen for each of the Squad members, a package of silver ink refills, and a silver-studded collar for Frisky.

Chris read the engraved inscription on the side of his pen. "To Chris Fulton—thanks for being a friend."

"They're from Jason!" Karen said with delight. In the past few weeks, and after several e-mails back and forth, Karen had found herself growing quite fond of Jason.

"Hey look, everyone," Kento said, going back to the box. "There's a note inside."

"Let me see!" Karen said excitedly.

Kento handed her the letter, and she read it to herself at first, and then aloud.

"To my friends—the Five Squad. I know my parents have already given you a reward for having a part in my rescue and for having done what you all did for me. But I wanted to give you a little reward of my own. I hope these pens will help you remember that you have a friend in me, and I hope someday I'll be able to help you as you've helped me. Sincerely, Jason Farell"

FIVE SQUAD



A Christmas Discovery

It was a week till Christmas. School was out and the Five Squad were spending the afternoon in the brightly decorated Shack. A seashell wreath hung on the door. In the corner of the room stood a small Christmas tree decorated with lights and tinsel stars, and a simple hand-made angel on the top. A collage of old Christmas cards hung on the wall.

Chris picked up a guitar that was leaning against a corner and strummed a few chords.

Karen entered the Shack bringing a plate of gingerbread men that Chris' mom had just baked. "Hey, I didn't know that you played," she said.

"Only the basics. I've been practicing a bit, but I still only have six chords down."

Susan looked up from the journal that she was writing and sketching in. "So do you know any songs?" she asked.

"None by heart yet," Chris answered. "But with a songbook, I was actually surprised at how many songs I could play even though I only know a few chords."

"It's your move, Kento," Ziggy said, as he reached over for another gingerbread man and began happily munching on it.

Kento raised his left eyebrow as he looked at the chessboard, then moved his pawn one space forward.

"Would you mind handing me the songbook, Ziggy?" Chris asked. "It's on the shelf above you, next to the dictionary."

"Here." Ziggy handed Chris the book, while contemplating* his next move.

Chris flipped through the songbook. "You probably know this one, 'You Are My Sunshine.'"

Chris cleared his throat and strummed the first few chords. Susan and Karen joined in.

"Checkmate," Kento announced.

"That's the third game you've beat me at this week!" Ziggy exclaimed.

"Yeah, but you're getting harder to beat every time. Next time don't leave your king

**contemplate: to think about seriously*



Recommended age: 8 years and up. (May be read by younger children at the parents' discretion.)

unguarded," Kento said encouraging him.

"Want to join in?" Karen asked the boys.

Soon they were all singing together. It took two or three times of singing the song before their very different voices began to blend.

"Hey, we don't sound that bad," Kento said with a chuckle.

"Can you play any Christmas songs?" Karen asked.

"Here's one," Chris said. "Joy to the World."

Only a few lines into the song, they were interrupted by Chris' mother. "Chris, telephone."

"Coming." Chris carefully handed the guitar to Susan and dashed out the door.

"Hi, this is Chris," he said, panting a little.

A familiar voice answered on the other end. "Hi, Chris, this is Jason."

"Good to hear from you," Chris said. "What's up? Been a few weeks since you've called. How's life?"

"Great, thanks. I was visiting my grandparents for a while. Being back though, it's a bit boring this Christmas holiday. Don't really know what to do with myself."

"Sorry, I wish we could help you out there."

"Actually, that's sort of why I called. I was wondering if the five of you could come and stay at my place for a couple of days."

"Cool! Are you serious?" Chris said in amazement.

"Totally! I asked my mom and she said it would be fine for a few days. My dad's away



on a business trip, and he'll only make it back by Christmas Eve. We have plenty of room for you. There are huge lawns that we can play ball on and there's the big forest behind our house we could explore."

"Oh wow! Wait till I tell the others!" exclaimed Chris. "Do we need to bring anything?"

"Um, I guess whatever you'd take on a short trip. I don't know if any of you like to swim, but we have an indoor pool. So you could bring your swimming suits."

"Sounds like a good plan. I'll have to check with the others. And of course, we'll need to ask our parents if it's okay with them. I'll call you back tonight when we know. Will that work?"

"Sure. I hope it does work out. It would be great to see you guys again."

"Would be good to see you too," said Chris. "I'll call you back once I have an answer. Bye!"

* * *

"Guys, guess what?" Chris said enthusiastically as he bounded through the door of the Shack.

"What?" the others chorused.

"That was Jason. He wants us to stay at his place for a few days this week."

"Cool!" Ziggy exclaimed.

"I told him I'd tell you and then we'd have to check with our parents, and I'd call him back this evening with a confirmation. What do you say?"

"That would be so fun," Susan said. "I'll ask my parents right away. We should also pray about it too, don't you think?"

The others all agreed. After getting an okay

from Upstairs on going, the Five left in every direction. The Shack was quickly emptied, as everyone raced home to get the okay from his or her parents.

* * *

The final details were all arranged by the following morning. By early afternoon they were all ready for their three-day stay over at Jason's house.

A shiny black limousine with tinted windows pulled into Chris' driveway. A uniformed chauffeur got out of the car and approached the house. He wore white gloves and a formal pin-stripe waistcoat. Before he could ring the doorbell, Chris opened the door.

"Good afternoon," the chauffeur said. "I am Ling Chung. Are you Chris?"

"Yes, that's me," replied Chris.

"The Farells sent me to pick up five of you, I believe."

"Yes. We'll be out in just a minute."

"Awesome car!" Karen said, as she came to the door.

Chris left to call the others who were waiting in the living room. "Sirs, if you will, the limo is here," Chris said with a pompous accent and then burst out laughing.

"Serious?" Kento asked.

"Honest!"

"Wow!" Kento and Ziggy chorused.

With a quick farewell to Chris' mom, the Five piled into the limousine. They were soon on their way.

None of them had ever been inside a limousine before, and

they all sat around looking at each other, not sure what to do.

"I almost feel out of place in this car," Karen said.

"Oh, but I could get used to this," Kento said, lounging back on the seat with his arms behind his head.

The others burst out in laughter.

It was a couple hours drive to Clarksdale from Sheldon, a scenic and pleasant trip, though. By dusk the well-to-do neighborhood on the outskirts of Clarksdale where Farell Estate was situated was ablaze with blinking and colorful Christmas lights.

Many houses were decorated with brightly colored lights draped along the roofs. Some had decorated their trees and bushes as well. There were manger scenes in the windows of some homes and stores. One store had an elaborate elfin and fairy village display.

The limousine pulled up to the large wrought iron gate of Jason's family's mansion. A large "F" graced both gates. A guard box stood on one side of the gate. Ling pressed a button and the huge gates opened automatically.

The driveway was lined with cedar trees leading up to the entrance of the house where Jason and his mother were waiting to greet them.

"Welcome to Farell Estate," the driver said as he opened the door of the limousine.

"So good to see you guys!" Jason exclaimed as the Five piled out.

"Same here," Chris said. "We couldn't refuse your invitation."





"Yeah, thanks for having us," Susan added.

Jason showed them to their rooms, and then took them to the dining room where dinner awaited them.

The large oval mahogany table was covered with a white tablecloth. Highly polished candleholders, real silverware, brightly colored flower arrangements, crystal glasses, and fine cloth napkins were placed neatly on the table. A butler served the meal of breaded veal with a twist of lemon, a mixed salad and baked potatoes. Dessert was blueberry pie with ice cream.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Farrell," Karen said when the dinner had ended.

"And thanks for the delicious food," Ziggy said.

Mrs. Farrell nodded with a smile. "It's my pleasure."

* * *

With dinner over, Jason decided to take his friends on a tour of the house.

"This is an amazing house," Chris said.

"It is," Jason said. "We only moved here last year, and there are still some parts of the house that are not fully set up. It's an enormous house, and we don't even use all of the rooms."

"Who lived here before?" Susan asked. "Do you know?"

"Some rich family. I only know what Thomas Cowley, our gardener, told me. He said his father was their gardener just after the war, and something about the daughter dying. I don't know the whole story.

"The house was empty for nearly fifty years, until my parents bought it."

"Do you know how she died?" Karen asked.

"No," Jason said. "When I first started going to school here, some of the kids said that the house was haunted by the daughter's ghost or something."

"Oh, I remember those stories from school," Karen said. "They all sounded pretty far-fetched. I didn't realize they were talking about this place."

"Yup. Apparently this is that 'haunted house,'" Jason said with a chuckle. "But I've never heard or seen anything spooky here. Come, I'll show you a picture of the daughter."

They walked down the hallway to the large study. Jason pointed to a large oil painting of a beautiful red-haired girl in her early teens that hung on the wall. Below it there was a golden plaque with the name "Colleen" written on it.

"She's kind of pretty," Kento said.

"The only time something slightly spooky happened," Jason said, "was once when I was looking at this painting it was like it came to life for a moment."

"What's the date on it?" Karen asked.

"Uh, I think it's 1943," Chris said after a close inspection.

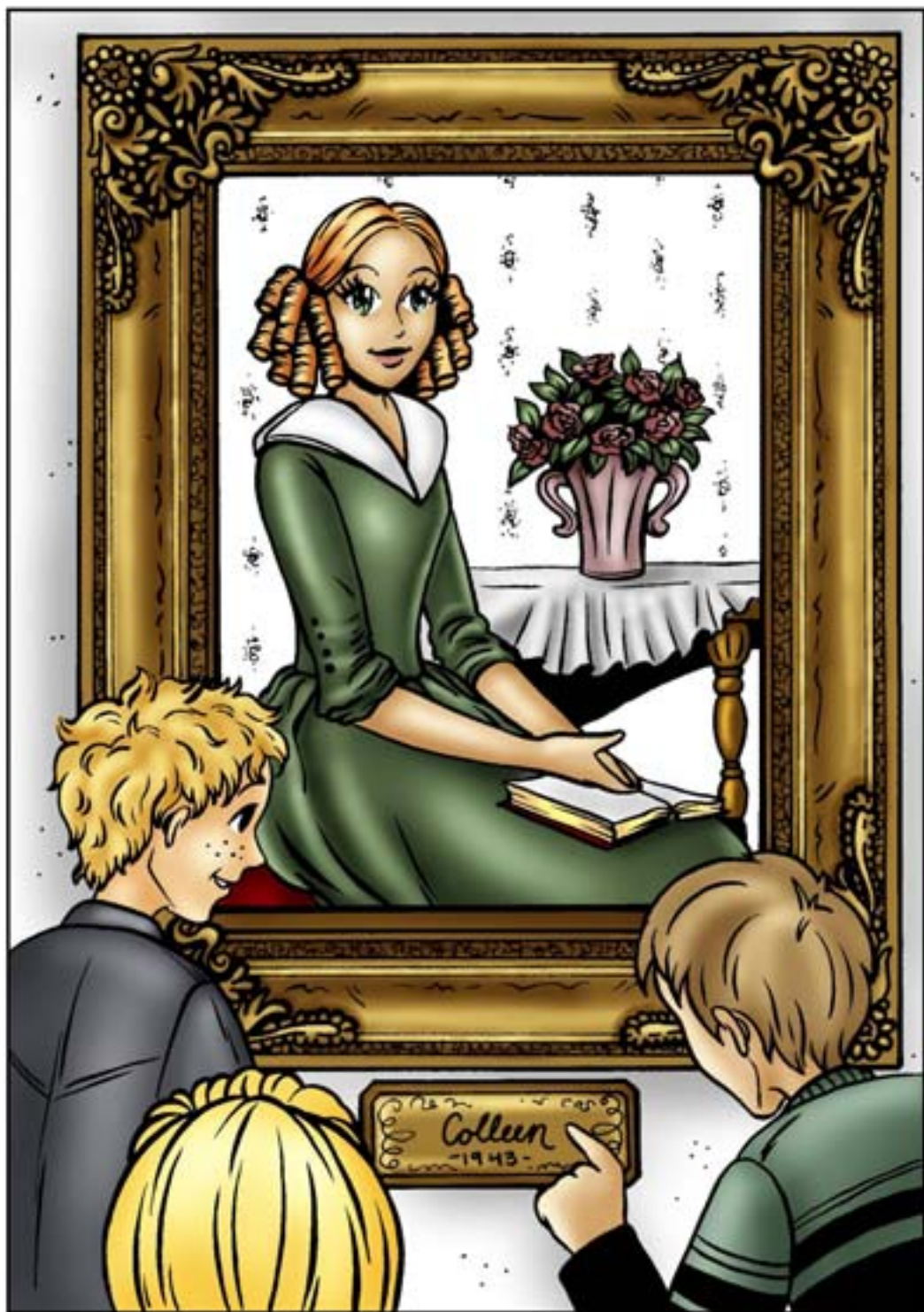
Susan shivered. "I'm getting goose bumps," she said.

"What was this place called before you lived here, Jason?" Kento asked.

"Um ... it'll come to me, give me a sec." Jason screwed his face up a little as he tried to remember. "Oh, that's right, Clarrington Estate. Why?"

"I was just thinking that it might be interesting to see if





there's anything online about it, like its history or something."

"Cool idea," Chris said.

"I have a computer we can use, in my study room," Jason said.

"Do you think they'd have anything on it?" Ziggy asked, peering over Jason's shoulder as he did a search for "Clarington Estate."

"Well, the house *has* been around for at least one hundred and fifty years, or something like that," Jason answered. "We should be able to find at least some history."

"It'd probably at least tell us what the name of the family that lived here was, when it was built and stuff," Susan added.

"Mr. Cowley did tell me their name, but I don't remember it. Oh, here we go, 'Clarington Estate—The History,'" Jason read aloud.

"Read on!" Karen said excitedly.

"Give me a sec. My computer is having a few problems. It freezes every now and then," Jason replied. "Okay, here it is."

"Clarington Estate was built in the mid-1800s. The extravagant architecture was the envy of its day, and its lush grounds were meticulously manicured and designed. A wealthy merchant family—the Stanfords—owned Clarington Estate. Wilbert Stanford originally had it built for his first and beloved wife, Anabel Josephine Stanford, as a country retreat. Anabel suffered numerous ailments throughout the final years of her life.

"Wilbert often was away from home tending to his business, but whenever he could he would return to Clarington Estate and Anabel.



In 1867, Anabel gave birth to a girl, Josephine Colleen Stanford. Anabel died of pneumonia when Josephine was only six months old.

"Wilbert was heartbroken over the loss of Anabel and for the first year after her death he refused to return to Clarington

Estate. Josephine remained at Clarington Estate under the care of a trusted nanny, whom she grew to love dearly—Theresa de Mantessa.

"In time Wilbert missed his daughter, and returned to find a bright-eyed child of nearly two—an image of her mother. Wilbert found joy once again in his daughter Josephine. In time he fell in love with Theresa and they married in the spring of 1869."

"This is an interesting story," Ziggy said.

"It was a long time ago," Kento responded. "Skip a little and see if there's anything more recent, like who had this house last."

"Okay, let's see," Jason said as he scrolled down the page.

"There, there!" Susan exclaimed. "I saw the name Colleen."

"All it says is that the house still belonged to the Stanford family, then Joseph Wilbert Stanford, the grandson of Wilbert Stanford." Jason continued, "His wife had died earlier, and Joseph was killed in the war, leaving their only daughter, Colleen, who was then fourteen, alone. Colleen lived only a few years longer, and the Stanford legacy came to an end.

"That's all it says ... besides about the house being put up for sale," Jason said, as he closed the Internet browser.

"It didn't say much about Colleen, though," Karen said. "I wonder what she died of."

"I'm getting tired," Kento said with a yawn.

"Me too," Chris agreed.

"We can research more tomorrow if we want," Jason suggested.

"Sounds good," Ziggy said.

* * *

After a hearty breakfast the next morning, Jason suggested they play outside for a bit.

"Sure, I'd be up for that," Kento said.

"My sports equipment is all in the basement. I don't use it that much," Jason explained.

"Basement, did you say?" Ziggy asked. "Can we come, too? I just love attics and basements."

"Sure, if you don't mind a few cobwebs," Jason said.

Jason took them down the old creaky wooden staircase that led to the dimly lit basement. Even the basement was huge, with several rooms in it as well. Originally the servants had lived in part of the basement, but now it was mostly used for storage.

"I think it's in here," Jason said, as he opened up a door to one of the basement rooms. "I haven't used some of this stuff since we arrived. There's no one to play with. It's in these trunks here. Feel free to poke around."

After finding some sports stuff they were about to go upstairs again, when Chris' curiosity got the better of him. "What's in the other rooms?" he asked.

"Not much," Jason answered. "A few of them have stuff that we brought when we moved here. Oh wait. . ."

"What?" the others chorused, as Jason took off for one of the basement rooms.

"This room over here has stuff from the former owners. My parents never did anything with it. They just had the housekeeper put it in one room. I poked around in there once or twice, but I wasn't too interested."

"We have to check it out!" Ziggy exclaimed.

"Sure," Jason said.

"It may have some clues about Colleen," Susan said. The large wooden door creaked as they opened it. Cobwebs covered the doorway and most everything within the room.

"You weren't kidding when you said this place has a few cobwebs," Chris sputtered, as a few webs got in his mouth.

Jason tried to turn on the light switch but nothing happened.

"Must be burnt out," Jason said. "I'll get a flashlight."

He was back shortly with a flashlight. The others followed him in to explore the room. The flashlight darted about the room and lit up strange shapes in the darkness. Against the wall was a tall stack of old *National Geographic* magazines.

Jason picked up one and held it up to the light to read it. "Wow, this one was printed in 1903!"

"What's in the back of the room?" Kento asked.

The beam from the flashlight shone on a large grizzly bear, standing upright on his hind legs with a fierce look and his mouth open, showing a row of sharp teeth.



Ziggy was so startled that he backed up and accidentally knocked over a writing desk. It went crashing to the ground in a cloud of dust. Ziggy fell over, unhurt but dazed.

"It's just a stuffed bear, Ziggy!" Kento reassured him.

"Oh!" Ziggy said with a sheepish grin on his face.

Jason helped Ziggy get up and then shone his flashlight towards the cupboard.

"What's in it?" Chris asked.

"No idea," Jason said. "I could never get into it before. It was locked and jammed or something."

The others gathered around curiously peering over Jason and Chris.

"This is awesome," Kento said.

On the side of the desk there were several drawers. Karen tugged at the drawers; they were jammed, but after a few tries she managed to open the top drawer. "Can you shine the light here?" she asked.

"What did you find?" Jason asked as he walked over to Karen and shone the light in her direction.

"Nothing yet. But there may be something in here." The drawer had papers and other miscellaneous items in it. Karen quickly sorted through it, not sure what she was looking for.

"Look! There's a key!" Susan exclaimed, pointing her finger at a copper colored key that was in the back of the drawer.

"I wonder what it's for?" Ziggy asked.

"Writing desks often have a drawer that locks or something," Jason said. "Maybe this one does too."



The six of them looked the desk over, but couldn't seem to find a drawer with a keyhole, or any keyhole at all for that matter.

"I guess there's nothing," Ziggy said, somewhat disappointed.

"Wait!" Karen exclaimed.

"Check this out! The top of the desk comes up." With Jason's help she lifted the top. A bronze plaque was on the underside of it.

"What does it say?" Kento asked.

"Shine the light here, please, Jason," Karen said, then she read the inscription on the plaque aloud. "To my beloved daughter, Colleen Anabel. With love, Father."

"This must've been Colleen's writing desk," Jason said. "And look, there's a keyhole. Try the key in it, Karen."

The key fit perfectly. The lock opened easily, and a shelf came up. Inside were several books. Karen picked them up and flipped through the first one. "This one is just a novel given to Colleen."

"And the others?" Susan asked.

"This one's a Bible," Chris said, as he looked through the book he'd picked up.

"What about that one, Karen?" Ziggy asked.

"It's a journal or something, maybe a diary, or a scrapbook," she answered. "I can't read it super well, as it's so dingy in here."

"Let's take it in the light and check it out," Kento suggested.

"Good idea," the others agreed.

Upstairs in Jason's study as the others crowded around her, Karen gently turned the first pages of the book.



“Colleen Anabel Stanford. 1944,” Karen read. The book was thick with a hard leather cover and a heavy binding.

“I think this is a prayer here,” Karen explained. “It says something about her father no longer being alive, and how she thanks God that he is now happy and safe in Heaven.”

“What’s on the paper there?” Ziggy asked, pointing at a paper in the book.

Karen unfolded the paper and skimmed over it. “It’s a letter from her father. It starts off, ‘My dearest Colleen, I may not have the chance to see you again in this life. . . .’ He must’ve written it when he was away in the war or something.”

“That must be what the prayer is for,” Susan said.

There were dates at the top of each page in the book. Handwritten prayers were found throughout the pages. Newspaper articles had been cut out and pasted in the book.

“Maybe it was some kind of school project,” Kento said.

“I don’t know,” Karen replied with a shake of her head. “It looks a lot more personal than a school project—maybe something she did in her spare time. She sounds very sweet and caring. Her prayers are mostly for other people.”

“I wonder what that means?” Susan said.

“What?” the others asked.

“Well, in one of her prayers it says ‘I will be glad though I am not like others. I will rejoice through all sorrow, knowing that it will pass in time. In Heaven I shall cry no more tears.’”

“Maybe it’s about her father,” offered Kento.

“The sorrow part maybe, but I wonder what she means when she says, ‘I am not like others.’”

“I wouldn’t know,” Jason said with a shake of his head. “She looked pretty normal in the painting, don’t you think?”

“Yes, absolutely,” said Susan.

They paused over a few newspaper articles. Many spoke of World War II, and Colleen had written prayers for those who had been lost at war, and for the mothers and families that felt the loss.

“She sure prayed a lot,” Jason said.

“Yes, just about everything she’s written are prayers,” Karen said.

“Check out this article and photo,” Chris said. It was a picture of a drunken man being carried away by two policemen. The date was December 15th, 1945. The title read, “Homeless Drunk Disrupts Victory Homecoming Parade.” Underneath there was also a prayer that he would become sober and find a good job.

“What does the article say?” Ziggy asked.

“Nothing much. Basically the title says it all,” Chris replied.

After a moment’s pause, Chris looked over at Jason. “What did you say your gardener’s name is?”

“Thomas Cowley. Why?”

“Well, this article identifies the drunk as a Mr. Fenton Cowley. Do you think he’s related to the gardener in any way?”

“I don’t know. We could ask Thomas.”

“Let’s do that,” Susan said.

“This is getting so interesting.”



* * *

The six of them quickly headed off to Thomas' cottage at the end of the estate grounds. They found him patching a hole in his cottage roof.

Thomas was in his late forties. He was a mild man by nature, with blue eyes and dark leathery skin from all his work in the sun, and gray colored hair. He lived with his wife and elderly blind mother in the cottage. His wife was a schoolteacher at the Clarksdale primary school.

"Good morning, Mr. Cowley," Jason called out.

"Good morning to you too, Jason," Thomas said as he made his way down the ladder. "So are these the heroes who helped rescue you? Ling said something about them spending a few days here."

"Yes," Jason answered. "I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce them. Susan, Chris, Ziggy, Karen and Kento. Guys, this is Thomas Cowley."

"Nice to meet you," the five said.

"And you," Cowley said. "You look like a fine group of young people. I hope your stay here is pleasant."

After a few moments of silence, Cowley gave Jason a puzzled look. "Were you going to ask me something?"

"Uh, yes. Just not sure how to ask you."

"Just go ahead and ask," Cowley said with a chuckle.

"Well, we were down in the basement this morning, exploring things down there."

"An adventurous bunch, huh?"

"Well, yes, we were looking through some



of the stuff from the previous owners, and we happened on this—a diary of sorts. It belonged to a Colleen Stanford."

"Colleen, huh?" Cowley said thoughtfully. "My father used to talk about her quite a bit when I was a young boy. I don't remem-

ber all the stories he used to tell me about her. Well, I'm sure I'd remember some if I tried. It's just been a while. Was there something in the book you wanted to ask me about?"

"Well, yes," Jason said, as he flipped to the page with the article of the drunken man and showed it to Thomas. "Here it talks about a Fenton Cowley, and we were wondering if he was related to you in any way."

Thomas' eyes grew wide with surprise. "Well I'll be . . . that sure looks like my father, and it's his name too," Thomas said, taking a closer look at the article and the picture. "I don't recall him ever telling me anything about this."

"Actually we were hoping that maybe you would know more about Colleen, seeing as your father was the gardener of this place when she was still alive," Jason said.

"I think you'd get better stories from my mother," Cowley said. "I never met Colleen, as she died before I was born. I believe she was very sickly her whole life and in a wheelchair most of the time."

"A wheelchair?" Chris asked.

"That's what she must've meant by 'I am not like others,'" Susan said.

* * *

Thomas invited the six children inside to see if his mother could tell them a little bit about

Colleen, and the meaning of the article on Fenton Cowley, her late husband. Thomas' mother was in her 70s, and had gone blind in her old age. Despite her lack of sight, a smile was always present on her face.



After introducing themselves the children sat down in the quaint living room. Thomas explained why they had come. Mara Cowley couldn't help but smile.

"Yes, yes, that was Fenton back in those days," she said. "Poor dear. It was before we were married, mind you. We had been engaged for some time, and though I loved him dearly, he was a hopeless drunk. Very depressed by the war, as he had lost two of his brothers in it. Terrible war! Absolutely horrendous." Mara shook her head as she spoke.

"Colleen, the darling girl, a true angel, helped Fenton. I don't recall when the article came out, though. I think I had been upcountry visiting my sisters for the summer. When I returned to Clarksdale a few months later, Fenton was a changed man. Colleen had hired him as the assistant gardener of Clarington Estate. The main gardener was getting rather old and couldn't manage all the work on his own. A year later Fenton became the head gardener.

"I tell you, Fenton was a completely changed man. I hardly recognized him. He no longer drank, he was absolutely sober, and he never touched another drink in his life. I couldn't understand it, but I was so happy. He was a much better man. We were finally married the week before Christmas."

"Did you know much about Colleen, Mrs. Cowley?" Jason asked.

"She was an angel of a girl. Barely sixteen when I moved here with Mr. Cowley. Lovely red hair, and eyes that seemed to sparkle and smile. The poor thing had been in a wheelchair from the

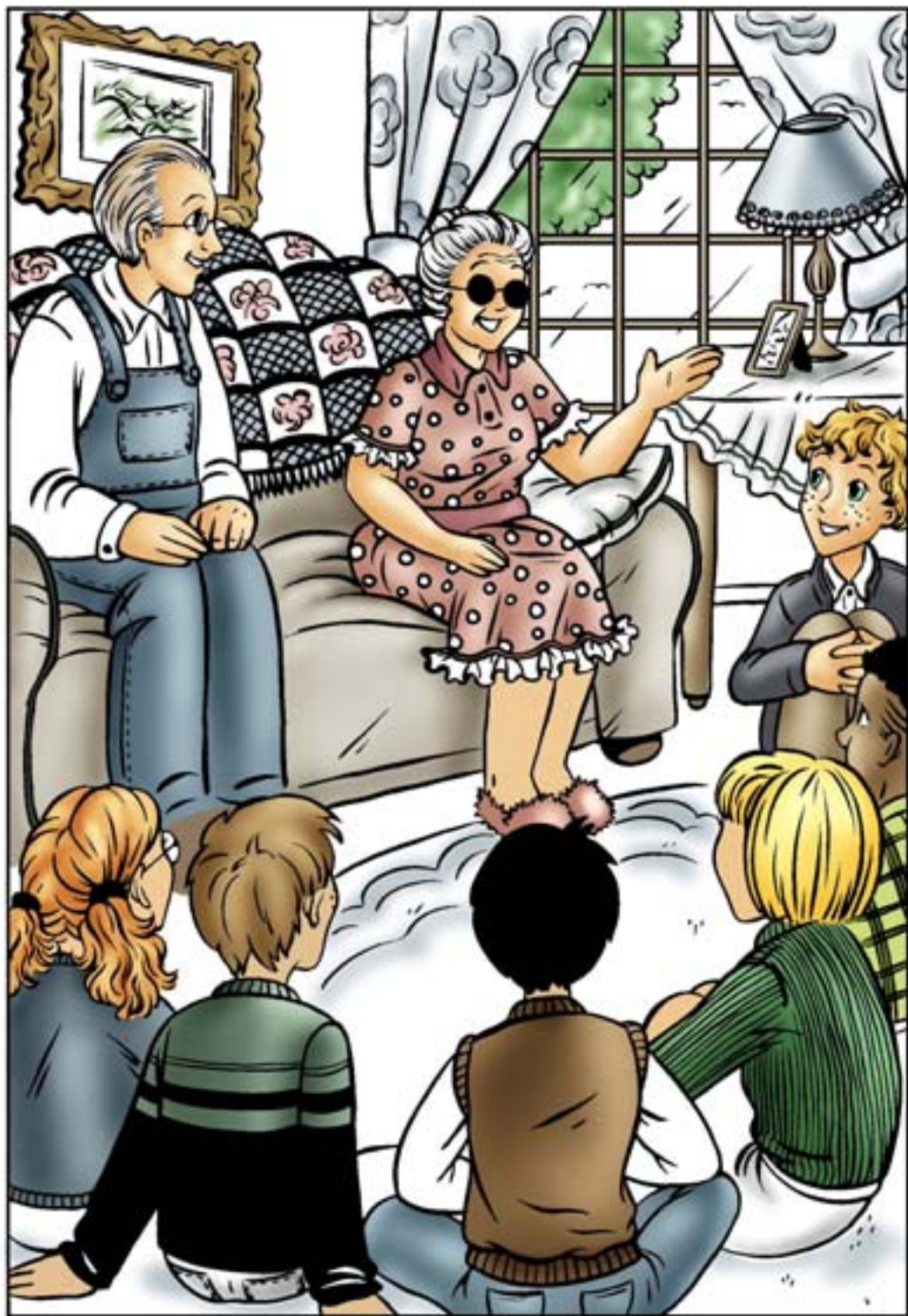
time she was five years old. Her mother had died years earlier and her father also passed away when she was barely fifteen. She had no close relatives, so Clarington Estate was hers. When she died there was no heir, and the house was abandoned. But before her death she had given this cottage and the acreage around it to Fenton and me, saying it was a belated marriage gift.

"Every Sunday she would have a servant bring her down here, and we'd sit around and talk. She was truly a lovely girl, so animated. Her smile was gorgeous. When she smiled and laughed you wanted to laugh and smile with her. She was always cheerful, despite her loss and disabilities. When she died Clarington Estate was never the same. She seemed to have taken the very spirit and joy of the place with her. I was at her deathbed. She was so peaceful and radiant, though she was so sickly. It was a sad moment, yet happy. It's hard to explain."

"After the article, Colleen wrote a prayer in this book, which we believe was for your late husband, ma'am," Karen said.

"Really?" Mara asked. "Will you read it to me?"

"Sure." Susan began. "You loved all, Jesus, no matter who they were, no matter what their



sins. It was those in greatest need of You that You healed and made whole. It was the broken hearts that You made glad. You brought joy and happiness to those who came to You. I ask that You help me too to find a way to bring happiness and joy to others as well, to help those in need, such as this man. Help him to change his ways, to stop drinking, and to find a job and a new reason in life. Help him to find You. And if there is anything I can do, dear Lord, I pray that You will show me. Amen."

Mara was in tears. "She never told me about this," she said. "But come to think of it, that's one thing I do remember about Colleen. She was always praying for those in need, and doing her best to help those that she could. To think that Fenton's change was a result of her prayers . . . bless your dear heart, Colleen!"

Mara fell silent for a few moments, and then continued, "She was only a couple of years younger than me, but she seemed so much wiser and experienced. I never could quite understand it. I always believed that it had something to do with not only all that she had been through, but the way she prayed. She shared a special connection with her Savior. She loved Him so dearly, and she often said that that was why she was so happy in spite of loss and difficulty.

"When Thomas was born, several years after her death," Mara explained, "we chose the name Thomas because it was Colleen's favorite name.—In loving memory of her, the blessed girl."

The stories continued on throughout the rest of the morning. Thomas invited the children

to join them for lunch on the day they were to return to Sheldon.

Mara told many stories of Colleen and her love for others and for Jesus. Mara became aglow and animated every time she spoke of Colleen. It was amazing that one so sickly, crippled, and helpless could bring so much joy and happiness to so many people—the Cowley family were but a few.

* * *

"It was great having you," Jason said to Karen, finding himself alone with her in the entrance hall. The others were piling into the limousine to head back to Sheldon.

"I really enjoyed myself," Karen said shyly. "And . . . it was good to see you again."

Jason smiled, leaned over and kissed Karen. "It was so nice to see you too."

Karen blushed and stuttered a quick "thank you."

Outside Jason said his final farewells to the others.

"Thanks again for inviting us," Chris said.

"I never expected we'd have a miniature adventure coming here," Kento said. "But it was totally cool finding that room in the basement and discovering all about Colleen's past."

The others nodded their heads in agreement.

"Well, Merry Christmas to you all," Jason said.

"You too," they chorused.

"And like Colleen wrote, 'May we always remember Christmas Day as a day of love. And may we do what we can to show that love from God to others as well.'"

The End

HEAVEN'S
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FIVE SQUAD



Issue 126

Frisky's Adventure

It was a cold, wintry day in Sheldon. Gales had been blowing furiously all week, bringing with them a deep chill to the air. The fun of the Christmas season and the winter snows had given way to wetter and windier days, leaving the children of Sheldon impatiently awaiting the arrival of spring.

Up in Kento's room, he and Ziggy worked silently on a fleet of paper airplane models that Karen had downloaded off the Internet for them.

Not much had happened in the week since the Squad had last met in the Shack behind Chris' house. In spite of the fun project he was working on, Kento let out a long sigh.

"I've finished another one," Ziggy announced, holding the glued aircraft triumphantly up in his hands.

"I'm almost done painting this one. How many have we finished now?" Kento asked.

"Twelve," Ziggy answered. "It was great of Karen to download these and print them for us."

Just then, Kento's mom's voice floated up the staircase. "Ziggy, your dad just called. He's coming by in five minutes to pick you up for dinner. And Kento, we're eating in ten minutes, so you might want to start cleaning up."

"Okay, Mom!" Kento called back.

Ziggy put the airplane he was working on down on the table.

"Looks like that's all I'll be doing for today," Ziggy said.

"Thanks for dropping by. Guess I'll see you at school tomorrow," Kento answered.

Ziggy gathered the planes he had finished and carefully put them in a shoebox so they wouldn't get squashed. He placed the shoebox in his backpack and then grabbed his coat, scarf,

gloves, and hat. "See you tomorrow!" he called as he left the room.

"See ya!" Kento called after him.

By the time Ziggy got downstairs, he could see his dad's car parked out in front of the house.

"Bye, Ziggy," Kento's mom said as she opened the front door for him. It was raining and Ziggy held his backpack over his head to shield himself from the rain. He quickly jumped into the backseat and buckled his seatbelt.

As Ziggy's dad pulled out into the street, Ziggy overheard the newscaster on the car radio. "... Winds are not expected to die down anytime soon, but instead of more rain, they may bring snow, with temperatures expected to drop below freezing tonight. With the roads wet from the heavy rains this past week, watch for ice on the roads and drive carefully. ..."

The drive back to Ziggy's house took only a few minutes, and if it hadn't been for the rain and wind outside, Ziggy could have easily walked or run the distance. But now he was thankful for the warm car, especially since it started hailing just as they pulled onto Claremont Street, where Ziggy's house was.

Stepping out of the car, holding his backpack over his head again, Ziggy headed up the driveway. He could hear Frisky barking excitedly inside. A second later the door opened, and Frisky came bounding towards Ziggy.

Ziggy wasn't about to start petting Frisky in the hail, so he merely gave Frisky a pat on the back as he continued past him, dashing for the front door. His dad ran in behind Ziggy, and quickly closed the door.

"Wait! Frisky is still out there!" Ziggy said, rushing to open the door again.

Recommended age: 7 years and up. (May be read by younger children at the parents' discretion.)

Illustrations by Kristen

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"Sorry, I didn't see him," Ziggy's dad answered.

But when Ziggy opened the door and looked out into the pounding hail, Frisky was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did he go? He was just out there!"

"Are you sure?"

Ziggy's dad joined him in peering out into the street in front of their house. Then he closed the door.

"Don't worry, Zig. Frisky will be fine. Maybe he just wanted to get some fresh air. He'll be back. Don't worry."

Ziggy looked glum. It just didn't feel right for Frisky to be out there alone, especially with the hail coming down as heavily as it was. But his dad was right—there wasn't anything he could do about it. Frisky liked to eat as much as Ziggy did, and if nothing else, he'd come back when he got hungry.

Gaining some comfort from that thought, Ziggy hung up his coat, exchanged his wet shoes for loafers, and joined his family at the dinner table.

A few hours later Ziggy was in bed, praying that Frisky would be safe, wherever he was, and that he would find his way home before the morning.

* * *

Frisky stood by the side of road, huffing and puffing with his pink tongue hanging out of his mouth. It had been a long dash from his home on Claremont Street to the far edge of Pinewood Ridge Forest. Now he looked around at the dark maze of pines, bushes, and outcroppings of rock that loomed in front of him.

Frisky had come to Pinewood Ridge a few times with Gramps, and then with the Five Squad on their unexpected kidnap rescue mission last spring. But this part of Pinewood Ridge Forest was



unfamiliar and the largely untamed surroundings didn't make finding his way around any easier. The hail had now stopped, and snow was beginning to fall in thick flakes. In the dark it was even more difficult to recognize any familiar landmarks.

But there was a reason he had come here. Something had woken him from his lazy, early-evening doze and had lit a fire in his feet so that he had run without stopping until he came to this place. Now he stood still and listened, trying to figure out what he was doing here, so far away from his nice warm home and waiting dinner.

Frisky suddenly cocked his ears. He had heard something. It sounded like a whisper . . . a distant whisper coming from a voice that sounded very close, and very familiar.

He let out a bark. Not that he was afraid; he only wanted to give a signal to whoever might be nearby. Even with his finely honed canine senses, he couldn't detect anyone.

"Psst! Frisky!"

This time the voice was unmistakable, and Frisky recognized the voice, and saw the form of the man it belonged to.

Frisky bounded over with great enthusiasm, joyfully barking and wagging his tail all the way.

"Shhh, Frisky!" the man whispered. The voice sounded younger than Frisky remembered, but it belonged, unquestionably, to his beloved former master, Gramps.

To Frisky there was nothing strange about this meeting, even though Gramps had passed away more than a year ago, and he looked a good 20 years younger than he had in his final days of life.

"Hey boy, how are you doing?" Gramps asked, bending down so that he was face to face with his faithful companion of times past.

Frisky let out another joyous bark.

"It's good to see you too. I've missed you," Gramps said. "But we don't have a lot of time. This snow is going to be whipped into a blizzard soon. Come, follow me."

With that, Gramps stood up, and began running with great vigor through the trees. He ran straight through low limbs and intertwining branches as if they weren't there, and Frisky followed just as quickly through the underbrush below, never stopping to wonder what his master might be doing here, where they were going or what for.

* * *

"Hey Ziggy, what's up?" Kento said the next morning as Ziggy entered the schoolyard.

"It's Frisky. He ran out last night, and hasn't come back since."

"That's strange. Has he ever done anything like that before?"

"No."

"Well, at least it's stopped snowing. I'm sure he'll be okay."

"You think?"

"Frisky's a smart dog. He can take care of himself. Hey, wanna come over after school and finish those airplanes we were working on?"

Just then Susan walked up. "Hi guys! How's everything? Hey, what would you think about meeting at the Shack this afternoon after school? It isn't raining or snowing anymore, and I heard Chris has a new game we can play."

Ziggy shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the matter?" Susan asked him.

Kento explained about Frisky.

"What do you mean, he ran away?"

"He ran out the door to greet me when I came home in the hail last night," Ziggy answered. "Then he just disappeared."

"That's strange," said Susan.



The school bell interrupted their conversation.

"So will you guys come to the Shack this afternoon?" Susan asked, turning to head for the school doors.

"We'll be there," said Kento.

"Maybe we can think of something to do about Frisky, if he isn't back by then yet."

Ziggy looked up with a hopeful smile. Then they all went to their classrooms.

* * *

Frisky stirred lazily as the first glimmers of sun warmed his face. He opened his eyes. It took him a moment to recollect where he was, and how he had gotten here. He was tucked under a small outcropping of rock, and in front of him was nothing but a dense mass of trees and undergrowth, covered with a fresh and thick layer of snow from the blizzard of the night before.

A squirrel darted out from behind some trees and scampered into a small, snow-covered clearing in front of him. The squirrel stopped and stared at Frisky, then disappeared up a tree.

A bird chirped loudly overhead, and Frisky felt something stir beside him.

He turned to see the young boy he had spent the night next to. He was a chubby-looking little boy, about two years old, with curly blonde hair that was matted and tangled with the twigs and dirt he had slept in. Frisky had no idea who this boy was, where he had come from or what he was doing alone in the middle of the forest. He only knew that Gramps had led him to the boy, and that he was meant to stay with him.

The boy stirred again and then rolled over, still sleeping in the dry patch of earth under the overhanging rock. Small sticks and leaves stuck to his knitted sweater as they did to his hair. He let out a little whimper, "Mommy," then was quiet again.



Frisky stood up and shook himself to get the bits of leaves and twigs off his own coat, then he lay down next to the little boy again to keep him warm.

“Psst! Frisky!”

It was Gramps again. Frisky quickly rose and walked over to him.

“Hi boy! How’s everything?” Gramps asked.

Frisky responded with an excited bark.

“Shh . . . not so loud. You’ll wake up Bobby,” Gramps whispered.

Frisky understood, and gave a quick glance back at the sleeping boy before turning back to Gramps, who continued speaking.

“My dear Frisky, still ever so faithful and obedient! I knew I could count on you. Thanks for watching over little Bobby and keeping him warm last night. He should be fine now, but we have something else to do. Come with me.”

Frisky looked back at the boy, then back at Gramps, as if to make sure the two-year-old would be alright all by himself.

“He’ll be fine. Jesus is watching him, and the sun is rising and will keep him warm. He just needed you there during the night to keep him warm. But we’ll be coming back to little Bobby. Don’t worry. We just need to do something else first.”

Frisky responded with a slightly quieter bark. Little Bobby stirred again, but kept on sleeping.

“Come, boy!” Gramps called. Then, just as the night before, he dashed off into the thick of the forest without ever having to brush a branch away from his face.

Frisky hesitated, turning to look from the peacefully sleeping boy to the direction Gramps had run off in. Then he took off, following his master to wherever he would lead next.

After about ten minutes of running, Frisky came to a paved road that led through a portion of the forest. There, off the side of the road and down a small embankment, sat a car. Its front had smashed into a fat tree, and its back was slightly raised on two smaller pines that the car had evidently crushed as it had careened off the road above.

Looking inside, Frisky could see the driver unconscious in his seat, his head hanging limply to the side, and resting on a stretched piece of seatbelt. The window beside him was shattered, and he had a few speckles of blood on his face. There didn’t seem to be any other signs of injury.

He looked around for Gramps, but could not see him anywhere. Still, he knew that this was where Gramps had led him, and that he was meant to help the driver in some way.

Frisky walked slowly around the car. On the other side, the passenger door was open, and Frisky noticed a child’s seat in the back of the car. Several toys were scattered all over the inside of the car. Frisky sniffed a few times, and his keen nose instantly recognized that this was where little Bobby had come from. So the man must be his father.

Frisky quickly ran back over to the driver’s side and barked a few times, hoping to wake the man up and get his attention, but the man didn’t move. Frisky then tried to jump up to the window, to get closer to him and perhaps get his attention by pawing him, but the bits of glass from the broken window cut into the back of his paws, so he backed off and looked for another way in.

He returned to the open passenger door and managed to squeeze past the rather bulky child safety seat. Sticking his paw between the two front seats, he tried to nudge the man, but there



was still no response. The man remained unconscious.

As Frisky continued nudging the man, something fell out of the man's jacket pocket. It was a mobile phone.

While Frisky did not know what it was, he did know that it was something humans used to speak into and hold conversations with. He stared at it for a few minutes, and then went back to nudging the unconscious man.

He suddenly heard a low buzz, and looked to see the cell phone vibrating on the floor between the seats where it had fallen.

"You need to push the flashing button, Frisky," he heard Gramps tell him, though at that moment he could not see him anywhere.

Frisky looked at the vibrating piece of plastic with some hesitation. He'd never seen one this close before. Gramps had never owned a cell phone, and nobody in Ziggy's home had one either.

He quickly recognized the button he was supposed to push, but he still hesitated. That jittery piece of plastic looked unnerving. Then it suddenly stopped vibrating, and quickly—before it could start again—Frisky reached down his paw and rested it on the phone, hopefully over the flashing button.

"Hello? Hello?"

Frisky's ears picked up the tinny voice speaking from the phone, and with his paw, tried to scoot it closer to the man.

"John? Is that you? Hello? Where in the world are you, John? Hello?"

"Woof! Woof!" Frisky barked back twice. It was all he could do.

The woman's voice on the other end of the line went quiet for a few moments, then Frisky heard a few quick thuds through the small speaker. Somebody had put the phone down.



"Wait!" Frisky could hear another voice saying, although it sounded quite a bit more distant. "Did someone answer?"

"I don't know . . . it stopped ringing, then I heard a dog barking," Frisky heard the first voice answering.

"So the signal is getting through?"

"I guess. . .," the woman answered.

"Let me see that."

Again there were a few thuds in the speaker, and this time a man's voice sounded through it.

"Hello! Is anybody there? Is anybody hearing this? Please answer."

"Woof! Woof!" Frisky barked back again.

"Your husband did not happen to be traveling with a dog, did he?" Frisky could hear the man asking.

"No . . . we don't have a dog," the woman's voice answered.

"Well, somebody does, and that somebody has your husband's cell phone. Now that it's been picked up, the phone company should be able to triangulate the signal for us. Harry!" The man now raised his voice. "Get ahold of CellCom and tell them we have a signal." The man's voice lowered again. "Hold tight, Mrs. Benton. We should have a location within twenty minutes."

Something that sounded like a sob followed.

* * *

That afternoon when the Squad gathered in the Shack, Frisky's disappearance was the first topic of their conversation.

"That's funny," Karen said when Ziggy had recounted all that he knew. "I had a dream about Frisky last night. I rarely remember my dreams, but this one was so vivid, and so . . . friendly. Gramps was in it too. He looked much younger than he did when I visited him with you guys, but I knew it

was him from the way he and Frisky were playing together in this garden. It was such a nice dream, and I woke up feeling all warm."

"You think he's dead?" Ziggy asked, his eyes wide with concern. "What if your dream means that Frisky has died, and is now in Heaven with Gramps?"

Karen hesitated. "No. No, I don't think it's that. That's not the feeling I got from the dream at all. I believe that, wherever Frisky went, he's fine, and that maybe Gramps is looking after him."

"Do you think he'll come back?" Ziggy asked.

"I'm sure he will, Ziggy," Chris answered.

"Maybe he just needed some time to get out and run. With that rain, he's probably been in the house almost all week, hasn't he?"

Ziggy thought for a moment. "Now that you mention it, yes, he has."

"See, he's probably just stretching his legs for a bit," Kento said, then added. "A very big bit."

Ziggy allowed himself a smile, but it faded quickly. "I just hope he found a warm place to spend the night," he said. "It was freezing last night. This morning the little pond in our garden had completely frozen over."

"But the goldfish were still swimming underneath, weren't they? So I'm sure Frisky survived as well, wherever he is," Kento said.

"I guess you're right," Ziggy said.

"What do you say we play a game?" Chris suggested.

"Sounds good to me," Karen answered.

"Let's just stop and pray for Frisky first," said Susan.

"Jesus," Kento began, "please watch over Frisky, wherever he is. Help him to return home by dinnertime tonight, or else give us some sign of where he is and that he's all right. Amen."

"Amen!" echoed the others.

"So what's the game?" Karen asked.

"My mom picked it up during an after-Christmas sale."

Chris explained the rules, while Karen, Susan, Kento, and Ziggy examined all the little pieces, cards, markers and boards that were in the box.

It took some time to get it all set up, but the game was soon underway. Midway through the game Chris' mom brought a snack of cookies and hot milk. By the time they had finished their snack, and the game—which Kento had won—it was starting to get dark outside.

"I'd better be heading home," Karen said.

"Me too," Ziggy said.

"See you tomorrow," Chris said as he and Susan began packing up the pieces of the game.

When she was done, she looked outside just in time to see Kento and Ziggy turning on the flashing lights on their bicycles, and wheeling them out of the gate for the short ride to their street and homes.

"You think Ziggy will be alright? What if something did happen to Frisky? What if he's still not back when Ziggy gets home?" Susan asked.

Chris shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe we can make and photocopy some "missing dog" pamphlets, and post them around town."

* * *

Ziggy sat up in his room. Four finished paper airplanes had the place of honor on top of his shelf, but he didn't feel like playing with them.

There was still no sign of Frisky, and it was past dinnertime. If nothing else, Frisky's hunger should have brought him back home long ago. Ziggy was beginning to worry that something serious *had* happened, and that perhaps he would never see Frisky again.



"Telephone, Ziggy! It's Karen!"
his mom suddenly called up.

News of Frisky? Ziggy thought as he bolted and dashed down the stairs, to where the phone hung on the wall.

"Yes, Ziggy here!"

"Ziggy! Are you watching this?"

"Watching what?"

"The news—Channel Two. Quick! I think it's Frisky!"

Ziggy did not even hang up the phone. He left it dangling on the wall as he dashed into the living room and grabbed the remote from the table.

"What are you doing, darling?" Ziggy's mother called over from the kitchen.

Ziggy didn't answer. He pushed the "power" switch and waited impatiently for the black screen to flicker to life and start showing some color.

His finger pressed the "2" button until the television finally responded.

"...joyful reunion at the Benton's house.

In what Martha Benton describes as a miracle, her two-year-old son was found unharmed after spending a night in the freezing outdoors of Pine-wood Ridge Forest."

"What are you watching?" Ziggy's mom asked, coming over from the kitchen.

"I think it has something to do with Frisky!" Ziggy answered excitedly.

The woman newscaster continued. "John Benton was driving back home with his young son when his car hit a patch of ice and slid off the largely deserted road, crashing into a tree. John Benton was knocked unconscious. The young child, Bobby Benton, who was secured in a child-safety seat in the back of the car, was unhurt, and managed to undo his buckles and crawl from the car.



"While Mrs. Benton called in missing person reports, the blizzard-like conditions made a search-and-rescue mission impossible, and little Bobby would spend the next ten hours alone in the freezing Pine Ridge wilderness before being discovered by police the next morning.

"And here is where the tale gets remarkable. Mrs. Benton, will you tell us what happened?"

"I had tried phoning John several times, but was never able to get through. I kept hoping for the best, though I feared the worst. Finally, one of my calls was answered. But there wasn't anybody there. All I heard was a dog barking into the phone's receiver."

"So then what happened?"

"Well, the police were able to use the signal from the phone to pinpoint its location, which led us to the scene of the crash. We found John still unconscious, but alive. He had suffered a few broken ribs and a broken leg, but the doctors say he is in good condition and should recover soon. But there was no sign of little Bobby. His seat was empty, and the blizzard had obliterated any foot-prints. All we saw around the car were the prints of a dog.

"I feared perhaps they were the prints of a wolf at first, but one of the policemen owned a Golden Retriever, and said these were identical to his own dog's prints. And then we saw him."

The camera now shifted its focus to a dog lying contentedly at Mrs. Benton's feet, and a little boy affectionately stroking him.

"Frisky!" Ziggy shouted.

"Oh my goodness! You're right!" his mother answered.

Mrs. Benton continued on the television: "He was standing a few feet away from the car, barking to get our attention. It was just like something out



of a Lassie movie. I somehow knew this dog would lead us to my little boy. So while the police called up a paramedic unit to take care of John, two of us followed this dog, and wouldn't you know it—he led us right to little Bobby. I have no idea how Bobby got himself out of that child restraint seat, that in itself is amazing."

"And you have no idea where this dog came from?" the newscaster asked.

"I have no idea what he was doing out there. When we looked up his tag, we discovered that his owner lived in Sheldon, but had passed away more than a year ago. . . ."

As Ziggy continued watching, his mom got up and went to the phone.

"Hello. KNTV News? Yes, this is Jemima Lomack. I'm phoning about your Benton report. That dog belongs to my son. . . ."

* * *

As the car pulled up to the front of the Benton house, Ziggy could already hear Frisky barking from inside the house.

The car had hardly come to a complete stop before Ziggy opened the door and rushed out. At the same moment, the front door of the house opened and Frisky came leaping out.

Ziggy and Frisky met halfway up the path, Ziggy showering Frisky with pats of affection, while Frisky wagged his tail and licked at Ziggy's face.

Mrs. Benton's smiling face could be seen looking out from the door, a small child hiding behind her skirt. Ziggy's dad got out of the car and walked up to her.

"Mrs. Benton? My name is Samuel Lomack—Ziggy's father."

"Call me Martha, and please, come in," Mrs. Benton answered.

"Thank you. And thank you for seeing us on such short notice. I must confess, I was hardly able to

get my son in bed last night after he saw Frisky on the news."

"No, Mr. Lomack. It is I who should be thanking you. If it wasn't for your dog, my child might have frozen out there last night. I . . . I just don't know what to say."

Tears came to the woman's eyes. "If . . . if there's ever anything we can do for you."

"That's very kind, but I really had very little to do with it. We're just glad to find Frisky safe, and even more so to know that he was a help in this very special way."

Martha looked up, a little surprised. She wiped the tears from her eyes. "You . . . you say your dog is named Frisky?" she asked, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Yes. Why?"

"Did you happen to be missing two dogs?"

"No. Just Frisky. He ran off the night before last, and we had no idea why or where he had gone until we saw the newscast about your husband's accident."

"That's funny. Ever since Bobby has been home, whenever he speaks of that night, he's been saying 'Fisky an' Gamps.' How could he have known the dog's name?"

"I have no idea," Sam answered.

Martha pulled herself back together. "Oh dear . . . I haven't even offered you anything. Coffee?"

"I never say no to coffee," Sam said with a smile.



Meanwhile, little Bobby had gotten on his jacket and gloves and ran out the front door to join Ziggy in playing with their special friend.

"Frisky. His name is Frisky," Ziggy explained to the boy.

"Fisky," Bobby answered, stroking the dog's nose. "Fisky an' Gamps."

"Gamps?" Ziggy asked.

"Fisky an' Gamps!" Bobby answered, pointing to himself. "Help Bobby."

"Gramps? Do you mean 'Gramps'?" Ziggy asked.

"Gamps!" Bobby said again.

"Did . . . did you see Gramps?" Ziggy asked.

But little Bobby got distracted and toddled off with a little red ball that Frisky had dug out of a pile of snow beside the walkway.

"How's Frisky?" his dad asked.

"Dad . . . Bobby was talking about Gramps. I think he may have seen him."

"Gramps?" Martha asked. "Who's Gramps?"

"You know, Dad . . . Gramps . . . that old man who lived a few houses down from Susan?"

"Oh . . . you mean old Colin Hedgcomb, who passed away last year."

"Yes. We always just called him Gramps, remember?"

"You mean my Bobby saw a dead man?" Martha asked, her eyes wide with alarm.

"I believe 'angel' might be the word you're looking for," Sam answered. "Colin Hedgcomb was an old saint of a man. He'd been a missionary and a teacher in his younger years, and was a good friend of the children. He was Frisky's former master, which probably accounts for the dog's very gentle and caring manner, especially when around young children. I have no doubt that God has some very special purpose in sparing your husband and child in this miraculous way."

* * *

A few weeks later, a large envelope arrived in the Lomack mailbox. Inside was a letter from Mrs. Benton that Ziggy's father read to his family as they sat around the dinner table.



Dear Mr. Lomack and family,

I wanted to thank you again for your part in helping my family and me. It wasn't just your dog coming to rescue my son and husband. It was also you taking time to come by and talk with me, to tell me about God and His greater purpose in allowing all these things

to happen and come together.

I have to tell you that I have often thought about God and serving Him. You see, my sister is a missionary. She started writing me again shortly before the accident. Then, when I heard that Colin Hedgcomb, Frisky's former master, had also been a missionary, I knew that God was trying to tell me something.

So now I have written my sister and asked her if there is anything I can do to help. I will be making a trip to Africa soon to visit her, and to talk about things we haven't talked about for years.

In the meantime, I wanted to send you the first issue of this great monthly magazine my sister sent me, and that I've subscribed to. It's called Activated! I've paid for a full year's subscription for you and your family. I hope you enjoy it.

*Much love,
Martha Benton*

PS: John is fine. He was released from the hospital a week ago. His leg is healing well, and while his ribs are still sore from time to time, and he has to move around on crutches for the moment, he is happy to be alive. He has seen, as I have, how fragile life can be. His time in the hospital has filled him with compassion for others less fortunate than ourselves, and he shares my desire to find a way to help those who need it, as God—and you, and Frisky, and Gramps—have helped us.

The End

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FIVE SQUAD



Issue 140

Within the Stones
Part One

The darkness was broken as a flaming ball descended from the atmosphere. A yellow and gray tail trailed the meteorite as it streaked across the sky on a downward course. A tremor shook the ground as the meteorite crashed into the ground, sending earth and the shattered remnants of the giant rock into the air.

"What was that?" Chris asked, jumping up out of his sleeping bag.

"I don't know," answered Karen. "But that sure was a loud crash!"

Chris rushed over to the window of the Shack, where the Squad had been spending the night, and scanned the darkness for any sign of evidence as to what had taken place. Karen joined Chris at the window.

Frisky, who had been sleeping outside, was howling and barking.

"Frisky sounds excited about whatever it was," said Chris.

"What are you guys doing?" Kento asked, opening one eye and letting out a sleepy yawn. "And why is Frisky making so much noise?"

"Didn't you hear the crash a few minutes ago?" Karen asked.

"There was a crash?"

"I guess you didn't hear it. But the whole ground shook. It was real weird."

"Where are you going?" asked Kento, watching Chris lace up his boots.

"I'm going to go check it out."

Chris threw on his jacket and grabbed a flashlight.

"Wait for me," Karen said, as she clambered about the Shack in search of her shoes and jacket.



Illustrations by Kristen

Recommended age: 8 years and up. (May be read by younger children at the parents' discretion.)

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"I'll come too," Kento said. "Though I'm not sure if I'm awake enough for adventure," he added with a yawn.

The three friends headed out of the Shack. As they did, Frisky stopped barking and perked up his ears.



"What is it, boy?" Chris asked as he scanned the horizon with his flashlight.

"Over there!" Karen pointed.

About a kilometer away in the field behind Chris' house, a small cloud of glowing dust hung like a mist over the landscape.

"This is kind of spooky," Kento said.

"I know, but I'm so curious," Chris said.

"Let's take it slowly," Karen suggested.

They made their way carefully to the crash site. A gentle sprinkle of rain started to fall, clearing away the cloud of dust.

"It's getting warmer as we near this thing—whatever it is," Chris said.

"There's a funny smell, too," said Kento.

"Kind of like sulphur," Karen added.

"Whoa! Look at that!" Karen shouted. "There's a huge crater in the ground."

"This wasn't here before," Kento said.

They peered closer into the crater. A subtle yellow glow came from the bottom.

Chris' eyes sparkled with excitement. "Looks like a meteor hit or something. I am going to check this out," he said bravely.

"Be careful," Karen said.

But Chris' curiosity was stronger than his sense of caution. He climbed down into the crater ditch.

"Could you hand me the flashlight, please, Kento," he said. Then, "Coolest! Look at this!"

Chris held up a small, peculiarly shaped stone, with a hole in it. It was letting off a dim yellow glow that would fade into a blue and then return to yellow. The stone had a flat, smooth surface, almost as if it had been polished.

"Incredible!" Karen and

Kento exclaimed.

"Is that what the yellow glow at the bottom of the crater was coming from?" Karen asked.

"I guess so," said Chris. "Come on down and check it out. Let's see if we can find any more of these stones."

After digging through the dirt on the crater floor they discovered five more stones. Each of the stones was different in shape, but all had the same smooth, polished surface. Although they looked similar to each other, when the stones were turned at different angles, each one reflected a different color—blue, green, purple, red, orange, and turquoise. The stones were the size of large coins, and each had a distinct hole in it that ran through the entire stone.

"These are very unusual," Karen said.

"They don't look like part of a meteorite at all." "And so amazing!" Kento added.

Just then the steady drizzle of rain picked up. A loud clap of lightning flashed and thunder rumbled across the sky.

"We'd better get back to the Shack," Chris said.

The three dashed back to the Shack where they found Ziggy still sleeping, and Susan sitting up with an anxious look on her face.

"Where have you guys been?" she said. "I woke up and you weren't here."

"Look what we found," Kento said, pulling

two of the stones from his pocket. "Aren't they incredible?"

"They're beautiful!" Susan exclaimed.

Ziggy stirred, sat up and yawned. "Hi, guys," he muttered, rubbing his eyes.

All now fully awake, the five friends sat around and discussed where the stones might have come from, surmising* what their worth might be, and whether or not they had any secret power.

The rain stopped outside, and from between scattered clouds the stars were now visible. The friends looked up to the sky as if trying to guess where the meteorite had come from.

"You know, there are six stones," Chris said. "Enough for each of us to have one, with one left over."

"Not if you count Frisky," Ziggy said.

"What would Frisky do with one of these stones?" Karen asked.

"We could put it on his collar," said Susan. "The stones could be our Five Squad symbol."

"I like that idea," Chris said. "And they each have a hole that we could thread a piece of string through. We can wear them around our necks!"

"I think I have some string here that'd be perfect," Kento said, as he rummaged through the trunk in the corner of the Shack.

"Who gets what?" Ziggy asked.

"Something about the blue one interests me," Chris said. "Maybe it's because it's the first one I picked up."

"I like the purple one," Susan said.



Each of the five chose a color, and strangely enough each one preferred a stone that the others were not interested in. Chris had chosen the blue stone, Susan the purple stone, Karen the turquoise stone, Kento the green stone, and Ziggy the orange stone.

"I guess that leaves Frisky with the red stone," Karen said, as she attached it to his collar.

"Look, the sun's rising," said Susan. "We've been up for quite a while, but I don't feel very tired."

"Are we still gonna go to the forest today?" Ziggy asked.

"Why not?" Chris said. "Let's go as planned. Let's get something to eat first, though."

"And we'll need to bring some food along for the day, too," Susan said.

* * *

Later that day, after trekking through the forest for several hours, Ziggy rushed over to an open area he spotted through the trees. "We can have our lunch—*whoa!*" Ziggy tripped on his shoelace, lost his balance, and landed in a heap on the ground.

"Heh, heh ... oops," he chuckled. "Didn't see that my lace was untied." Ziggy picked himself up from off the ground and sat on a nearby stump.

"I could use something to eat," he said.

"A nice cheese sandwich with tomatoes and mustard," Susan finished absentmindedly.

"How did you know that?"

"Know what?"

"Exactly what I wanted to eat."

"I don't know. At first I was going to say a

**surmising*: to guess about something

jam sandwich, but then I kept going back and forth..."

Ziggy's mouth dropped open. "I was trying to decide which sandwich I'd prefer. But I never said it out loud, did I?"

"No, you didn't," Chris said.

"Zingers!" Ziggy exclaimed. "That's weird. It was almost like..."

"I was reading your mind," Susan finished his sentence, and then put her hand over her mouth in shock.

"You're weirding me out, Susan," Ziggy said.

"Let's just get something to eat," Chris suggested.

Susan took off her backpack, and as she did, the stone on her necklace came out from under her shirt.

"Susan!" Karen exclaimed, pointing at Susan.

"I know," Susan blurted out, "my stone is glowing." Susan paused. "I didn't actually know that. I mean I knew ... but I didn't. This is really strange! It's like I can know what you're going to say before you say it. I don't know, maybe I'm just hungry." A puzzled look played on Susan's face, as she busied herself with unpacking the lunch. The others fell silent.

"Sorry, Kento, I didn't pack any orange juice," Susan said, breaking the silence.

"I didn't ask you for any," said Kento. "Though I was thinking about orange juice."

"Susan—your stone. It's glowing again. I wonder if that's what's making you know these things?" Chris said.

"Maybe," Karen said, who had climbed the tree overlooking

their picnic area, and was scanning the horizon with her binoculars. "But I'm not hearing any thoughts, so why aren't they doing it for all of us?"

"Because they give us each a different power?" Ziggy suggested.

"Power?" Susan repeated. "Do you think the stones would actually give us powers?"

Karen put away her binoculars, and started making her way down the tree. "I don't know," she said, "but they were in that creepy-looking crater and probably came from some meteorite. ..." Just then a branch she was standing on snapped. Unable to hold herself up, Karen started to fall.

"Don't worry, I've got you!" Kento shouted, and instinctively stretched out his arms, and without as much as a stagger in his step caught Karen.

"Are you okay?" Kento asked, still holding Karen without flinching from her weight.

"Fine, thanks," she answered. "You can put me down now."

"Oh, right!"

"Kento, your stone is glowing brighter," Susan said.

"Zounds! It's strange but I kind of feel an extra burst of energy myself," Ziggy said. "Like I could do some amazing stuff."

Ziggy jumped to his feet and with incredible agility performed consecutive forward flips, backward flips, and flips without hands. When he'd finished he stood upright, hardly gasping for breath.

"Uh, I didn't know you could do that stuff," Kento said.



"Neither did I," answered Ziggy. "I'm usually kind of clumsy."

"Then how did it happen?" Kento asked.

"The stones!" they chorused.

"That's so cool!" Kento exclaimed.

"We'd better get on our way, guys," Chris said. "It's getting late, and we still want to make it to the lake and back home."

After packing up they continued their trek through the forest. It was a quiet hike, as each one pondered what these stones meant to them, and why some of them apparently had powers or enhanced abilities, while others didn't.

Karen fiddled with her stone, studying each contour on it, and its changing color.

"Okay, so we know what the stones do for you three," she said. "What about Chris and me, though?"

"Well, if Susan is telepathic," Kento began, "Ziggy incredibly agile and fast, and I have unusual strength and reflexes, then what powers would you guys have?"

"Maybe they see things we don't?" Ziggy offered.

"Nope!" Chris said affirmatively. "That's not what it is. Not for Karen ... or me."

"How would you know? I haven't seen you try to see something that we couldn't see."

Chris shook his head. "You don't understand ... Karen's telekinetic."

Ziggy raised an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"You know ... power to move things with her mind and hands without touching them," Chris explained.

"I am?" Karen asked, puzzled. "How would you know that?"



"I feel it inside of me. Try it, you'll see."

"Try what?"

"Use your mind and hand to ... um ... pick that flower and bring it here," said Chris, pointing at a flower in the grass.

"Chris, please!" Karen

exclaimed.

"I'm serious. Go like this." Chris came up behind her and moved her hands for her. "Put one on your temple, like this, and the other one stretched out in front of you ... in the direction of the flower. Now focus. Imagine yourself picking the flower and bringing it over here."

Karen stood there squinting, scrunching her face, and rubbing her temple. After a moment she threw her hands in the air. "Forget it, Chris," she said. "Nice joke."

Chris wasn't laughing, though. "I'm serious. That's your power, you just don't know how to use it yet."

"Please!"

"You're not letting go," Susan interrupted.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know how to say this, but you don't believe you can do it, so that's why it's not happening."

"Look," Karen said, "I don't know when you two planned this whole thing, but the joke's over."

"C'mon, Karen!" Ziggy exclaimed. "Maybe it is your power, but you've got to try harder."

"Okay, I'll give it another shot. But no one laugh."

"We won't," they said.

"This time, imagine that we're not here," Chris instructed. "Focus on the flower alone."



Karen placed her left hand on her temple, and positioned the palm of her right hand out in front of her. She looked straight at the flower, without blinking her eyes or moving.

The four stood around her in absolute silence. It seemed the light breeze that had been blowing earlier stopped rustling the leaves and grass.

After a moment the stone that Karen wore around her neck started to glow. Dimly at first, but as she continued to focus it grew brighter.

At first nothing happened, but then the flower bent one way and then the other. Then it stopped.

"You're getting it," Chris whispered. "Keep trying!"

Just then, it was as if an invisible hand had plucked the flower. Karen continued to focus as the flower detached from its stem and floated toward her. When it was within hand's reach she picked it out of the air and let out a sigh.

"That was incredible!" Susan exclaimed.

"You okay, Karen?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, just give me a sec. It was like everything went in slow motion. I don't know how to describe it."

"Phenomena* are hard to describe," Chris said.

"True," the others chuckled.

"Now we know what Karen's power is," Kento said. "But what about Chris?"

"Check his stone," Susan pointed out. "It's been glowing ever since he started telling Karen about what she could do."

"Are you serious?" said Chris. "I didn't even notice it."

"I know," Susan said with a smile. "I was going to tell you, but didn't 'cause you were showing Karen what she could do."

"So, what does that mean?" Ziggy asked.

"Well, Chris knew something none of us knew," Kento said. "Not even Susan."

"Like a premonition," Karen added.

"This is totally amazing!" Chris exclaimed. "Who would've thought that these stones would be able to give us these powers—different powers? I wonder why us."

"Maybe because we need to do something?" Kento suggested.

"Something? Like what?"

"I don't know. But these are good powers, so maybe we're supposed to help someone."

"Personally, I'd like to learn more about this power before I'm off to do anything," Karen said. "It's very cool, but I don't even know half of what I can do."

"Karen has a point," Chris said. "What good are powers if you don't know how to use them?"

"That's right."

"Do you think we'd spook people if they knew what we could do?" Ziggy asked.

"Most likely," Susan said with a shrug. "I guess that's why superheroes never tell people who they are and always wear a disguise.—It'd scare people if they knew."

"Does that mean we can't tell anyone?"

"It'd probably be better if no one knew," Chris said. "At least not until we have to use them for something."

"But we can develop these powers ... skills—whatever



***phenomena:** plural of phenomenon; something out of the ordinary

they're called—together," Susan said. "We could help each other."

"How?" Kento asked.

"I don't know, but I'm sure we can help each other somehow. Like when you learn to do something new—the more practice you have, the more skilled you become."



"I think we should head home even though we didn't reach the lake like we'd planned," Chris said. "It'll be dark soon, and it'll probably take us the rest of the afternoon to get home. We can talk about this later."

* * *

Over the next few days the five friends spent whatever time they could toward developing their powers. Kento and Ziggy, whose powers were more physical, worked together and helped each other out. Meanwhile Susan, Karen, and Chris focused on developing their mental powers.

One afternoon, several days after they had found the stones, Karen, Susan, and Chris were in the Shack.

"I'll never get this!" Karen exclaimed in frustration. "Every time I think I have it down, something happens that screws it up."

"It's going to take practice, Karen," Susan said. "Don't get discouraged! We're all learning something new, and sometimes it works for us, and other times it doesn't. You just have to keep persevering."

"Let's take a break," Chris suggested. "I'm exhausted."

Just then Kento and Ziggy came in from outside where they'd been practicing.

"How's it going for you guys?" Karen asked.

"I fell more than I would've liked to," Ziggy said, rubbing his neck.

"You know, we've been working at our skills so much in these past few days—we probably just need a break," said Susan.

"Yeah, let's just forget we even have these powers for the rest of the day," said Chris.

Susan loosened the string that held the stone around her neck. "Every day this stone feels heavier and heavier," she said. "I don't know why."

"Same here," the others agreed.

"I'm going to take mine off for a while. That way I'll really 'forget' that I have these powers."

Karen giggled. "I agree with you."

The others took off their stones and placed them on top of the trunk.

"I could use a nap," Kento said with a yawn.

The Shack went quiet. Kento curled up in the corner to rest, as did Ziggy. Chris picked up a book and started reading. Karen walked about the place and tidied things up, while Susan sat in a corner.

"The stones are so beautiful," Susan said. "I love the way they change colors. It makes them so mystical and cool."

"You know there must be some reason that we found these stones," Chris added.

"What do you mean?"

"We're still learning about the powers, but if we actually got them down we could do a lot of good."

"Funny," Karen interjected, "but doesn't it seem like Susan's and Chris' stones could join together?"

She walked over to the trunk, and began maneuvering the two stones. "See this curved part, couldn't that fit with..." Karen jumped back in shock, dropping the two stones onto the top of the trunk.

As she had placed the two stones together, a beam of blue and purple light rose about one foot from where the stones were joined. It then fanned out in all directions, creating a dome two feet in diameter that encased the two stones.

Inside of the dome a stream of bright yellow light went from the center of the stones to the top of the dome.

"What did you do, Karen?" Chris asked incredulously.

"I just put your two stones together."

The others scrambled over to see what was going on.

"What will happen if we touch it?" Ziggy asked, as he went to touch the dome.

"Wait!" said Susan, reaching out to stop him. But Ziggy's finger had already touched the dome, and gone right through it. He pulled his finger back instantly. The dome seemed to close up in reverse of how it had opened, the center light being drawn back into the stone. The dome had retracted into the stones, and all that remained were the two stones pulsating with light, which soon faded.

"Okay, what was that?" Kento asked, breaking the sudden silence.

"No idea," Karen answered. "But do you think any of the other stones join up together like that?"

"We could try," Chris said, looking carefully at each stone. "Let's see..."



"Try Ziggy's, Karen's, and mine," Kento said.

Kento's and Ziggy's fit together. A spiral of green and orange slowly rose from the merged stones.

"Amazing!" Ziggy whispered.

"Don't anyone touch it," said

Chris. "Let's see if anything will happen."

The light continued to spiral upward, and when it was about fifteen inches above the stones the spiral morphed into an orange and green iridescent mist.

"You are the keepers of the stones!" came a deep voice.

The five friends staggered back in surprise.

"Is it coming from the light?" Ziggy whispered.

The others only nodded.

"Within each of these stones lies a power.—And each power is destined for a mission. Learn the power within the stones, and do good. Do not use the power for selfish pursuit, or the power will vanish. As you develop the skills within these stones, the power will become a part of you."

The spiral of light slowly retracted back into the stones. "Find your mission and complete it!" the voice concluded.

With that the Shack went silent.

"Let's try putting Chris and Susan's stones together again," Kento suggested.

Once again the spectacle of the two stones merging lit up the room.

"Something is forming inside the dome," Kento pointed out. "It looks like an image of something."

"What is it?" Susan asked.



"Kind of like—" Chris paused—"that's it, a football stadium!"

"I see it too," Susan said.

"I've seen that stadium before!" Ziggy exclaimed.

"Where?" Karen asked.

"My dad took me to see the season's final game last year. It's, uh . . . bummer, what is it called? Oh, that's right, Whitley's Stadium in Hampton City. It's where my team, the Hampton Hawks, play."

"But why would we be seeing a stadium?" Kento asked.

"I don't know, maybe we're supposed to go there," Ziggy answered.

"Hmmm, I wonder what it means?" Susan mused aloud.

"I know this is off the subject of the stadium," Karen said, "but would my stone go with anyone's? Would there be a message in it as well? Something like these ones?"

"But which stone would it go with?" Kento asked. "Chris' and Susan's went together, and Ziggy's and mine fit, but . . ."

"Frisky!" they all shouted.

Frisky who had been resting in the corner of the room stretched and perked up his ears. Karen removed the stone from around his neck.

"Oh look, they'll fit perfectly together!" Karen exclaimed, as she joined them.

Once again light shot out from the center of the stones, only this time as if it were a fountain of light, letting off individual offshoots of turquoise and red light.

Suddenly a flash of light seemed to engulf the entire Shack. The girls shrieked, while the others stumbled backward in shock. As swiftly as the flash of light had appeared it vanished.

"Uh, guys, look at us!" Ziggy exclaimed.

Each Five Squad member had been outfitted with a suit that matched the color of his or her chosen stones.

"This is cool, but scary," Chris said.

"What do we do now?" Susan asked.

"Learn more about our mission, I guess."

"Which is?" Kento asked.

"I don't know, but it must be important."

"Let's re-merge Chris and Susan's stones, and also Kento and Ziggy's, and see if we get any more information from them," Karen suggested.

"We could also do with learning what these gadgets on our suits are for," Kento said.

"One thing at a time," Chris said. "We'll get there soon enough. But let's put those four stones together and see what else we can learn. Start with Kento's and Ziggy's."

When the two stones were placed together the same orange and green spiral rose, only this time the voice spoke something different.

"Step by step is how the mission will be solved. One mystery unfolded at a time, as you need to know. Follow the blue and purple light."

"Blue and purple light?" Ziggy repeated. "What's that?"

"Of course!" Chris exclaimed. "Susan's and my stone give off a purple and blue light together."

The two stones were joined together, and the same image of the stadium showed up again.

"It's the same thing," Kento said. "What does that mean?"

"Well, maybe like Ziggy said, we're supposed to go there," Susan said.

"For what, though?"

"Remember what the voice said, 'step by step . . . one mystery unfolded at a time.'"

To be continued...

HEAVEN'S
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FIVE SQUAD



Issue 144

Within the Stones—Part Two

The silence was broken by a gleeful laugh. Simeon Kurndaft's face lit up as he jumped up from the desk in celebration.

Simeon was a twenty-four-year-old with brown hair that was overgrown and hung past his eyes. He was muscular and fit, though he walked with a slight limp. His late father had been a scientist, and Simeon had always taken an interest in his father's experiments and inventions. His father had endeavored to cultivate Simeon's wild imagination and creative talent.

When Simeon was eighteen his father had died in a car accident. His mentor gone, Simeon attempted to forget his sorrow through inventing things, most of which he destroyed immediately after they were created. His only joy outside of his father's workshop was playing with the Greenville Giants, but when that dream vanished, Simeon plunged into a world of inventions that was motivated by revenge and anger.

"At last!" he shouted in elation. "I have created my very own Simeonizer!"

For three years, Simeon had put all his time and energy into developing a mechanism that would enable him to become invisible to the human eye. A year earlier he'd discovered the components that would make his invention a reality, but it had still cost him the better part of the past year to finalize the details of his creation, what he had dubbed the Simeonizer.

He stroked his latest invention, which looked like little more than an elaborate watch with a blue opalescent* face and six buttons on the rim.

"At last, revenge will be mine," he crooned. "Now for a quick test run."

He placed the Simeonizer on his wrist, stood in front of a mirror, pressed several of the buttons, took a deep breath, and smirked as he vanished.

"Ha! Ha!" a sinister laugh broke out in the room. "I am a god!"

Instantly Simeon reappeared, still laughing. "It has begun," he said, taking a mock bow. "Enter Simeon Kurndaft, the invisible god!"

* * *

The Five Squad spent the better part of the afternoon discussing what their plan of action should be. They also took the time to learn more about their suits.

"These suits are so amazing!" Kento said. "Who would've thought we'd get powers—much less suits that accompany them!"

"With an awesome jetpack attached," added Ziggy. "I can hardly wait to get on with our mission."

"What's wrong, Chris?" Susan asked.

Chris sat with a distant look on his face, as if he hadn't heard Susan's question.

"Chris! What's up?" Susan repeated.

"Oh, sorry, did you ask me something?" asked Chris, jolted out of his reverie*.

"I was just asking you what was wrong. You looked kinda weird, and I was getting disturbed vibes from you."

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking ... actually, it was more like a feeling. Something's not right somewhere."

"Do you have a few more specifics for us?" Karen asked, raising her eyebrow.

***opalescent:** shimmering with milky colors

***reverie:** to give thought to something

Illustrations by Kristen

Recommended age: 8 years and up. (May be read by younger children at their parents' or teachers' discretion.)

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Chris put his hands to his head. "I don't know what it is. Something has happened. I'm not sure what it is, but it's *not* good. It has something to do with the stadium that we saw, but I don't know what, exactly."

"Guys, you know—we haven't prayed about all this," Kento said. "That'll probably help us know what to do next."

"True," added Susan. "We know we have a mission to get to, but we're not doing anything because we don't know where to start."

Karen began to pray: "We're a little confused, Jesus. We found these incredible stones, and we know that we've been chosen to work on some sort of mission. But we have no idea of where to start."

Chris continued: "What should we do, and where should we go, Jesus?"

The room went silent, as each one took time to listen.

After a few minutes, Chris spoke up. "I don't know what anyone else got, but I got that what I was feeling was a premonition, and that our first step..."

"Is the stadium," Susan finished his sentence for him.

"Yes."

"If that's our first step," Kento said, "then once we get there, we'll find out what the next move should be."

"Are we ready for this?" Susan asked with a smile.

"Not exactly," answered Ziggy. "But I'm excited!"

The five friends piled out of the Shack, dressed in their suits. Around their necks they wore their stones, which had started to glow.

"Our mission begins," Susan announced.

Frisky let out a few barks and jumped up excitedly.



"Sorry, boy," Ziggy said. "This isn't an adventure for you. Next time, perhaps."

"We'll be back soon," Karen added.

"One ... two ... three," Chris said.

They'd learned what the different gadgets on their suit were for. One activated the jetpacks on their backs. They pressed on the button and their jetpacks fired up. With a gentle jump they took off into the sky, following the train lines that led to Hampton City.

* * *

Throng of people cued outside Whitley Stadium. The annual football finals for the Triumph Trophy were being held. The two teams were the Hampton Hawks and the Weston Winners. Fans wore the colors of their team. Chanting and cheering resounded throughout the stadium.

Unbeknownst to the crowds, the stadium management was running around frantically.—The prized Triumph Trophy was missing.

The previous night it had been locked up in its place, but now it was nowhere to be seen. Security cameras had not been able to pick up who the thief was; he'd not left a trace. In fact, there was absolutely no evidence of his appearance, simply that the locked cabinet had mysteriously opened on its own, and the cup had vanished within minutes of apparently falling out of the cupboard.

"This cannot be happening to me!" cried the agitated Mr. Pustach, head manager of the stadium. "Get security on this immediately. I want that trophy found ... NOW!!"

* * *

The Five found a comfortable speed that took them from Sheldon to Hampton City. As they

neared Hampton City, they crossed the Hampton airport airspace.

"Let's keep our eyes open," Chris said. "We don't want anything disastrous happening to us."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Kento and Ziggy saluted jokingly.

Chris and the others laughed.

The pilot of a passenger plane stared out of the cockpit in astonishment at seeing the five fly by.

Inside the control tower, the mike crackled: "This is Captain Boorman from flight PA472 approaching the airport."

"Roger, we read you, Captain. You are coming in smooth. Hold your present course."

"Roger that, uhh ... one more thing ... you're not going to believe this."

"Try me, Captain. Make my day."

"Well, control, there are ... five kids, unaided, flying next to us."

There was a moment of silence, followed by a burst of laughter. The control tower answered, "You're right, Captain. I don't believe you."

"Then you are definitely not going to believe it when I tell you that they're wearing some type of superhero suits."

"Roger that, Captain. I don't know what you are seeing but we are picking up five unidentified bleeps on our radar screen. Airport security will be on them immediately. Please continue with your landing."

"Roger that, control tower."

Airport security sent a helicopter to investigate the five unidentified bleeps on the radar. As soon as they were spotted, the pilot reported to the control tower.

"This is airport security. We have a visual."

"So, what is it?"

"Exactly what was reported: Five kids flying through the sky, kind of like ..."

"I'm listening."

"Superman or something."

"Have you been swigging some of that high-octane jet fuel up there?"

"Nope. Just doing my job. They're heading out of airspace now."

"Which direction?"

"Looks like they're headed towards the stadium."

"We'll notify the officials at Whitley Stadium. Bring the chopper back in."

* * *

Simeon Kurndaft's wall was a collage of photos, news clippings, and mementos that explained his resentment and how he had gotten to his spiteful state.

Two years prior, at age twenty-two, Simeon Kurndaft had played center for the Greenville Giants. It was the team's first Triumph Trophy championship game in years, and it was against the Hampton Hawks. Tragically, while playing Simeon had had a serious accident, which cost him his promising professional football career and his team the game. Since that fateful day, he immersed all his time and money into learning all he could about chemistry and physics that would enable him to take his revenge one day.

Callous sports writers, looking for a sensational story, never let Simeon forget his misfortune.

"Kurndaft—The Player Who Never Made It!" screamed the headlines, telling of Kurndaft's promising future, and the accident that ruined his career. His accident had been caused by a





careless move on his part, which had shattered the bones in his knees. He'd spent over a year going through numerous surgeries and therapy, and though he slowly regained his ability to walk and run, he would never play for the Greenville Giants again. His career as a football player had come to an abrupt end.



"That Triumph Trophy should've been mine," he smoldered. "But what I was deprived of then, I've taken for myself!" Kurndaft stroked the shiny cup that had vanished the previous night from the stadium.

"What will you say to that, Hawks?"

He set the trophy on a shelf and sat for hours simply staring at it. *What's my next move?* he thought to himself. *I have the trophy I've always wanted, but I feel I need more. Surely revenge once stricken is sweet, but I hear it calling me again. I must conceive my next plot.*

"On to a greater plan!"

* * *

"That was the greatest flight I've ever had!" Ziggy exclaimed, as they landed on the stadium lawn.

"Perhaps because it's the *only* flight you've ever had," Kento said with a chuckle.

"Could be. But I enjoyed it a lot."

Their entrance had not gone unnoticed. A sportscaster caught sight of them and announced the "breaking news" with his opening commentary of the events.

"What an unexpected surprise, Martin," one of the sportscasters announced. "Looks like we have a quintet of 'superheroes' dropping in on the game."

"They've definitely got the dress for it," his co-announcer added. "Quite outstanding! I don't recall seeing it on the program."

"Well, a surprise never hurt anyone, and much more can be expected with the game we're about to see—the biggest game of the year. For those of you who are tuning in now, this is the Triumph Trophy finals between the Weston Winners and the Hampton Hawks, held here at Hampton City's Whitley Stadium."

"You'll have to agree, Martin, that the Whitley entertainment committee has outdone themselves this time."

"You've got my vote on that, Jim."

The sportscasters were not alone in thinking that the Five's landing was part of the opening ceremony of the championship game. A huge wave of applause and cheers rose from the seated crowd.

"I think that cheer is for us, guys," Susan said. "Let's get out of here."

"Spread out, and when we're out of sight, let's lose these suits. They make it a bit hard to blend in," Chris chuckled.

"See the central clock over there by the concession stand? Meet you there in five."

The Five dodged past the curious crowd around them. When they were out of sight they pressed their stones, which clothed them in their regular clothes again.

"Now what?" Kento asked.

"I don't know," Chris answered. "But since we're now at the stadium, we might get a different picture when we put Susan and my stones together."

"We can't do it here," Susan said. "It will draw too much attention. Let's find a quieter place."

They found an exit and rounded a corner to find a deserted spot out of sight of the crowds. As soon as the stones clicked against one another the magic began. In the glow the stadium was still there, as

was a trophy and a bank, but rapidly more and more banks appeared in the picture, and kept increasing. The picture faded as the glow subsided.

"What was that?" Susan asked.

"I have no idea," said Kento. "But I believe that's the Triumph Trophy we saw, which is what the winners of the game will get."

"But why banks, as well?" Karen asked.

Chris had a pensive look on his face.

"You're sensing something again, aren't you?" Susan said to Chris.

"It's about the trophy ... it was stolen, or something like that."

"You sure?" Ziggy asked.

"No, I'm not sure, but it's what I feel. I don't know how accurate it is, which is why I'm usually hesitant to say anything."

"Well, it's a good thing Susan asks you then," said Karen. "We obviously have these gifts for a reason, and even if we're not exactly sure how to use them, if we're sensing something or need to act using our powers, then that's what we should do."

"You're right, Karen," Chris said. "I'm worried at times that I'll send us running in the wrong direction because I 'sense' something, and then we could miss the real problem, or something."

"Well, your job is to express what you're sensing, and then we can talk about it and decide together what our next plan of action should be."

"I hate to sound impatient," Kento interrupted, "but don't you think we need to get a move on?"

"Why don't we try putting Ziggy and Kento's stones together again and see if there's any instruction coming from there."

"It has only begun," the voice said. "But more is still to come, unless you can prevent it.

Follow the premonitions, and more insight will be found."

"We're going to be following you more, Chris," Karen said. "At least that's what it seems like."

"Let's recap what we've found out this far," Kento suggested.

The five friends spent several moments reviewing all the information they'd received from the stones, including the latest that had been told and shown to them.

"How will we find out if the trophy *has* been stolen?" Ziggy asked.

"I'm not sure," Susan answered. "But we have to go on the belief that it has been stolen, and that something is still going to happen here in the stadium."

Karen said, "Let's check out the stadium. We can split up and look around and see if anything strikes us as suspicious, then meet back here in half an hour."

"Let's pray first," Chris suggested. "I'm feeling a little uneasy about all of this."

"Me too," Susan said. "Though remember, this mission was given to us, so if we follow the signs we're given, and if we do our part, then we'll be okay, right?"

"I sure hope so," Kento said.

The stadium was packed with at least 30,000 spectators. Moving around would not be an easy task, much less discovering something they were clueless about.

The five divided up; Chris and Susan headed to the south side of the stadium, while Karen, Ziggy and Kento took the north.

Chris and Susan had been walking down a stadium aisle, when Chris whispered. "You should put your stone in your



shirt. It's shining, and it might attract attention."

"Chris, I'm reading some very disturbing thoughts."

"Do you know where they're coming from?"

"I couldn't say for certain, but it seems like it's coming from that row over there. Usually I can sense who the person is, but right now it's like I can't see the person whose thoughts I'm hearing in my head."

"I'm sensing something weird as well. Like what I was feeling when we saw the picture in the stones."

"Whoever's thoughts these are I'm picking up, they're gloating over having stolen the trophy, and..."

"What, Susan? What else?"

"They're planning something else, the beginning of..."

Suddenly Susan was knocked to the ground, as if someone had bolted into her, only no one had come that close to them.

"Are you okay?" Chris asked. "What happened?"

"I don't know. It felt like someone ran into me, but no one did, did they?"

"No, it was just you and me."

"The thoughts are getting more distant now. I wonder what that means."

"We should head back. The others are going to be at our meeting spot shortly."

* * *

"You were right, Chris!" Kento exclaimed. "The trophy was stolen. Apparently it was in its place last night, but suddenly vanished."

"And get this," Ziggy interrupted, "the security cameras couldn't identify who did it, because



it was as if it was an invisible person."

"Where did you find that out from?" Chris asked.

"Kento gave a vendor a hand moving her cart, and she started talking about this. It's what's being whispered amongst the stadium workers," Karen explained.

"Chris, this is spooking me out!" Susan said.

"I know ... when you got hit ... then it faded. That's what it was."

"Whoa! Mind including us in on your discovery?" Kento asked.

"Sorry, guys, something just happened while we were up in the stands, and I think it has something to do with what you're talking about," Susan explained.

Susan and Chris told the other three what had happened to them.

"We should see if the stones will tell or show us anything else," Ziggy said.

This time there was a picture of the stadium, and it was zooming in on the ticket box, and then to a bolted room, underneath the stadium.

"We saw that place when we were checking out the stadium!" Kento exclaimed. "I think it's where they keep the money."

"You mean the safe?" Chris asked.

"I guess that's what it'd be."

"Guys ... stolen trophy ... stolen money?" Susan asked.

"Could very well be."

"What do we do then?" Ziggy asked, looking worried. "We need to go now and make sure nothing bad is happening."

"Calm down, Ziggy," Karen said. "We have to make sure we're doing this properly and getting our instructions right."



"What's our next move, though?"

"Finding out if there's any verbal instruction from the other stone set."

The other two stones were assembled together, and once again they were given instruction as to what to do.

"This is one more step. Follow it and it will lead you on your way."

"I guess we'd better be on our way and check out that safe room," Karen said. "Let's split up—some of us go to the ticket booth, and the rest head for the safe room."

They were just about to run off in the different directions when Kento called out. "Wait!" he shouted. "Aren't we missing the whole suit thing?"

"This would definitely call for it," Ziggy said, as he pressed on his stone. Immediately he was dressed in his heroic suit. "I'm starting to like this!"

Kento, Karen, and Susan took off to the ticket box area. When they arrived, there was a woman curled up in the corner of the ticket box with a terrified look on her face. Her hands and feet were tied.

"Oh goodness, I wonder if we're too late," Karen said.

"No, the woman thinks it's still here," Susan answered.

"It?" Kento asked.

"She doesn't know what 'it' is, but look..."

Drawers were flying open and money coming out and then suddenly disappearing.

"Karen, shut the drawers!" Kento exclaimed.

"How?" Karen hesitated for a moment before she focused her mind more intensely than ever before. She knew her cue, and with her mind she began shutting the drawers, and trying to keep them shut.



"I don't know how long I can do this for."

"He's leaving!" Susan shouted. "He's heading for the door. Kento!"

Kento dashed for the door, and with his strength held it shut. "I could use some help, people," he said.

Just then Chris and Ziggy showed up on the outside of the ticket booth.

"He's in here!" Susan shouted.

Karen had managed to keep the door shut using her powers, and Kento tackled the unsuspecting invisible being.

The five saw a watch-like contraption fall to the ground, and instantly the invisible being appeared, as Kento wrestled him to the ground. It was Simeon Kurndaft.

Susan let out a shrill scream when she saw him.

Suddenly she called out. "He's going to reach for that thing..."

"I've got it," Chris said, as he and Ziggy entered the room.

Chris looked at the Simeonizer. "So is this your little toy?" he asked.

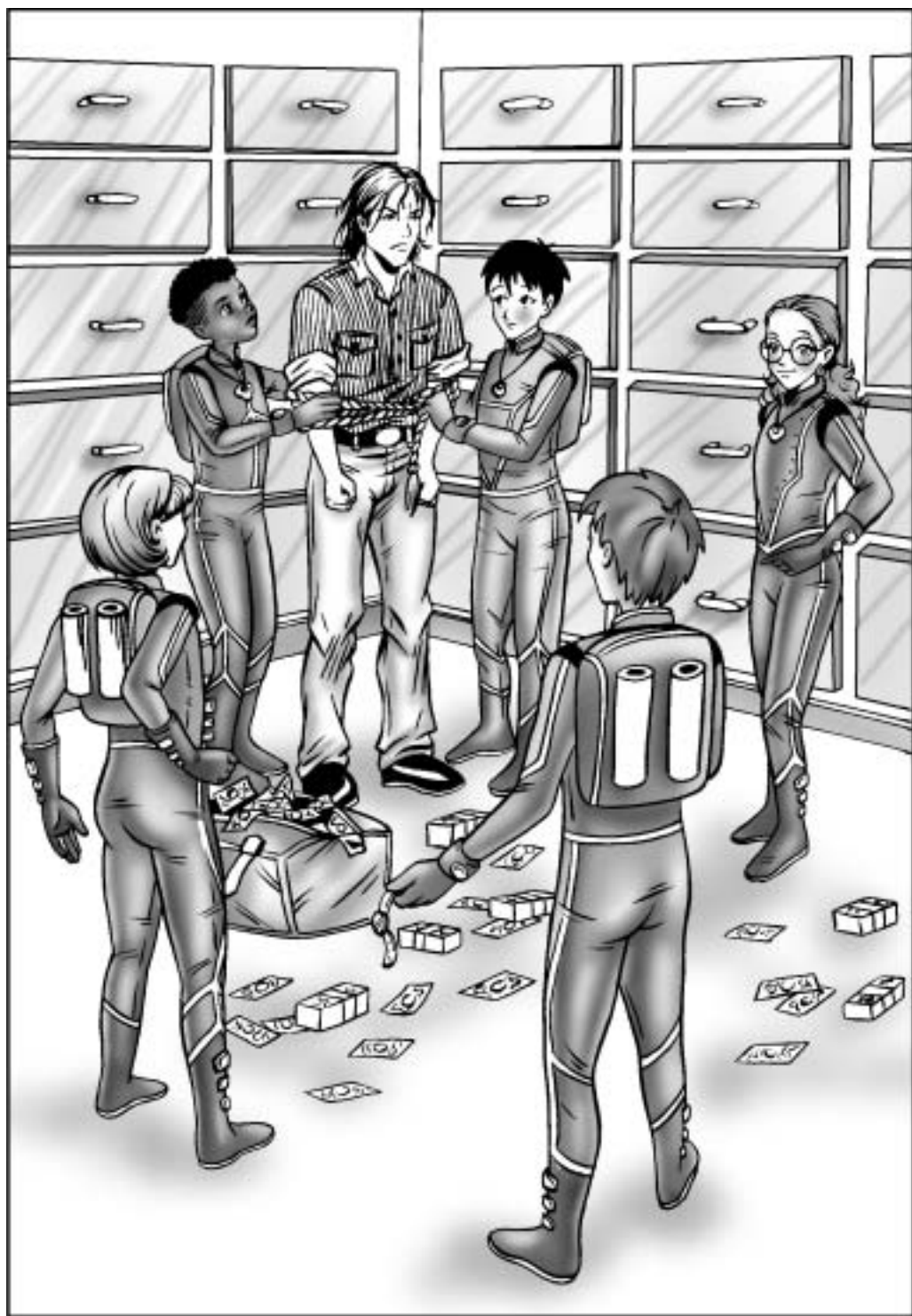
Simeon didn't answer. Kento and Ziggy secured Kurndaft, and tied him up.

At least they haven't found my hideout, Kurndaft thought to himself.

But Susan had overheard his thoughts. "He's got something at his hideout he doesn't want us to know about," she said.

"The trophy, most likely," Chris said. "But I think I might have a clue as to where it is."

A horrified look crossed Kurndaft's face, but then it turned into a cackle. "Nice going, kids, but you can guess all you want. You won't find out anything."



"And would this be of any help to us?" Chris had pulled a train pass out of Simeon's pocket.

"That's not going to tell you anything."

"We'll see. Who's coming with me?"

"I'll go," Ziggy said.

"We'll call security, and then we should probably leave," Susan suggested. "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves and have to answer any questions."

"Good idea," the others agreed.

Chris and Ziggy flew off to find Kurndaft's hideout. When they got to the train station, Chris' power of premonition led them right outside Kurndaft's place on the outskirts of town. There they found the trophy, as well as diagrams of banks scattered over the table.

"I guess that's why we saw the banks in the stones' projection," Chris said.

"Does that mean we prevented a bank robbery?" Ziggy asked.

"Probably—which is pretty cool, if you think about it."

"What are we going to do now?"

"An anonymous call to the police, I think."

* * *

"Good morning, guys!" Chris' mother called out, as she opened the door to the Shack.

"Mom?" Chris questioned, feeling around his neck, as if he'd lost something.

"That's me. Are you missing something?"

"Uh, I don't know."

"Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes. I made waffles with fresh strawberries and syrup. I'll see you in the house."

"Thanks, Mom."

The door shut and Chris started to search the Shack more fervently.

"Where could it be?" Chris muttered to himself.

"Your stone?" Susan asked.

"So it was real? You have a stone too?"

"I don't know. I thought I did. But then I'm not sure if it was a dream or not."

"Guys, wake up," Chris called to the others.

Ziggy jumped up. "Do we have to be off to another mission?"

"Okay, this is weird. Did it really happen, or did we all have the same dream?"

"I've heard that that happens sometimes—more than one person having the same dream," Karen said.

"What happened to you last night . . . in your dream, or whatever?" Kento asked.

Chris started relating his story, while the others filled in portions that they remembered.

After several minutes of talking, Chris remembered: "Oh, Mom's got breakfast served in the house. We can talk more about this more later."

The five friends traipsed^{*} off to the house.

"You'll never believe what I just heard on the news," Chris' mom said, as they entered the house. "Apparently the Triumph Trophy was stolen by some guy just before the start of the game yesterday, but then they caught him. Turns out he was planning to rob banks too."

The five kids stood in shock.

"Spooky!" Ziggy exclaimed, with a make-believe shiver.

"I wonder if it'll happen again," Susan whispered.

"I wouldn't mind," Chris said with a smile. "I had fun, even if I don't understand what happened."

***traipse:** to walk casually

The End



How was your day at school?" Karen asked Chris over the phone.

"Okay. I got a difficult assignment, though. We usually do a school play each year, and Miss Jenkins insists that this year she's expecting something original."

"That should be interesting," Karen said.

"Each one of us is supposed to come up with a concept and turn it in to her by next Tuesday. A prize will be given for the best story idea."

"Really? What's the prize?"

"Two tickets to see a play that's in town," Chris answered.

"Which one?"

"*The Man of La Mancha*. Have you heard of it?"

"I think so. It's the one about the crazy knight who fights windmills, right?"

"Well, the thing is, he lives quite a bit later than the time of the knights, but thinks he is one. Anyhow, he gets his neighbor involved—he's called Sancho Panza, who is like his helper—and they both go off to rescue damsels in distress and try to save the world from evil.

Turns out that even though they are a bit crazy, they do change some hearts and give people hope that there is still some good in the world."

"Sounds like we could use a few more Don Quixotes in the world today."

"Anyway, back to reality. What am I going to do about the play? I'm blank!"

"Let me call the other guys, maybe we can help you. Meet you at the Shack after dinner?"

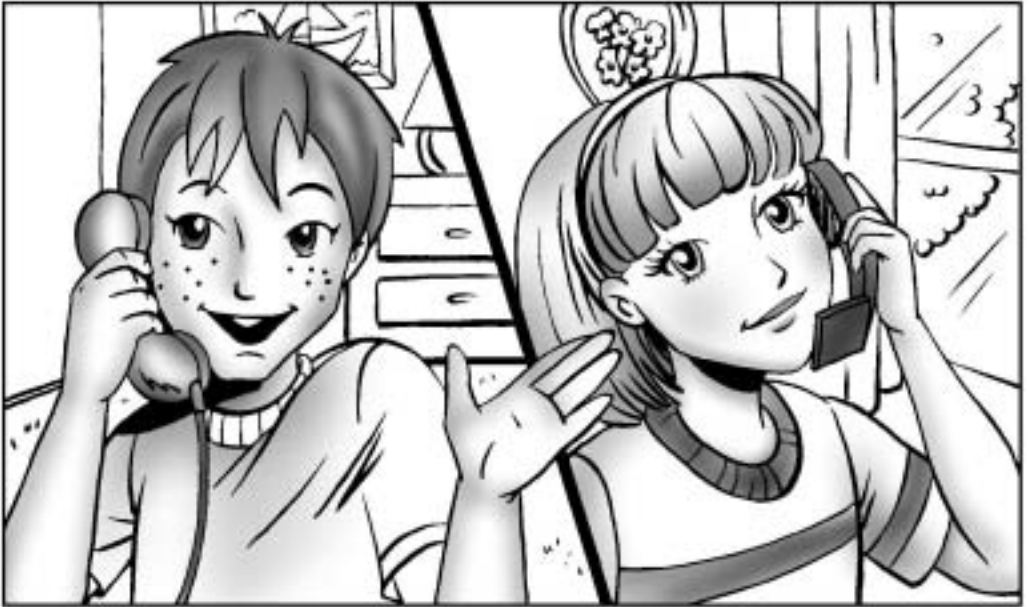
"I'll be there. Thanks a lot!"

True to her promise, Karen was there with all the others. This time, Karen took the lead. "Brainstorming time, everyone! Chris needs a play idea fairly soon. I thought we could put our heads together and help him out."

"I've got an idea," Kento blurted out. "That dream we had with the stones and all. Wouldn't that make a cool story?"

"That reminds me," Susan said, "we never did figure out what Frisky's stone was for."

"Look at him over there—moving his paws and



Illustrations by Kristen

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quietly growling. He must be dreaming about chasing a rabbit or something," Kento said.

"Maybe he's thinking: 'Throw the stick, Master, and I'll fetch it!'" Ziggy barked, trying to imitate how a dog would sound if he could talk.

"I wonder what it would be like if we could talk to animals," Susan thought aloud. "Like Frisky, for example."

"That would be cool," Kento said. "I suppose Noah could communicate with the animals. How else do you think he could get all those animals into the ark? He sure didn't try and run around and capture all of them. He was busy enough just trying to get the boat built in time."

Karen was determined to make some progress with the story concept. "Let's not get distracted or Chris will never get this done. Okay, we have one good idea. Any others?"

A number of ideas were tossed back and forth, and a lot of praying was done, too. Chris was busy writing it all down. After working on it later that night, he had a play setting. A couple days later, with some hesitancy, he turned it in to Miss Jenkins, hoping for the best.

* * *

A week later, Chris came home from school beaming.

"Guess what?"

"From your excitement I would guess that someone just handed you a million dollars," Susan said with a smile.

"Miss Jenkins liked it! I won the prize!"

"Are you serious? I knew we could do it if we all put our heads together," Karen said with assurance.

"Now that you won the prize you can relax and take it easy," Ziggy suggested as he curled up in the comfy sofa.

"Quite the contrary. Now the work begins," Chris said. "Miss Jenkins wants the play to be performed for the school, but she asked if we could

offer our help. She said that they need people who are willing to make it happen so . . ."

"So, you would like to call upon your trusted manpower reserve of able-bodied, wildly willing workers, namely all of us?" Susan said with a laugh.

"Exactly, precisely, and most definitely!" Chris answered, knowing he could count on his friends to come through for him in his hour of need. "And we even have a part for Frisky to play as well. Okay, boy?"

Frisky answered with a few happy yaps and woofs. As usual, Frisky was ready for any action and of course he was glad to hear his name mentioned, whatever the occasion.

"So how can we help?" Kento asked.

Chris had been thinking about the idea for some time and was ready. "Kento, I was thinking you could do lights and sound, along with Ziggy. Susan could do costumes and . . ."

* * *

After a month of hard work, the curtain was ready to go up.

Susan peeked out from behind the curtain at the audience. "Wow, look at all those people!"

She pulled her head back inside and remembered her job of checking on everyone's costumes. Backstage was a whirl with activity as everyone was busy doing his or her job to make sure everything was just right in the last few minutes before the curtain opened. Susan checked out Chris' captain's costume first, as he had the lead role.

"Are you nervous?" she asked Chris, as she made some last-minute adjustments on his costume.

"We've practiced enough," he answered. "I'm ready, but . . . oh Jesus, please help everyone to remember their lines and help this play to turn out as You'd want it to."

"Amen," Susan said. "And don't worry, the prompter is there with the script to help anyone who forgets their lines."

"I hope we don't need her."



"You'll do great!"

A buzzer sounded. The noise in the audience died down as the curtain opened.

Ziggy turned on the large wind machine and an accompanying soundtrack of a raging storm at sea, with thunder claps and the sound of heavy rain.

A spotlight shone on a boat made from plywood, and another light flashed for lightning. Ziggy stood backstage, pulling a wire that ran through a pulley, which made the boat appear to be rocking violently up and down.

The first mate and the captain were tossing to and fro, trying to hang on to whatever they could to prevent themselves from being cast overboard.

The effect of the waves was made by several long pieces of blue cloth that Karen and Susan were shaking up and down from the stage wings. Several other long pieces of flapping cloth served as sails attached to the boat's mast.

The actors had to shout to be heard above the waves.

"Batten down the hatches!" the captain cried. "Take up sail on the mizzenmast*!"

"Captain, I don't think the ship will be able to take much more of this! We have to find shore soon or we'll be food for the sharks!" the first mate screamed back.

"There is no land for a hundred miles! We'll have to set our sails into the wind and somehow get through this! Get some men up to the topsail to secure it right away!"

"That won't be so easy, Captain."

"Where is the crew?"

"Down below playing cards, sir."

"This is no time for games. Get them up here right now!"

"I'd like to, sir, but some of the crew are saying that this voyage was jinxed* from the start. They say that we are all going to die anyway so they want to enjoy the last few minutes of their lives. They refuse to work!"



"Nonsense!"

"It's not only that, Captain... some other crew members are saying that... that..."

"Well, come out with it!"

"That we are doomed to be the next ones to visit Davy Jones' locker*!"

"Enough of this superstition. Heave ho to starboard. All hands on deck! Trim the sails and steer to starboard! I said, all hands on deck! Mate, who is on the wheel?"

"No one, sir..."

The fierceness of the storm was beginning to overpower the ship, and causing it to break up.

"Abandon ship! Abandon ship!" the captain shouted.

The entire crew, including Frisky, wearing a sailor's hat and uniform, came up from below and jumped from the ship, clinging to whatever pieces of wood they could find floating, as the ship tilted upwards and began to sink. One of the crew members grabbed the dog and kept him afloat on top of a large barrel that was bobbing in the water.

The ship, overwhelmed by the waves, sank beneath the surface.

Waves softly lapped on the shore, as the surviving crew members found themselves on the beach. Their clothes were torn and tattered, and they were weary from the storm.

The captain was the first to stand up and pull the others out of the water and onto higher ground. His small sword, attached to his belt survived the ordeal.

Unbeknownst to the survivors, in the shadows behind some nearby rocks, strange slimy figures

* **mizzenmast**: mast nearest the rear of the boat

* **jinxed**: something that is thought to bring misfortune

* **Davy Jones' locker**: an expression meaning the bottom of the sea



were creeping about. Some had webbed feet or long extended fingers.

“What are we going to do to them, Master?” one of these creatures asked, poking his head over the rocks to get a better view of the survivors.

“We could zap them, fry them or freeze-dry them, please!” begged another goon.

“No, fool. Do you want to bring the whole legion of protecting angels on us? Special orders from Prince Grim, we need to make it look like an accident. We’ll pick them off one at a time—starting with the weakest of them. We must do everything in our power to prevent their rescue. Remember, they must not reach the mountaintop and send a distress signal, because if they do, they’ll be rescued, and we’ll be discovered. Now, everyone to your places, and don’t mess up or you will be spending the next month in the pit!”

Just then, Frisky came running back on stage with his sailor’s hat and costume.

(It was a real feat for those backstage to have Frisky participating in the play. It took a lot of coaching and coaxing with a nylon fishing string for a leash that the audience could not see, and offering treats to persuade Frisky to fit the action. There were a few mistakes, but for the most part, it worked.)

“Monty!” the captain exclaimed upon seeing his dog. “How are you, boy?”

“Good, master,” said the dog (with a voice that was pre-recorded), “I am fine but you must follow me, now!”

“Am I going mad? Did you hear that?” asked the captain in astonishment. “It sounded like the dog was talking to me, telling me to follow him!”

“I heard the same thing,” said the first mate. “Do you think this island has some magic power?”

“I have no idea. But look at that collar around his neck. I’ve never seen it before, and it’s aglow. Why must we follow you, Monty?”



“You are in danger,” said Monty. “You must go to the top of the mountain and make a signal fire to be rescued.”

“How are we going to do that?” the first mate asked. “Do we even have matches?”

Though Monty was eager to get going, the captain wanted to be prepared.

“Let’s see what we can find on the shore,” the captain said. “Maybe something’s washed up.”

Though he searched, however, he found nothing on the shore, and a despondent* look crossed his face.

“Oh wait!” the second mate exclaimed. “I have a lighter in my pocket. The flint is a bit wet but it should work if I dry it out in the sun.”

“There’s some good news for a change,” the captain said.

The first mate hadn’t finished his worrying. “How are we going to get out of here? What if we die on this island and no one rescues us?”

“We can climb that mountain and set a signal fire on top. Sooner or later, a ship is bound to pass by and rescue us,” the captain said.

“Let’s do it,” said the second mate.

The crew followed Monty through the jungle, as the captain hacked his way through the low hanging branches and obstructive brush.

The silhouette of several figures could be seen moving in the shadows, and eerie animal calls resonated through the jungle.

“Did you hear that?” the first mate said as he jolted in fright, nearly knocking the captain over.

After regaining his composure the captain said, “It’s just some animals looking for food. We must continue on our way.”

The first mate still clung to his fears. “I don’t want to be their next meal,” he wailed.

***despondent**: discouraged

"Don't worry, everything will be all right," the second mate reassured him.

But the first mate thought of a fresh new batch of worries. "Maybe it was a mistake for us to go this way. Maybe we should return to the beach. We could build a fire there and scare the animals and their noises away."

A tree branch fell, injuring the first mate. Startled, he fell back. A hand from behind a tree reached out and grabbed the first mate by the throat. No matter how the first mate struggled, the shadow would not free him from its clutches.

"Help! Help!" cried the first mate. "Get this thing off of me!"

After removing the obstacle, the second mate attempted to comfort the other: "It's only a tree vine you got tangled in, sir."

The first mate was crouched with his head between his knees, trembling and too frightened to speak.

The captain lifted the first mate to his feet. "Pull yourself together, man! There is only one way to the mountaintop, and that is straight up through the jungle."

The captain was distracted from the first mate by Monty who was barking loudly.

"What's up, boy?" The captain followed the dog who was chasing something. The others followed.

Monty's booming voice could be heard again. "Watch your step," he said. "Some of this ground is..."

"Aaahhh!" cried the first mate. "I've fallen into a mud pit. It's sucking me under!"

"Stay calm," the captain instructed as he tossed a large branch to him so that he could reach it. "The more you struggle, the more you will sink,"

With much effort the first mate was saved. The crew resumed their journey.

When they reached a waterfall the captain called for a brief rest. Hidden from the weary crew, shadows lurked in the trees and amongst the rocks surrounding them.



"I am so thankful for some fresh water. I just wish there was something to eat as well." The first mate had no sooner said this, when the second mate returned holding a large comb of bananas.

"You called? Your genie is at your command to fulfill your wish."

"Can you cook up some steak and potatoes?" the first mate joked.

"Let's be thankful for small miracles at this point."

The first mate, finding himself still hungry after several bananas, decided to look for something more to eat and wandered away from the camp, despite the captain's warning to remain together.

The first mate then saw a strange fruit tree that attracted his attention. He picked a plump red fruit that looked a bit like an apple but was much softer. He was just about to eat it when Monty saw him and started barking and saying, "Don't eat that! It will make you sick."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous—you're just a dog. What would you know?"

The first mate was just about to take a bite when the captain rushed in. He grabbed the fruit out of the first mate's hand and threw it away.

"What are you doing, Captain?" the first mate protested. "I was going to eat that!"

"And meet a slow and painful death. Don't you know what this is? Obviously not! It is called the 'fruit of purgatory'—one bite of that and you will be vomiting within an hour. In two you won't be able to stand, and in three..."

"Okay, Captain, I get the point," the first mate said reluctantly.

"It is getting dark. We had better push on," the captain said.

The group began their trip up the mountain again. Before long they came to a field of flowers. A lurking shadow ran by and sprinkled some dust on the travelers and they began to get sleepy.

"I am getting so tired!" the captain said.

"Me too. Why don't we rest here for a little while?" the second mate suggested.

They looked back and saw the first mate already asleep in the flowers.

"No, good master. It is a trap," Monty warned them. "Do not sleep. Awake and walk on!"

They staggered on, trying to fight the drowsiness, but to no avail. The shadows began to come closer and grow bolder. Monty barked at them, sensing the danger. He licked the faces of each of the crew to wake them up. The captain was the first to awake, and struggled to wake the others up, and finally succeeded.

The shadows then quickly returned to the darkness.

"I sense danger," the captain said as he struggled to his feet. "I thought I heard Monty tell us to wake up. There's no telling what will happen to us if we spend the night here. Come on, there is not much time. We have to reach the mountaintop before nightfall!"

"I'm with you, Captain," the second mate answered.

They walked on until they came to the face of a steep cliff.

The first mate complained, "Well, this looks like the end of the line for us. There is no way up this cliff. We had better turn back before it is too late."

"Speak faith, man," the second mate said. "We haven't come this far just to turn back now."

Just then the ground beneath them began to shake. Large Styrofoam boulders began to fall from the mountainside.

"Watch out for the falling rocks!" the captain shouted. "Quick, let's find a way out of here!"

They followed Monty up a trail.

The earthquake continued and at times the threat of falling off the mountain seemed inevitable.

"Almost there, don't look down! Keep your eyes on the peak," the captain coached the others as they all struggled towards the mountaintop. At last they reached the mountaintop and lit a fire with a few scraps of wood they'd gathered along the way.

"What makes you think someone will see this fire and come and rescue us?" the first mate questioned.

"We have to give it a try, at least. We have to do what we can and trust that God can and will do the rest. Right?"

"I guess so," the first mate reluctantly agreed.

Evening had set in.

"A searchlight!" exclaimed the captain. "Someone has spotted us. They are coming this way. We are saved! We will be home soon! *Now* what do you have to say?" the captain said as he turned to his first mate.

"Took long enough," the first mate said.

Everyone laughed at how ridiculous that sounded at this moment of triumph.

"There's one thing I have to say," began the captain. "First mate, you are now second mate. Second mate, because you spoke faith every step of the way and helped us make it through, I hereby make you first mate! I would be proud to have you sail with me any time." The captain gave him a congratulatory hug.

The captain then went over and gave Monty a friendly pat to show his gratitude.

"I love you, too, Master," the dog responded.

* * *

The curtain closed and a loud applause rose from the audience. The actors lined up for the curtain call. Miss Jenkins brought up a bouquet of roses and placed it in Chris' hands as a sign of appreciation. Everyone took a bow. The next night word spread and the play was performed to a full house with standing room only.

After the final performance there was a party at the Shack where they had a victory celebration.

Chris made a toast as each one raised their glass of fruit punch. "Great job, everyone. We did it as a team. Here's to everyone who helped to make the play a reality!"

Everyone cheered, and then returned to the conversations they'd been engaged in.

"Well, now that that's over, what next?" Ziggy asked Chris.

"Oh, don't worry about getting bored. I'm sure something exciting will turn up at our doorstep," Chris answered.



Issue 153

WORLDS OF ADVENTURE



*A Five Squad
Coloring Book Special*

Illustrations by Kristen

Susan sat up, rubbed her eyes, and blinked a few times as she studied her surroundings. She was in the Shack, where she and Karen had spent the night.

It was a dream, all right! she thought. *But it seemed so real.*

"You'll never believe the dream I just had," she said to Karen, who was beginning to roll up her sleeping bag.

"What was it?" Karen asked. "Like the 'stones' dream we all had?"

"I guess," Susan answered, "but different . . . very cool!"

"What's very cool?" Ziggy asked as he entered the Shack, having overheard the last thread of the conversation.

Before long the rest of Five Squad had joined them in the Shack, and over their bowls of cereal Susan told them her dream.

* * *

"On this key is written your first riddle," the elderly man explained. "Once you pass through this door, the first stage of the competition will begin. Each team has to figure out what their riddle means, and it will lead you to the next key, and the door that leads to the next stage. Every key you find will have a new riddle."

The contestants nodded their heads vigorously after hearing the instructions.

"Read the riddle carefully," the man continued, "because it's the clue that will lead you to find the next key."

Once they had read the riddle on the key several times, Chris placed the key in the lock, turned it, pulled it out, and the door opened on its own. It had no sooner opened than they were sucked into a whirl of colors and powerful energy. They were propelled forward, spinning and turning as they went.

It was over in an instant.



**SURROUNDED BY DARKNESS,
RADIANCE FINDS ENTRANCE.**



The Five Squad stood on a drawbridge in front of an enormous castle.

"How did they ever fight in these?" Kento asked, finding himself suited from head to toe in armor. "It's so heavy, I can hardly lift my arms!"

"This dress is beautiful," Susan said.

"But also very heavy," added Karen, studying her own elaborate dress.

"Let's not forget we're here on a mission, guys," Chris said. He held the key in his hand and reread the cryptic message. "'Surrounded by darkness, radiance finds entrance.' What do you think that means?"

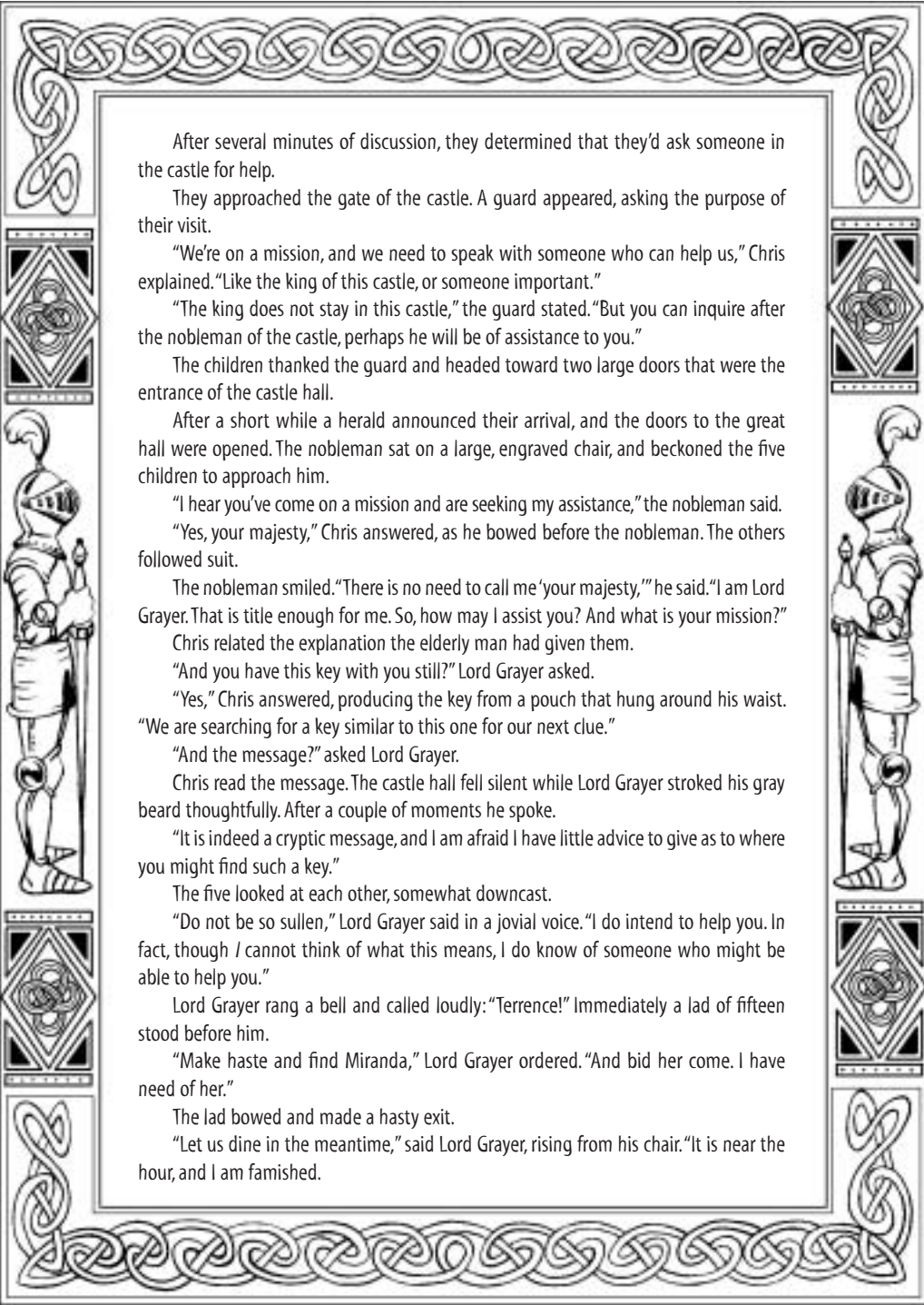
Find an A4 version of this coloring book on the MO site.

For children of all ages.

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After several minutes of discussion, they determined that they'd ask someone in the castle for help.

They approached the gate of the castle. A guard appeared, asking the purpose of their visit.

"We're on a mission, and we need to speak with someone who can help us," Chris explained. "Like the king of this castle, or someone important."

"The king does not stay in this castle," the guard stated. "But you can inquire after the nobleman of the castle, perhaps he will be of assistance to you."

The children thanked the guard and headed toward two large doors that were the entrance of the castle hall.

After a short while a herald announced their arrival, and the doors to the great hall were opened. The nobleman sat on a large, engraved chair, and beckoned the five children to approach him.

"I hear you've come on a mission and are seeking my assistance," the nobleman said.

"Yes, your majesty," Chris answered, as he bowed before the nobleman. The others followed suit.

The nobleman smiled. "There is no need to call me 'your majesty,'" he said. "I am Lord Grayer. That is title enough for me. So, how may I assist you? And what is your mission?"

Chris related the explanation the elderly man had given them.

"And you have this key with you still?" Lord Grayer asked.

"Yes," Chris answered, producing the key from a pouch that hung around his waist. "We are searching for a key similar to this one for our next clue."

"And the message?" asked Lord Grayer.

Chris read the message. The castle hall fell silent while Lord Grayer stroked his gray beard thoughtfully. After a couple of moments he spoke.

"It is indeed a cryptic message, and I am afraid I have little advice to give as to where you might find such a key."

The five looked at each other, somewhat downcast.

"Do not be so sullen," Lord Grayer said in a jovial voice. "I do intend to help you. In fact, though I cannot think of what this means, I do know of someone who might be able to help you."

Lord Grayer rang a bell and called loudly: "Terrence!" Immediately a lad of fifteen stood before him.

"Make haste and find Miranda," Lord Grayer ordered. "And bid her come. I have need of her."

The lad bowed and made a hasty exit.

"Let us dine in the meantime," said Lord Grayer, rising from his chair. "It is near the hour, and I am famished."



"So am I!" exclaimed Ziggy.

Susan nudged him in the ribs for not having better manners.

However, Lord Grayer had not heard his remark. "Terrence will bring Miranda to us when he has found her," he said.

"Thank you, your high . . . I mean, Lord Grayer," Chris said.

"Let us hope I can be of true service to you," responded Lord Grayer, as he led them into the dining chamber.

Partway through the meal, Terrence entered and bowed.

"Did you find her?" Lord Grayer asked.

Terrence nodded and Miranda entered.

"As lovely as always!" Lord Grayer exclaimed rising from the table and greeting the young girl.

The others rose from their seats in courtesy.

"Thank you, Uncle," Miranda replied with a slight curtsy.

Lord Grayer explained the children's need for help, and asked Chris to read the riddle to her. Miranda didn't say anything, though her lips moved silently as she repeated the phrase Chris had read. She walked over to the window as she continued to silently repeat the riddle.

Lord Grayer leaned over toward the children and whispered, "My niece has a gift for such riddles, an insight, you could say. She's had it since she was a child."

"The Sanctuary," Miranda whispered.

"You said something, my dear?" Lord Grayer asked.

"The Sanctuary," Miranda repeated. "I will lead them there. We must hurry, though, for it is soon time when 'radiance finds entrance,' as the words of your riddle say."

Lord Grayer shrugged his shoulders. "I would follow her if I were you," he told the children. "I do not know if that truly is the place, but perhaps it will give you a clue of where to go next."

"What is the Sanctuary?" Susan asked.

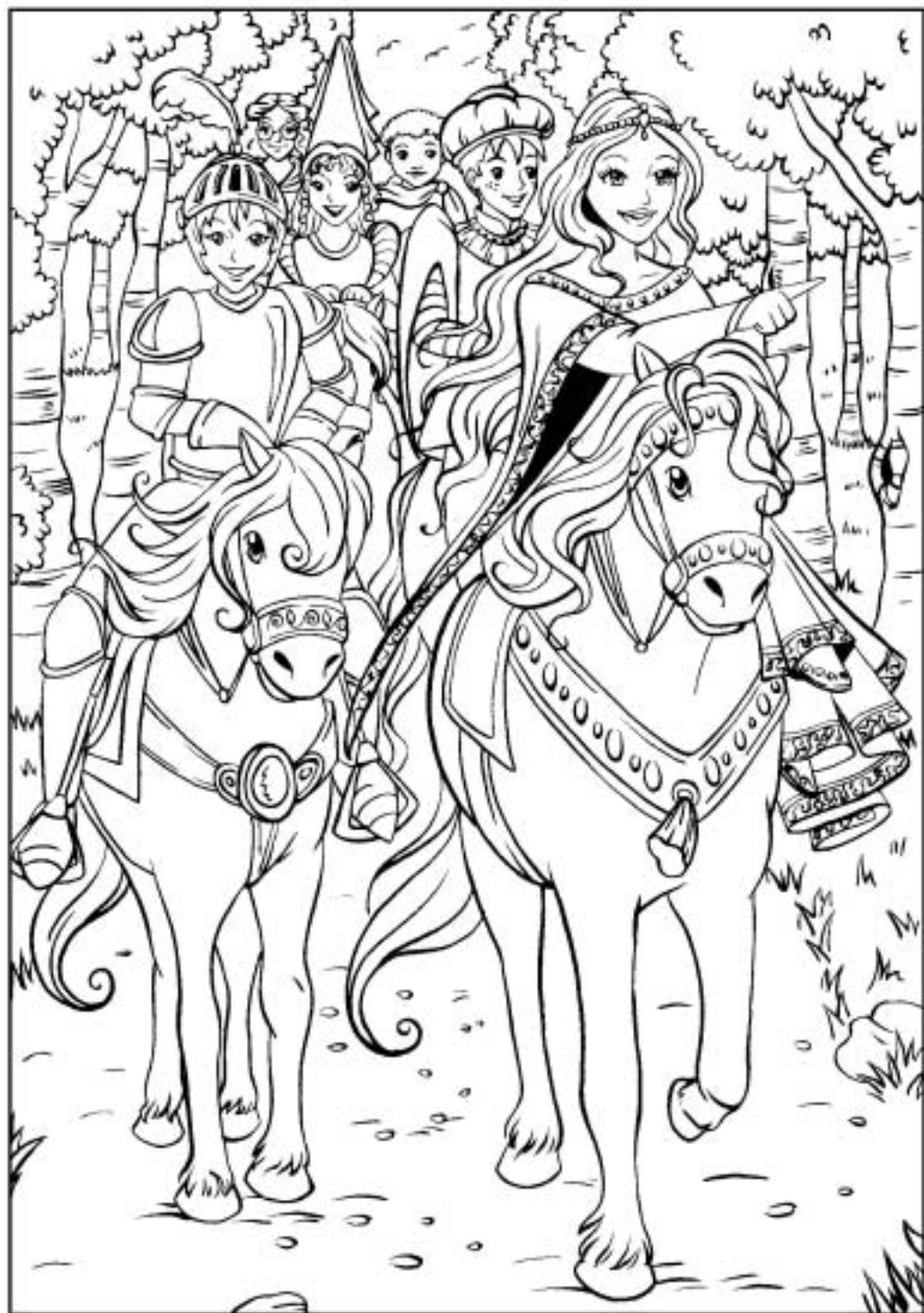
"A garden found in the forest," Lord Grayer explained. "It has been many years since I have gone there. It once was a favorite place where I would go to find peace of mind when I was troubled. Miranda visits there often. I do not recall seeing any place where you might find such keys on my visits there, but perhaps there is."

"Hurry! We must be on our way," Miranda said. "Terrence has readied the horses."

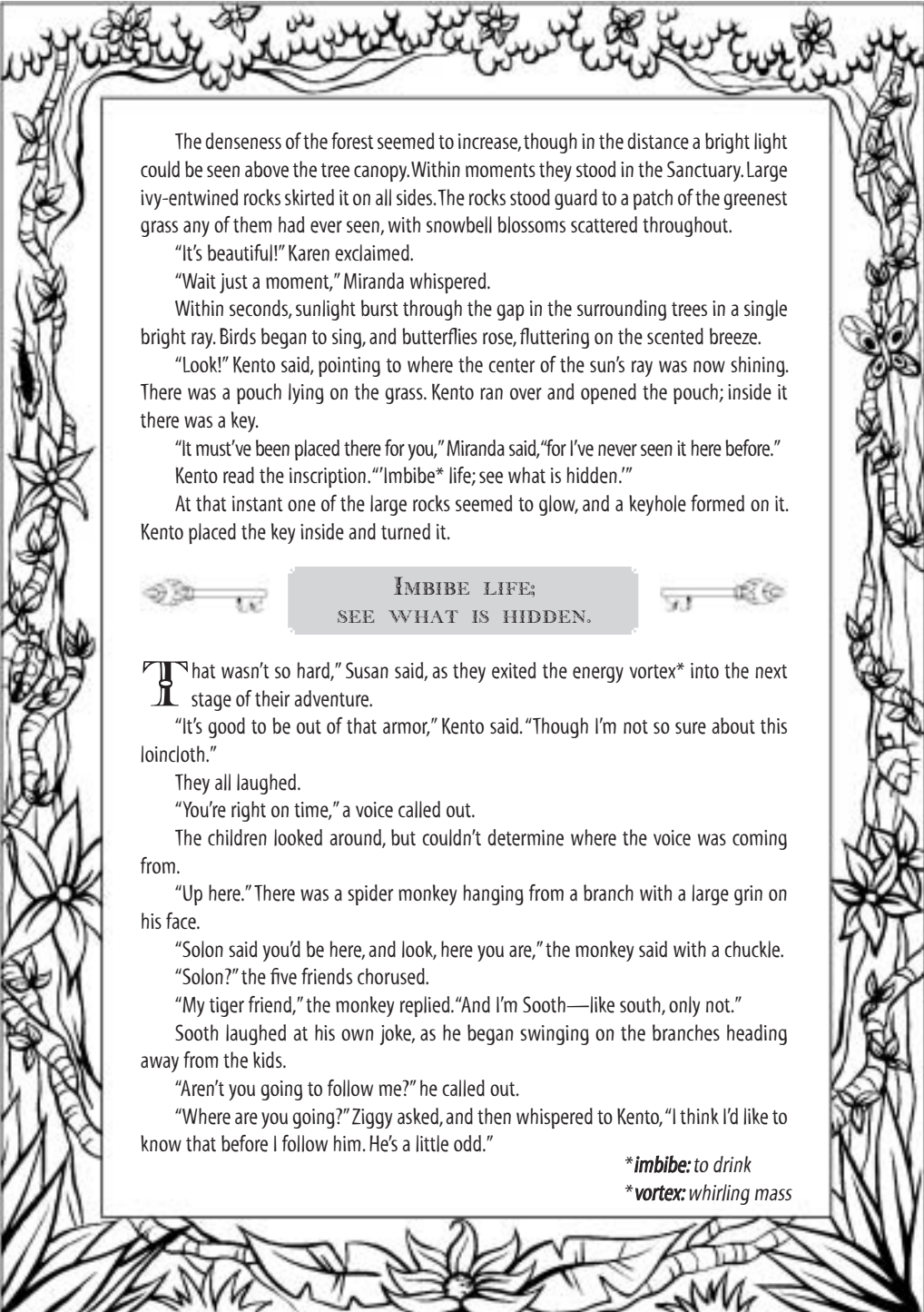
"In case we do not see you again," Chris said, "thank you, kind sir, for your assistance."

"Think nothing of it," replied Lord Grayer. "It is the least I can do. Now hurry, before Miranda leaves without you."

After ten minutes of riding through a dense forest, Miranda slowed her horse down. The others did the same. Miranda slowly dismounted, and led her steed by the reins. "You will understand why it is called the Sanctuary," she said with a smile.







The denseness of the forest seemed to increase, though in the distance a bright light could be seen above the tree canopy. Within moments they stood in the Sanctuary. Large ivy-entwined rocks skirted it on all sides. The rocks stood guard to a patch of the greenest grass any of them had ever seen, with snowbell blossoms scattered throughout.

"It's beautiful!" Karen exclaimed.

"Wait just a moment," Miranda whispered.

Within seconds, sunlight burst through the gap in the surrounding trees in a single bright ray. Birds began to sing, and butterflies rose, fluttering on the scented breeze.

"Look!" Kento said, pointing to where the center of the sun's ray was now shining. There was a pouch lying on the grass. Kento ran over and opened the pouch; inside it there was a key.

"It must've been placed there for you," Miranda said, "for I've never seen it here before."

Kento read the inscription. "Imbibe* life; see what is hidden."

At that instant one of the large rocks seemed to glow, and a keyhole formed on it. Kento placed the key inside and turned it.



**IMBIBE LIFE;
SEE WHAT IS HIDDEN.**



That wasn't so hard," Susan said, as they exited the energy vortex* into the next stage of their adventure.

"It's good to be out of that armor," Kento said. "Though I'm not so sure about this loincloth."

They all laughed.

"You're right on time," a voice called out.

The children looked around, but couldn't determine where the voice was coming from.

"Up here." There was a spider monkey hanging from a branch with a large grin on his face.

"Solon said you'd be here, and look, here you are," the monkey said with a chuckle.

"Solon?" the five friends chorused.

"My tiger friend," the monkey replied. "And I'm Sooth—like south, only not."

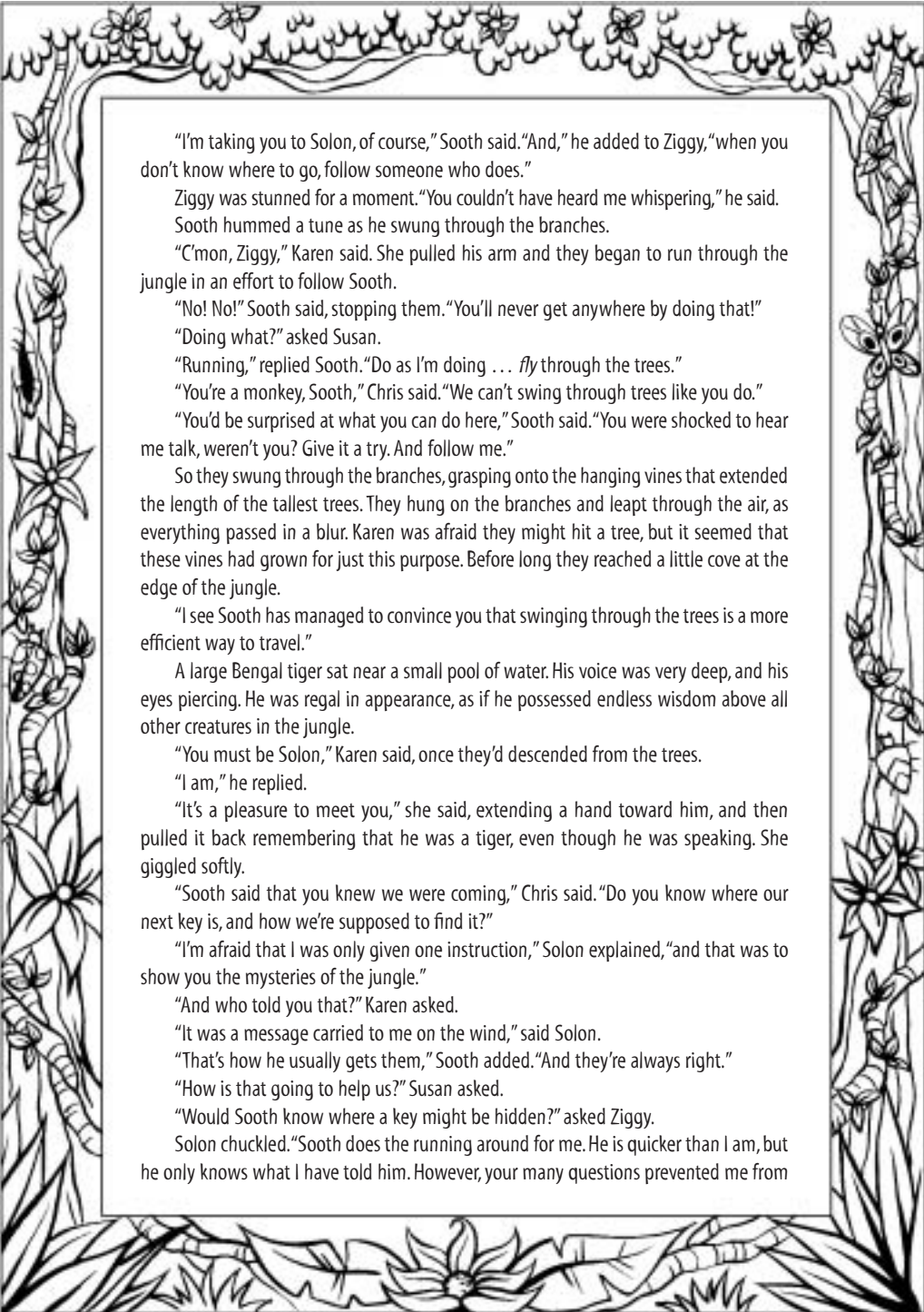
Sooth laughed at his own joke, as he began swinging on the branches heading away from the kids.

"Aren't you going to follow me?" he called out.

"Where are you going?" Ziggy asked, and then whispered to Kento, "I think I'd like to know that before I follow him. He's a little odd."

**imbibe*: to drink

**vortex*: whirling mass



"I'm taking you to Solon, of course," Sooth said. "And," he added to Ziggy, "when you don't know where to go, follow someone who does."

Ziggy was stunned for a moment. "You couldn't have heard me whispering," he said.

Sooth hummed a tune as he swung through the branches.

"C'mon, Ziggy," Karen said. She pulled his arm and they began to run through the jungle in an effort to follow Sooth.

"No! No!" Sooth said, stopping them. "You'll never get anywhere by doing that!"

"Doing what?" asked Susan.

"Running," replied Sooth. "Do as I'm doing . . . fly through the trees."

"You're a monkey, Sooth," Chris said. "We can't swing through trees like you do."

"You'd be surprised at what you can do here," Sooth said. "You were shocked to hear me talk, weren't you? Give it a try. And follow me."

So they swung through the branches, grasping onto the hanging vines that extended the length of the tallest trees. They hung on the branches and leapt through the air, as everything passed in a blur. Karen was afraid they might hit a tree, but it seemed that these vines had grown for just this purpose. Before long they reached a little cove at the edge of the jungle.

"I see Sooth has managed to convince you that swinging through the trees is a more efficient way to travel."

A large Bengal tiger sat near a small pool of water. His voice was very deep, and his eyes piercing. He was regal in appearance, as if he possessed endless wisdom above all other creatures in the jungle.

"You must be Solon," Karen said, once they'd descended from the trees.

"I am," he replied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, extending a hand toward him, and then pulled it back remembering that he was a tiger, even though he was speaking. She giggled softly.

"Sooth said that you knew we were coming," Chris said. "Do you know where our next key is, and how we're supposed to find it?"

"I'm afraid that I was only given one instruction," Solon explained, "and that was to show you the mysteries of the jungle."

"And who told you that?" Karen asked.

"It was a message carried to me on the wind," said Solon.

"That's how he usually gets them," Sooth added. "And they're always right."

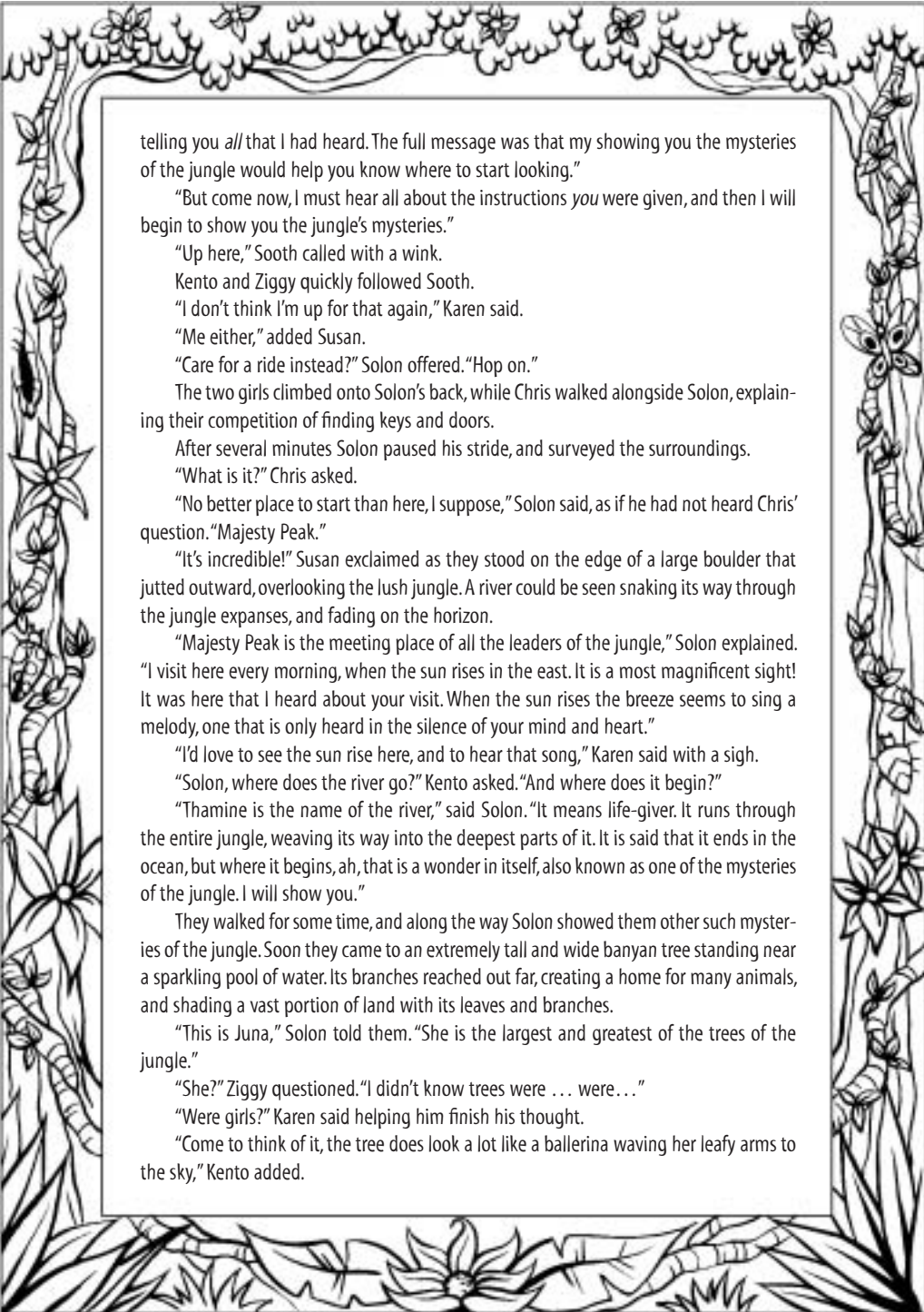
"How is that going to help us?" Susan asked.

"Would Sooth know where a key might be hidden?" asked Ziggy.

Solon chuckled. "Sooth does the running around for me. He is quicker than I am, but he only knows what I have told him. However, your many questions prevented me from







telling you *all* that I had heard. The full message was that my showing you the mysteries of the jungle would help you know where to start looking."

"But come now, I must hear all about the instructions *you* were given, and then I will begin to show you the jungle's mysteries."

"Up here," Sooth called with a wink.

Kento and Ziggy quickly followed Sooth.

"I don't think I'm up for that again," Karen said.

"Me either," added Susan.

"Care for a ride instead?" Solon offered. "Hop on."

The two girls climbed onto Solon's back, while Chris walked alongside Solon, explaining their competition of finding keys and doors.

After several minutes Solon paused his stride, and surveyed the surroundings.

"What is it?" Chris asked.

"No better place to start than here, I suppose," Solon said, as if he had not heard Chris' question. "Majesty Peak."

"It's incredible!" Susan exclaimed as they stood on the edge of a large boulder that jutted outward, overlooking the lush jungle. A river could be seen snaking its way through the jungle expanses, and fading on the horizon.

"Majesty Peak is the meeting place of all the leaders of the jungle," Solon explained. "I visit here every morning, when the sun rises in the east. It is a most magnificent sight! It was here that I heard about your visit. When the sun rises the breeze seems to sing a melody, one that is only heard in the silence of your mind and heart."

"I'd love to see the sun rise here, and to hear that song," Karen said with a sigh.

"Solon, where does the river go?" Kento asked. "And where does it begin?"

"Thamine is the name of the river," said Solon. "It means life-giver. It runs through the entire jungle, weaving its way into the deepest parts of it. It is said that it ends in the ocean, but where it begins, ah, that is a wonder in itself, also known as one of the mysteries of the jungle. I will show you."

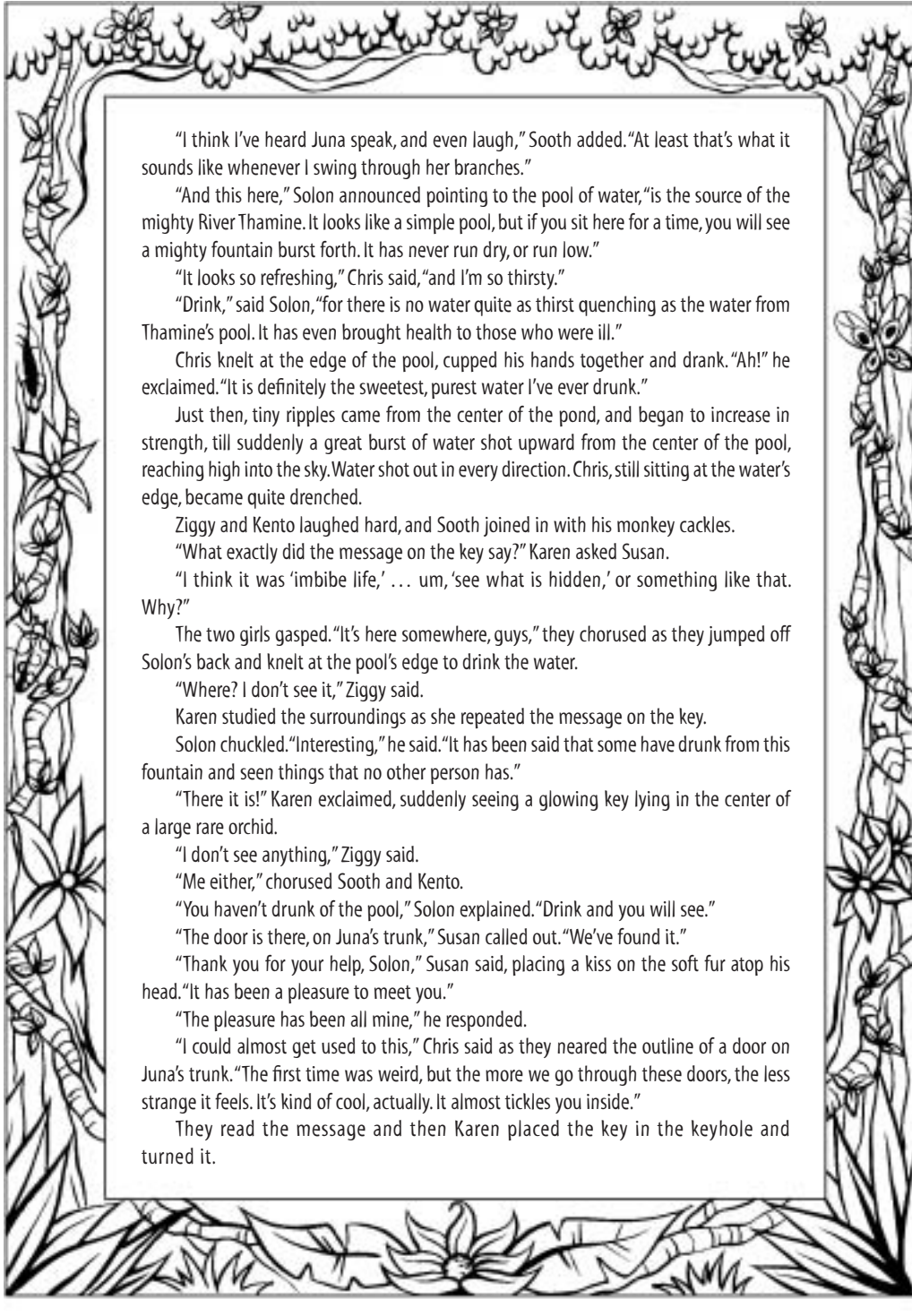
They walked for some time, and along the way Solon showed them other such mysteries of the jungle. Soon they came to an extremely tall and wide banyan tree standing near a sparkling pool of water. Its branches reached out far, creating a home for many animals, and shading a vast portion of land with its leaves and branches.

"This is Juna," Solon told them. "She is the largest and greatest of the trees of the jungle."

"She?" Ziggy questioned. "I didn't know trees were . . . were . . ."

"Were girls?" Karen said helping him finish his thought.

"Come to think of it, the tree does look a lot like a ballerina waving her leafy arms to the sky," Kento added.



"I think I've heard Juna speak, and even laugh," Sooth added. "At least that's what it sounds like whenever I swing through her branches."

"And this here," Solon announced pointing to the pool of water, "is the source of the mighty River Thamine. It looks like a simple pool, but if you sit here for a time, you will see a mighty fountain burst forth. It has never run dry, or run low."

"It looks so refreshing," Chris said, "and I'm so thirsty."

"Drink," said Solon, "for there is no water quite as thirst quenching as the water from Thamine's pool. It has even brought health to those who were ill."

Chris knelt at the edge of the pool, cupped his hands together and drank. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "It is definitely the sweetest, purest water I've ever drunk."

Just then, tiny ripples came from the center of the pond, and began to increase in strength, till suddenly a great burst of water shot upward from the center of the pool, reaching high into the sky. Water shot out in every direction. Chris, still sitting at the water's edge, became quite drenched.

Ziggy and Kento laughed hard, and Sooth joined in with his monkey cackles.

"What exactly did the message on the key say?" Karen asked Susan.

"I think it was 'imbibe life,' ... um, 'see what is hidden,' or something like that. Why?"

The two girls gasped. "It's here somewhere, guys," they chorused as they jumped off Solon's back and knelt at the pool's edge to drink the water.

"Where? I don't see it," Ziggy said.

Karen studied the surroundings as she repeated the message on the key.

Solon chuckled. "Interesting," he said. "It has been said that some have drunk from this fountain and seen things that no other person has."

"There it is!" Karen exclaimed, suddenly seeing a glowing key lying in the center of a large rare orchid.

"I don't see anything," Ziggy said.

"Me either," chorused Sooth and Kento.

"You haven't drunk of the pool," Solon explained. "Drink and you will see."

"The door is there, on Juna's trunk," Susan called out. "We've found it."

"Thank you for your help, Solon," Susan said, placing a kiss on the soft fur atop his head. "It has been a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure has been all mine," he responded.

"I could almost get used to this," Chris said as they neared the outline of a door on Juna's trunk. "The first time was weird, but the more we go through these doors, the less strange it feels. It's kind of cool, actually. It almost tickles you inside."

They read the message and then Karen placed the key in the keyhole and turned it.







THROUGH A RAINBOW
THE JOURNEY ENDS.

Ziggy spluttered and coughed in a slight panic when he realized they were underwater. Karen was ecstatic when she realized the colorful tail that was now a part of her form, and even more surprised to discover that she was breathing normally, and could even speak normally. "Check this out," she said enthusiastically, as she swayed her tail with flowing movements.

"I don't think I'm going to get used to this," lamented Kento, as his tail flip-flopped around in an uncoordinated fashion.

"Kento!" Ziggy exclaimed as he was unceremoniously slapped in the face by Kento's tail. "Watch out how you swing that fin!"

"Sorry. I've got to get used to this tail thing, I guess."

"So where are we going to start on this one?" Chris asked.

The five looked at their surroundings. They'd entered this underwater world on the outskirts of a beautiful palatial garden. Colorful seaweed grew in rows, swaying in the ripples of water, and lining a pathway of colorful sand. There was also a coral garden. Off in the distance an awesome palace towered majestically.

"This place is amazing," Susan said. "I always wondered what an underwater world would look like."

The sound of playful laughter came from behind them as two dolphins chased each other.

"Oh no!" cried Kento. "They're headed straight for us, and..."

The two dolphins had not seen the five children, and continued in their playful banter with one another.

"Whoa! Look where you're going!" shouted Kento, as one of the dolphins bumped into him, causing him to lose his balance.

"Sorry about that," the dolphin said. "Didn't see you there. Actually, I don't think I've ever seen you. New around here?"

"Yes, we just arrived," Chris said cheerfully.

"How come you didn't see us?" Karen asked the dolphins. "I thought dolphins had a particular keen sense of direction using echolocation."

"Echo what?" Kento asked. "Oh that's like sonar, isn't it?"

"Right. We've got that," the one dolphin said, "but... well, we were a little carried away in our game. Sorry about that, maybe we can make it up to you. Can we help you with something?"

"We're here to look for a key," Chris explained.

"A key?" the dolphin questioned. "I'm sure you'd find plenty of keys buried in the sands of many shipwrecks around here. But exactly what kind of key are you looking for?"



"One like this," Karen said, showing the key she'd found in the jungle.

"That's quite the key," the dolphin said. "I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Karkon, and this is my brother Kirby."

"Nice to meet you," the five friends answered.

"So how do you plan to find this key?" Kirby asked.

"We were wondering the same thing," Karen said. "There is a message on it, and we have to find out what it means and where it will lead us to."

"We should take them to Deion," Karkon said to Kirby, after Karen read them the riddle.

"Who's Deion?" Ziggy asked.

Karkon and Kirby caught each other's eye and chuckled.

"Deion's not a person, or a merman, or even an underwater animal," Kirby explained.

"It's a mirror of crystal rock that shows you things . . . things you don't know."

"Really?" Ziggy said, his eyes bulging with excitement.

"There are a lot of wonderful things in the world below the sky," Kirby said.

"Come, we'll show you," Karkon said.

The two dolphins led the friends to the coral garden. Deion, the mirror of crystal glass, stood in the center of the garden, surrounded by numerous orange and yellow sea anemones*.

"This is Deion," Kirby announced.

"How does it work?" Kento asked.

"I don't really know," Kirby said, "but whatever question you have, it knows . . . somehow."

Karen swam up toward the mirror, and looking in it saw her reflection. Gradually, the surface of the mirror seemed to change, as if it were becoming liquid.

"It's vanishing!" she squeaked.

"Not exactly," Kirby answered. "Keep looking."

Karen could see a tunnel in front of her. It was rainbow colored, and seemed to curve in various directions. Slowly it faded till Karen was once again looking at her own reflection.

"What did you see?" the others asked.

"Some kind of tunnel," she answered. "And I heard the words 'through the spiral.' What's the spiral?" she asked, turning to Kirby and Karkon.

"Not really sure," Karkon said. "Though there is a spirally tunnel of sorts behind the palace. I don't know exactly what it's for."

"It comes down from the palace dome," Kirby added, and then chuckled. "It's a good ride."

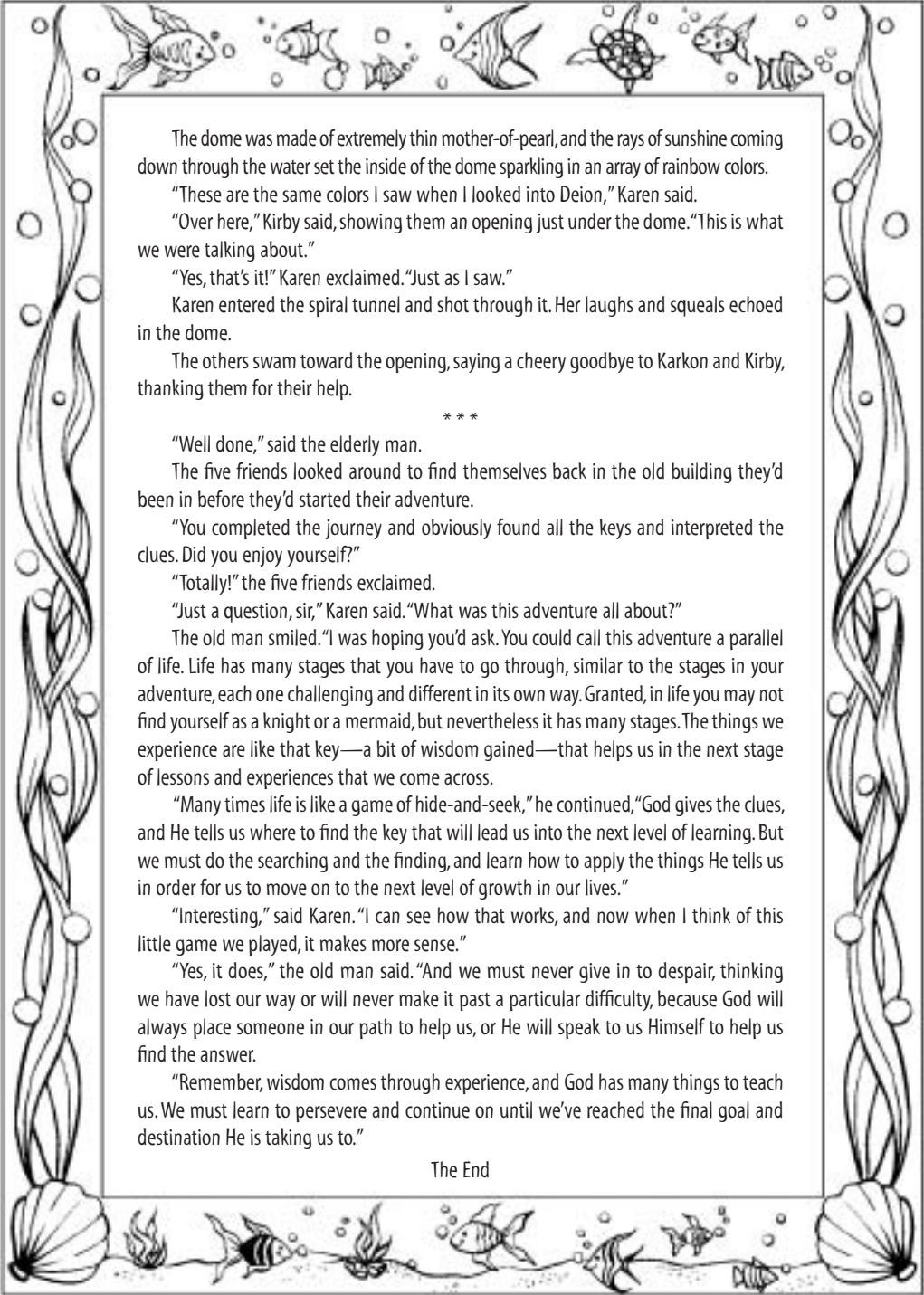
The five followed the dolphins, though Kento had a hard time keeping up.

"Here, hold on to me," Kirby offered.

"Thanks."

***anemone**: sea animal resembling a flower





The dome was made of extremely thin mother-of-pearl, and the rays of sunshine coming down through the water set the inside of the dome sparkling in an array of rainbow colors.

"These are the same colors I saw when I looked into Deion," Karen said.

"Over here," Kirby said, showing them an opening just under the dome. "This is what we were talking about."

"Yes, that's it!" Karen exclaimed. "Just as I saw."

Karen entered the spiral tunnel and shot through it. Her laughs and squeals echoed in the dome.

The others swam toward the opening, saying a cheery goodbye to Karkon and Kirby, thanking them for their help.

* * *

"Well done," said the elderly man.

The five friends looked around to find themselves back in the old building they'd been in before they'd started their adventure.

"You completed the journey and obviously found all the keys and interpreted the clues. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Totally!" the five friends exclaimed.

"Just a question, sir," Karen said. "What was this adventure all about?"

The old man smiled. "I was hoping you'd ask. You could call this adventure a parallel of life. Life has many stages that you have to go through, similar to the stages in your adventure, each one challenging and different in its own way. Granted, in life you may not find yourself as a knight or a mermaid, but nevertheless it has many stages. The things we experience are like that key—a bit of wisdom gained—that helps us in the next stage of lessons and experiences that we come across.

"Many times life is like a game of hide-and-seek," he continued, "God gives the clues, and He tells us where to find the key that will lead us into the next level of learning. But we must do the searching and the finding, and learn how to apply the things He tells us in order for us to move on to the next level of growth in our lives."

"Interesting," said Karen. "I can see how that works, and now when I think of this little game we played, it makes more sense."

"Yes, it does," the old man said. "And we must never give in to despair, thinking we have lost our way or will never make it past a particular difficulty, because God will always place someone in our path to help us, or He will speak to us Himself to help us find the answer.

"Remember, wisdom comes through experience, and God has many things to teach us. We must learn to persevere and continue on until we've reached the final goal and destination He is taking us to."

The End