

ROSE DOOLITTLE

THE
CLAMDOLLAR
CAPER



DANIEL PHALEN



Also by Daniel Phalen

THE CHUMASH CIRCLE

Library of Congress Control Number 2001094308

ISBN 978-0-9712971-1-1

The Clamdollar Caper. Copyright ©2002 by Daniel Phalen. Printed and bound in the United States of America. All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems without the written permission of the author. Published by Creston Hall Publishing Company, Scappoose, Oregon 97056. First edition.



In a Hostile Camp

From the moment Rose Doolittle first set foot in Washington, D. C., her vacation started to go bad.

Miss Priscilla Prill, the middle-aged woman who was to be Rose's tour director, met her in the airport lobby, holding a placard overhead with Rose's name on it. Instead of greeting Rose with a "how do you do?" or "welcome to Washington," Miss Prill scrunched her narrow features in a frown.

"Your hair's mussed," she said.

Medium in height, Priscilla Prill was scarecrow skinny. A navy blue jacket hung like a sack from her bony shoulders, and her skirt looked two sizes too big. Around her scrawny neck stood a stiff white collar, buttoned tight to support a black ribbon tie, and her rather large feet were clad in black low-heeled pumps with squared-off toes. Her mousy brown hair was cut in a short bob, and dark bushy eyebrows met over a sharp, angular nose. Her close-set black eyes glared at

the world with prudish disapproval, and a large brown mole on her chin completed the effect of a witch in a business suit.

“Guess I slept on it wrong,” Rose explained about her hair, thinking Miss Prill was possibly the ugliest woman she had ever met, and hardly the one to criticize Rose’s hair. After nine hours in airplanes and a mad dash through Denver’s Stapleton Airport to make her connection, Rose was ready for a pleasant relief. Apparently that was not to be.

“Well, give me your tickets,” said Miss Prill. “I’ll have to collect your baggage.” Her tone made it seem as though the least errand was a nuisance.

Rose couldn’t find her ticket in her handbag, fumbled the strap, and spilled the contents on the floor. After picking up the mess, she rummaged around in her back pack while Miss Prill stood with her arms folded and tapped one shoe impatiently.

When Rose finally located the folder in a side pocket, Miss Prill snatched the wrinkled folder from her hand and stalked off in a hurry. Apparently she expected Rose to wade through the throngs on her own. Of course, at baggage claim Rose’s bag had to be one of the last to show up, so the big rush was for nothing. But Rose kept her comments to herself.

The drive into the city from Dulles International took an hour through traffic. Miss Prill made it clear as she drove that she was going out of her way on Rose’s behalf.

“The regular guide took sick last week,” she said with a huff, as though the person’s falling ill was criminal. “So I had to pull everything together at the last minute. We sent out reminders to arrange everyone’s arrival no later than 3:00 p.m., but there’s always a straggler.”

Meaning Rose, of course. She wasn’t going to apologize for something she couldn’t control, and even though Miss Prill needed reminding that tighter airport security meant

long delays, Rose didn't speak up about that either. So she tried a diversionary trick her dad had taught her and changed the subject.

"I'll bet you're one of the best tour guides around," she said, really hoping it was true.

Up went the eyebrows as Miss Prill's expression softened. People liked to talk about themselves, Rose recalled, particularly in a flattering light, and Priscilla Prill was no exception.

"Ought to be," she replied. "Taught grade school for twenty-one years, then gave tours for five. I was on President Clamdollar's staff, you know. Gentleman told everyone that I knew more about White House history than any clerk on the federal payroll. Well, that wasn't entirely true, but his opinion gave me a chance to start my own tours for VIPs and guests of the State Department. 'Expressly-For-You Mansion Tours' it's called. We have four docents now."

So that was it! Priscilla Prill liked the prestige of entertaining bigwigs. But now she had to squire a bunch of nobody kids around to museums and tuck them in at night. Indeed, Miss Prill must have been thinking along the same line, for the smile that had crept ever so slowly over her face suddenly stopped dead in its tracks. The scowl was back.

"I had to tear myself away from Expressly to save poor Trumby Tours," she said through gritted teeth.

And play nursemaid to kids again, Rose finished to herself.

It was nearly six p. m. local time when Miss Prill braked to a stop in front of the quaint Wicket Hotel in the heart of the Capital. Rose signed her name at the counter, and the man behind the desk handed Rose the key card to her room and kindly pointed out the elevator.

"Third floor, second door on the right," he said. "Enjoy

your stay.”

Rose thanked the man and picked up her bag, but Miss Prill wasn't finished.

“We start promptly at eight tomorrow morning,” she said, following Rose over to the elevator, her lips pursed like she'd just bitten into a sour lemon. “That means on the bus and in your seat.” She reached around Rose and pressed the button numbered “3” as though Rose couldn't figure that out for herself. “Don't keep the others waiting, we have a long day ahead. Our young ladies wear skirts or dresses at all times. I assume you have several to wear?”

According to her father, Washington sweltered from muggy heat in June, so Rose had brought mostly shorts. Her mother had packed a skirt somewhere and one dress for the big evening at the concert. “I've got a skirt,” she replied. “Do we have to wear dresses even if it's hot?”

Miss Prill's dark brown eyes flashed. “What did I just say?”

“Skirts or dresses.”

The heavy eyebrows went up as Miss Prill waited for the rest.

“At all times,” Rose added.

“Remember it.” Miss Prill nodded once, like a satisfied drill master. “I suggest you eat a full breakfast before boarding the bus. We don't lunch 'til one, and you'll be on your feet most of the morning. Any questions?”

Rose didn't tell Priscilla Prill that she hated breakfast and had trouble getting awake before nine at home. She did the math in her head and realized that the three-hour time difference between the two coasts meant she was expected on the bus at five a.m. Pacific time. Backing up an hour for dressing and (yuck) breakfast meant rising at four a.m.! Her travel alarm was trustworthy, but she might still need help

making the bus at eight. "Where are the other kids?" she asked.

"Everyone else arrived hours ago. The other girls are on the fourth floor, boys on the fifth. Your essay arrived late, so we were forced to make last-minute arrangements. Lucky for you, there was a vacancy in the same hotel."

Rose had mailed in her essay weeks in advance, and was certain it had arrived in plenty of time. But arguing the point would only feed Miss Prill's dissatisfaction, so Rose simply nodded and picked up her suitcase. However, Miss Prill had more to say.

"House rules apply at all times. You may visit only girl's rooms. The boys are strictly off-limits. Lights out by ten."

In the elevator, Rose leaned against one wall and closed her eyes. Maybe it was jet lag, or just the tension and confusion of flying, but she felt drained. And Miss Prill's cold manner didn't make things any better. The woman dished out more rules than a submarine commander.

She had only herself to blame, going for the Washington tour instead of her usual month with Nana and Poppa on their California ranch. Like the others on the tour, Rose was a finalist in a national essay contest on What American Freedom Means To Me. Each winner had received an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D. C., and here she was at last, for a whole week. No sour-mouthed tour guide was going to spoil it for her.

Her room was long and narrow and pleasantly decorated with Victorian touches. Against the left wall stood a queen-sized bed covered by a quilted comforter in a flower pattern. Beside the bed was a round table with two straight-backed chairs. A window in the end wall overlooked a small courtyard bedecked with maples and flower beds. As Rose looked down, she noticed several glass-topped tables with

filigree wrought-iron chairs. Maybe she would find time between tours to just sit down there and relax with a book.

A dresser occupied the right wall and the bathroom was on the left. Rose unpacked her things and spent the next twenty minutes putting everything away. The task reminded her of settling into her room at the Doolittle ranch, except this room was larger and didn't have Nana's little touches.

A card on her dresser announced three selections for the evening meal. She could even order room service, it said, but Rose didn't feel hungry. All she wanted to do was sleep. But first she wanted to write to her mom, so she sat down at the round table and picked up a postcard with a picture of the White House. She had just started "Dear Mom" when the telephone warbled.

"Is this Doolittle?" said a girl's voice on the other end.

"Yes, who is it?"

"Allison Sweet," said the voice. "I'm fourteen and I'll start eighth grade next year at Beck School For Girls, so Miss Prill made me room monitor."

"Oh, thanks, Allison." Rose wasn't sure what private school had to do with it, but she didn't care. "Why don't you come on down for a visit?" she asked.

"Doolittle, I don't have TIME to visit EVERYONE. I have OTHER people to check, you know."

"Oh, sure. Well, I'll see you in the morning. Could you do me a favor and knock on my door on your way down? Just to make sure I'm up? I'm a heavy sleeper."

"That's not MY problem, Doolittle. You KNOW the rules, so DON'T mess up and keep us WAITING. Eight o'clock isn't the middle of the NIGHT, you know."

"Well it's five o'clock my time," Rose started to remind the girl, but the phone had gone dead.

"How RUDE," Rose said to her empty room.

At 7:30 the next morning, 4:30 Oregon time, Rose wandered into the hotel dining room, still groggy and disoriented. Several tour students occupied most of the booths, so she headed for one of the empty tables. She hadn't gotten far when a dark-headed girl beckoned to her from a booth.

"You must be Rose," she said, scooting across the seat to make room. "Come on, chow down. I'm Flick Tamber."

"Ugh," Rose groaned. Then, "Oh, I didn't mean you, I meant breakfast. I can't look food in the face till at least nine."

"Yeah, some people are like that," said Flick, who had eaten her plate clean. "Say hi to the guys."

Rose plopped down where she was told and blinked up at a handsome blond-headed boy across from her. The African-American boy next to the window clearing pancakes with a fork was tall with intelligent black eyes.

"Cleve Norman from Chicago," said the blond, reaching forward to shake her hand. His thumb caught the handle of his mug, and suddenly a shot of hot cocoa spilled across the table top.

"Whoa!" he cried, bobbling the mug with both hands.

The other boy glanced at him with an expression of disbelief. "Cool it, dude," he said to Norman. Then he faced Rose. "I'm Carter Stokes."

Cleve Norman's face was red as he awkwardly mopped the spill with a soggy paper napkin. "He's a local," he explained about Stokes. "Calls himself 'Keybo,' short for keyboard."

Rose introduced herself as the candidate from Oregon, then picked up a menu and glanced over it without interest. Keybo Stokes wiped his mouth with a napkin, squinted, and

addressed Rose with a W. C. Fields nasal whine.

“I was in Portland once,” he said. “It was closed.”

Cleve guffawed and Flick spluttered in her hot tea. Rose still wasn’t awake and stared stupidly at the menu on the table before her.

Keybo Stokes immediately offered apology. “Sorry, that was sort of dumb.”

“S okay,” Rose muttered at her menu. “You have to live in Washington.”

“Oo-oo!” Cleve chided as he elbowed Stokes. “*Touché*, Mister Capital Cee-tay.”

“I never saw it coming,” Keybo admitted. “Thought the girl was asleep.”

“I am,” said Rose as a waitress drew near. “My dad says I’m not civil before noon.”

Rose ordered orange juice and a hot roll she didn’t want. The conversation turned to what each one expected from the tour, and then diverted to a list of who was hot and not hot.

“Britney’s getting old,” said Flick. “I think the President might decide to give her a cabinet position.”

“As what?” asked Cleve. “Leader of the national anthem?”

Keybo shook his head. “Hasn’t got the vocal range. You know who’s way up there with the girls in this town is Peek.”

The fog in Rose’s head cleared a little. “You mean Percy Quince? The White House kid? I agree he’s hot, but not for the usual reasons.”

“‘Usual’ meaning which?” said Cleve.

“Meaning all that stuff about his long eyelashes and great singing voice. The media wants to turn him into a rock idol.”

Keybo Stokes suddenly transformed himself into the likeness of a popular movie comic. “Ay, man, whass wrong

wid a rocka, you dissin da kid?”

Flick waved a hand in Keybo’s face. “Quit talking that way. You’re too smart. What Rose means is Peek’s stand on animal rights.”

“Well, ibbe easy for him,” Keybo replied, sticking to his comic persona. “He automatically get press time. If I wanna hold forth my ideas for cafeteria reform at McKinley Middle School, you think they shovin a video cam in my black face? No way.”

Flick ignored Keybo’s performance. “I still like the way he made his dad promote the House bill on wetland conservancy. That took guts.”

Cleve nodded, adding, “And every senator up for re-election got behind it.”

Allison Sweet suddenly appeared at the table and flicked her hair over one shoulder. She was carrying her clipboard on display, and she peered down her nose as she spoke to Rose. “The bus boards in five MINUTES, Doolittle.”

“I know what time it is, Allison,” Rose replied evenly. “Thanks just the same.”

Allison widened her eyes. “You haven’t even been SERVED yet. Everyone ELSE is finished.”

“No problem if I miss it. Breakfast doesn’t agree with me anyway.”

“Well, don’t COMPLAIN about being hungry at noon—ohmigod, WHERE did you get that AWFUL necklace?”

Rose looked down at her bear pendant, suspended on a rawhide thong. She usually kept it hidden under a tee-shirt top, but the stone had eased over the top button of her blouse. She started to tuck the bear back inside, but Flick reached for it and held it up to catch the window light.

“Hey, what’s this?” she said. “Looks real old.”

The bear carried special meaning to Rose. She had found

it last summer in the ruins of an old adobe near her grandparents' ranch in California. The circumstances were something she didn't like to discuss with other kids. Especially not with Allison Sweet hanging around.

Allison swung her hair over the other shoulder in a way that put her closer to Cleve Norman. "Looks like a relic from a CAMP craft project. Geez, Doolittle, get a GRIP. It's time to drop the little-girl toys."

She whirled away and walked out of the dining room, leaving perfume scent in her wake. Rose hated to admit it, but the scent was pretty nice.

Cleve and Keybo slid out of their side of the booth and headed for the door. "What's wrong with her?" Rose wondered aloud.

Flick made sure the boys were out of earshot before she answered. "Allison doesn't like anyone taking Cleve's attention."

"But we were only talking. You too."

"Yeah, but I didn't make Mr. Cool spill his cocoa."

Five minutes later, twenty-one middle school students—twelve girls and nine boys—assembled on the sidewalk beside a tattered yellow bus parked at the entrance to the Wicket Hotel. By all appearances, Trumby Tours was in need of help. The bus was a dilapidated relic passed down from school district to church to summer camp and finally to Artimus Trumby himself. At various stages of its life it had been painted yellow, cream, sea-green, blue, then yellow again and all four colors showed through one peeled patch or another. Painted on the side in blue letters of differing sizes were the words "Take A Tour With Trumby," a job Mister Trumby evidently had taken on himself, for the letters followed a roller-coaster path most first-graders could have avoided.

Stepping down from his motor coach, Mister Trumby presented a jolly face to the world. He wore a tan work uniform, the front of which was decorated with food and grease stains. An embroidered oval that said "Owner" was stitched over the left pocket, and his brown shoes were flecked with paint. Artimus Trumby was obviously a do-it-yourselfer of sorts.

He hitched his belt over a rotund paunch and pushed a tan watch cap back from his forehead as he prepared to set forth his "rules of the road."

"Awright, boys and girls, it's real easy. First rule is, hands and arms inside the bus at all times."

Keybo appeared on Rose's left. "That's easy," he called out. "The windows are all stuck."

The kids all laughed, and Mister Trumby mopped his red face with a large blue bandana to cover his embarrassment.

Rose turned to Keybo. "How do you know?" she asked.

"Rode with this guy a couple years ago."

Mister Trumby was speaking again. "Second rule is no defacing of the coach interior."

"No prob," Keybo answered in a loud voice, "job's already been done."

More laughter. Cleve Norman reached over and pulled Keybo's ball cap down over his eyes.

Mister Trumby's good nature was being put to the test, so he finished quickly. "And no standing until the bus comes to a complete halt."

"Could take a long time with no brakes."

Mister Trumby squinted across the crowd at Keybo. "In that case we'll call on Mister Stokes to hang out the door and drag his long tongue on the pavement. No prob, eh, Keybo?"

The laughter turned to an uproar and Keybo grinned.

Miss Prill scowled at the group as she shaded her eyes

and counted heads. Her scowl deepened to a frown when she came to the essayist from Oregon. Rose's corn silk hair was brushed neatly and she had managed not to get food stains on her white blouse and dark blue skirt. Still, a look of disdain passed over Miss Prill's face, affirming her earlier opinion of Rose. But Rose met Miss Prill's gaze without flinching.

Allison Sweet from Philadelphia was clearly Miss Prill's favorite and the prettiest girl on the tour by far. She carried a clipboard like Miss Prill's and consulted her roster as she checked off names. Allison's figure had bloomed early and she wore makeup and brushed her thick brunette hair in a flip. She attracted stares wherever she went, and she flirted with the older boys in the group, especially Cleve Norman. Rose figured Allison had been pretty all her life, for she liked having the other kids take her picture and seemed to know how to strike a pose from any angle.

Miss Prill positioned herself beside a park bench and addressed the group.

"First, I will need two tour assistants, one for morning and one for afternoon. Who would like—?"

"I-will, me-me-me!" Allison Sweet was bouncing on her toes and sticking her arm high as she waved her hand.

"All right, Miss Sweet it is," said Miss Prill. "Now, how about an afternoon volunteer from the boys? Anyone?"

Cleve Norman slowly raised his hand as Keybo clouted him over the head with his ball cap.

"And Mister Norman. Very good. Will you two please step forward for instructions?"

Miss Prill smiled her satisfaction and jotted a note on her clipboard as the prettiest girl and best-looking boy joined her.

"Probably awarding Miss Stuck-up five stars for kissing up," muttered a scratchy voice beside Rose. She turned and

had to look down to see who was talking.

The girl was a tiny redhead with freckles and an impish pair of blue eyes. She was dressed in tan halter shorts with a pink cotton shirt—a direct violation of the rules.

“Don’t say it!” said the girl. “My parents paid for this tour and nobody’s telling me what to wear, least of all a two-bit tour guide from Arbuckle, Iowa. Whose salary I’m paying, I might add.” She removed a hand from her pocket and offered it. “I’m Antonia Louisa Dench. Call me Toni.”

“Hi, Toni, I’m Rose,” said Rose.

“You are one tall girl, Rose! Sure you’re not fifteen?”

“No way. I shot up this year.”

“Don’t tell me you’re twelve. I don’t want to hear that you’re twelve. I’m twelve and I must’ve stopped growing when I was six. In fact, that’s what the kids back home joke about. When they don’t accidentally step on me, that is.”

“Where’s home, Toni?”

“You’re gonna laugh.”

“No I won’t, I promise.”

“You can’t help yourself, but I won’t blame you if you do. Everybody else laughs.”

“Try me.”

Toni hesitated.

“Come on,” Rose prodded, “tell me so we can get on the bus without this nagging question hanging in the air.”

Toni drew a deep breath and gazed down at her shoe tops. “Little Neck.”

Rose struggled to keep a straight face. “Um, that’s on Long Island, isn’t it?”

“You’re smirking!” shouted Toni, pointing an accusing finger.

Rose raised her right hand in a mock pledge. “No, honest,” she protested, but the corners of her mouth lifted in

betrayal.

“So you’re human, just like all the others.” Toni looked around. “Where’s a Grinch when you need one?”

For some perverse reason, Rose’s eyes chose that moment to settle on Miss Prill, and Toni snickered behind her hand.

Miss Prill had assigned bus seats alphabetically, which put Dench and Doolittle together in the third row. Allison sat behind the driver in the front seat with Cleve Norman, privilege of rank, while Miss Prill took the seat by the door for herself.

Toni immediately scrunched down and propped her heels against the seatback in front of her, whereas Rose had very little leg room to spare and sat erect, which made her ridiculously taller than everyone except Keybo and Miss Prill.

As the bus lumbered away from the curb, Miss Prill brought out her clipboard and read off the morning’s itinerary: A tour of the U. S. Engraving and Printing Office, where money was made, would be followed by a stop at the Museum of Natural History for a look at the gem and mineral display, including the Hope Diamond, then lunch there. In the afternoon they would take in the “History of the Piano” exhibit in the underground Hirshhorn Museum, and finish up with a photo tour of the East Mall, with views of the Capitol.

Toni rolled her eyes. “A thrill a minute,” she said with heavy sarcasm as she gazed out the window with a bored expression.

“You wanted maybe a personal tour of the White House?” Rose asked.

Toni brightened at the idea. “Hey, Rose, now wouldn’t that be cool? Especially if it *he* was leading it.”

“You mean the President? Not likely—I think he’s just a little too busy.”

“No, goofus, I mean P.Q. The Kid. Mister Long Lashes himself. The First Son.”

“Oh, honestly, Toni, not you too? Why does every girl in the country go ballistic over Percival Quince Clamdollar? He’s just a shrimp in pop-bottle glasses. Ooh, sorry.”

“Forget it,” Toni said with a careless shrug. “They go for him because he’s cute. Behind those glasses are the most divine pair of blues you ever saw. Besides, he’s just the right size for me.”

“Dream on, Antonia Louisa. About forty million babes are lined up ahead of you, a lot of them over twenty-one.”

“I know,” Toni pouted. “But just once I’d just like to win something that bigger kids don’t have a chance at.”

“Toni, size isn’t everything. Look at that girl who’s playing the concert tomorrow night.”

“Who cares? She’s from Arabia or somewheres.”

“Armenia, and she’s a violin virtuoso and only thirteen. And she’s no taller than you.”

“She’s taller by an inch and a half.”

“Are you sure? I mean, how do you know?”

“I looked it up on the Internet. Nobody who ever got out of first grade is shorter than I am.”

“Toni, I was only pointing out that size is not the only measure of a person. Samova Dossarian is living proof. People from all over the capital will be here for her performance.”

“Are you going?”

“I didn’t think we had a choice. Besides, it’s included in the tour we won. Maybe I’ll get a little culture. How about you?”

“My mom bought me a dress for it, so I may as well go.”

Rose had difficulty imagining Toni Dench in a dress. The idea almost made her laugh, so she put it out of her mind. “Look on the bright side,” she said. “There’s always a chance the First Family will show up and we’ll get a look at P.Q. Clamdollar.”

Toni brightened. “Do you think we could get close?”

“Not with those Secret Service guys surrounding them all the time. But we might get a glimpse. I’ll hoist you on my shoulders, how’s that?”

“Not funny, Rose,” said Antonia Louisa Dench, scrunching down in her seat until her head slid below the back. “Not a bit funny.”



The Dark Side

Toni and Rose got separated inside the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. A glass-enclosed observation deck overlooked the work areas, allowing visitors to watch workers print, stack, and cut sheets of bills. At either end of the line, an armed guard was posted to prevent stragglers from wandering through a door or falling behind. Washington was full of armed guards these days. Walking around town among so many weapons gave Rose the creeps.

She was standing above a worker who was stacking sheets of five-dollar bills for cutting when she whispered from the side of her mouth. “What a dirty place to work!”

She half-turned, expecting Toni’s nod of agreement, but instead she was confronted by the unsmiling face of Keybo Stokes. She hadn’t seen him since boarding the bus earlier. He stood an inch taller than Rose and his eyes carried an intelligent sparkle as he lifted his chin in the direction of the greasy machinery.

“My dad worked down there for twenty years. Used to come home smelling like ink.”

Rose felt her face burn with embarrassment. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything.”

“No problem,” said Keybo. “You’re absolutely right, it’s filthy work. He wants me to do better.”

“I think you’ll be outstanding at anything you do.”

“Whoa, we hardly met,” he said. “Although I already know a bit about you.”

“Like how I hate breakfast. That’s not much.”

“Like how you stopped a theft ring out in California last year.”

Rose faltered for a moment, stunned. How had Keybo Stokes found that obscure news item? She tried to cover her surprise with a casual flip of her hand. “Oh, that! Well, I had a lot of help, mostly from real crime fighters.”

Keybo remained serious. “I’d like to talk to you about it. Maybe after we get through with this place.”

Rose hadn’t told a soul at home except her parents, and because news traveled slowly to Sherman, Oregon, if it traveled at all, her exploits had escaped notice at school. She started to shrug off Keybo’s invitation, but at that moment the tail guard approached them with grim-faced authority.

“Move along, you two,” he said. “Tour’s about over.”

The M-16 rifle slung over his shoulder stifled Rose’s will to speak. She just did as she was told and moved.

It was eleven o’clock and the sun was bright outside when Miss Prill led the group through the exit doors and up the street toward their bus. Keybo edged toward Rose, obviously with his earlier promise in mind, but Cleve Norman quickly appeared at Keybo’s elbow, and, of course, wherever Cleve went, Allison had to go. Realizing that his one-on-one chat with Rose had drawn a small crowd, Keybo

bit his lower lip in disappointment. A little shake of his head told Rose there would be no discussion of last summer for the time being. Rose was glad, but tried not to let her relief show.

Just then Toni appeared at her side. “What happened to you? I thought we were sticking together?”

Before Rose could answer, Allison interrupted.

“Did it ever OCCUR to you, Dench, to keep your place in LINE? I nearly lost TRACK of you. After all, I AM morning MONITOR, you know.”

Instead of answering directly, Toni just kept her eyes on the pavement in front of her and continued walking.

“I’m talking to you, Dench,” Allison insisted. Jen and Pen Quillen had appeared on either side of her like fighter jets flying wing formation. Rose had noticed that whenever they showed up, Allison became more aggressive.

Rose looked down at Toni’s small figure and realized that a small thunderstorm was brewing there. But instead of blasting back, Toni posed a question of her own.

“Allison, where’d you learn to talk?” Her voice held a conversational tone, her manner was polite. “Was it an old folks home where everyone’s deaf?”

Allison’s eyes narrowed and her pretty mouth contorted in a cruel twist. “No, I just GRADUATED from LeClair School for Girls. It’s VERY exclusive.”

“Oh, wow, you’ll have to tell me what it’s like some time. I’m just a public school brat.”

“Well, that’s to be expected of anyone from LITTLE Neck.” Allison turned to Jen and Pen and rolled her eyes. “I MEAN, her father sells BATHROOM fixtures.”

The two girls laughed with Allison and the three of them turned to break away for the bus. Toni maintained her cool.

“Almost right, Alley Cat,” she said loud enough for the

other girls to hear. “Daddy has a whole sales force to do the selling for him. Guys like your dad, I imagine.”

Allison spun around, a look of scorn clouding her pretty features. “MY father is a STOCK broker with Clenker Batten SWAB. He wouldn’t be caught DEAD selling SINKS!”

Toni held her ground. “Oh, heavens, Alley Cat, Dench Porcelain doesn’t sell sinks. Daddy’s factory makes urinals and toilets. He’s got contracts with two national hardware chains and three thousand hotels around the world.”

Allison wrinkled her nose and made a face. “How positively disGUSTing,”

“Not bad really,” Keybo remarked, “Got all kinds of possibilities for promo angles.” He tucked his chin and launched into an imitation radio announcer baritone. “And remember, there’s no stench with Dench.”

Toni glared at him while the crowd around them howled with laughter, Rose included.

“Oh, Toni,” said Allison with a snigger, “you must be so PROUD of your father. What DO they call him, ‘the commode king’?”

Rose stopped laughing. Jen and Pen did their best to keep up the effect, but their muted *ha-has* rang hollow. Allison didn’t seem to notice as she pressed ahead.

“Guess he’s very BIG in WASTE removal,” she said, checking with Jen and Pen, who were standing in awkward poses, forced grins pasted to their faces as their eyes darted away nervously.

“That’s right,” Toni replied evenly. “So big, in fact, that he has his own seat on the New York Stock Exchange. He just fired a guy by the name of Charlie Batten for messing up a big merger deal. Wouldn’t be one of your dad’s senior partners, would he?”

Allison's smile froze in a sickly grimace. "You're making that up."

Toni shook her head quickly. "You can read about it in Barron's if you don't know already."

Rose could tell by the pained expression on Allison's pretty face that she did know already. Her father must have mentioned something at home about losing a big account, because Allison spun on her heel and stalked away without another word.

Oddly, Toni seemed to take no pleasure from Allison's defeat. She slid her arm through Rose's and pulled her at a rapid pace up the sidewalk to the bus.

"Damn it," she muttered when they were in their seats. "Why'd I let her do that to me?"

"Toni, nobody cares what Allison Sweet thinks."

"That's not what I meant."

"Well, she only embarrassed herself."

"That should have been enough, but I let her drag me down and get nasty. That's not me, Rose."

"You sound almost ready to apologize."

Just then Allison brushed by on her way to her alphabetically assigned seat. Toni twisted around to follow Allison with her eyes. "Maybe I should."

"I don't think so. She's the one who owes an apology, not you."

Toni turned back and sat up straight. "Rose, some things you do for yourself."

Rose pondered Toni's remark all the way through the Museum of Natural History. It reminded her of something a Chumash Indian woman had told her about finding your own path, and it was still echoing through her head when Keybo Stokes caught up with her in front of a glass display case filled with crystalline rocks called geodes.

“How about a date?” he asked.

“Keybo! I don’t date boys I hardly know.”

“Hey, just for lunch, okay? The cafeteria’s huge and you can sit anywhere. I thought we could find a small table and talk about Tobin Lightfoot.”

Rose felt the ground slip from under her. Tobin would be eighteen now, and probably working cattle somewhere. He hadn’t answered her letters for months, so she had stopped writing altogether. If Keybo knew Tobin’s name, he knew a lot of other things Rose wasn’t ready to answer. But he was being so nice about it, she couldn’t refuse.

“Okay,” she agreed, “but don’t expect a lot.”

The museum cafeteria offered great food and a wide selection. Rose decided on a vegetable salad, and picked out a melon wedge for dessert. Keybo found a table and surprised her by seating her in gentlemanly fashion before he launched into his interrogation.

“Look, maybe I ought to start out by telling you a bit about myself.”

Rose almost heaved a sigh of relief. She couldn’t have asked for a better start.

Keybo took a bite of his hamburger, chewed, and smiled. “I still eat burgers like the other kids where I live, not nouvelle rabbit food.”

“Is it rough?” Rose asked. “I mean, you read about the crime and poverty in Washington. I hope you’re not too close to that.”

“Smack in the middle. But there’s ways you can get around a lot of the bad stuff. Plus, I got great parents. I’m lucky they both live in the same house. It’s kind of tough with six kids, well, five now. My oldest brother’s gone now.”

“Off to find a job?”

Keybo sobered as he frowned at his half-eaten hamburger. “No, he died in a street fight.”

“Oh, Keybo! I’m sorry!”

“So’m I. He was a great guy, always looking out for me. Jamal’s one of the reasons I survived this far. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

Rose put down her salad fork. “Keybo, look, I don’t know what you read about me, but if it’s about fighting crime—”

“It’s about stopping a crime before it’s committed.”

“Well, I didn’t stop anything. They were already stealing when I got there.”

“You knew something was up, though, didn’t you?”

Rose thought back, remembered a lot of questions with very few answers. And none of them had had to do with the big question of whether she had lost her mind. Whether the voices and visions were real or imagined, whether the people behind the voices were living or dead or someplace between. One thing for sure, she didn’t have answers for Keybo Stokes.

He was watching her across the table. The mind behind those intense black eyes of his was churning, alive with activity, and she was tempted to answer with a question of her own.

“You know how, sometimes, you think you know things?” she started. “Certain things are fact, others you know are just guesswork, and others don’t make any sense at all.”

Keybo was nodding. “And you find out the stuff that doesn’t make sense is the truth.”

Rose nodded. Where was he going with this?

“What do you see when you look at me?” he asked suddenly.

Rose shrugged. “A guy. An ordinary kid in baggies and a ball cap.”

“Right, nobody special, just another black kid like so many others in this town.”

“Keybo, don’t get me wrong.”

“Wait, listen. That’s my point, see? I blend. That’s why they didn’t notice me, thought I wasn’t even there.”

“Who didn’t notice you? The white kids in the group?”

Keybo knit his brow in a deep frown. “It’s not about prejudice, Rose, although I’ve seen plenty. I’m talking about a conversation I overheard. Like you, I didn’t believe it because it was too crazy, didn’t make sense. I mean, look around you at what’s happened to this city. Cops everywhere, armed guards at every door, soldiers on patrol with real weapons that fire real bullets. Stairs and entrances blockaded to keep car bombs from blowing up buildings, like what happened in Oklahoma City. All that armament, all that attention, you wouldn’t think anyone would plot a crime right in the middle of it.”

Rose simply stared back at Keybo. “What sort of crime?” she asked in a small voice. Keybo’s grave manner was frightening. He was serious about whatever was on his mind. Deadly serious.

“You’ve got to promise me one thing,” he said.

“Keybo, I won’t tell a soul.”

“You’re not the kind who would. No, what I’m going to tell you is weird, but I’ll quit if you start poking fun at what I say.”

“Okay, no jokes, just fact.”

Keybo crossed his arms and leaned on the table. “These guys—I saw only two of them, but there was a third—they’re sitting as close to me as you are. But on the other side of a planter box and up about four feet. I’m doing my

hacky-sack thing, hanging with a couple other dudes from school. We're kind of hidden down in this stairwell below a restaurant. And these guys are sitting at an outdoor table, talking about taking some guy out. I just keep making passes to Darby and Haymo, because we're background noise, know what I mean? If I stop and listen hard, the guys upstairs'll quit talking."

"Keybo, what in the world are you getting at?"

"I don't know, that's what's driving me nuts! Sounded like either a killing or a kidnapping. Maybe both. The whole time they're talking sort of in code, but I figure out later it has to do with the White House. Or the President, or maybe a cabinet or staff member."

"So they didn't mention names."

"Not outright, but one name kept coming up. I think it was coded to mean someone else. Poquette, or Pacquette, or Pickette. The accent was always on the last syllable, but—look, I'm not making much sense. I just had to tell someone."

"Who else have you told?"

"No one."

"Not even your parents?"

"Especially not them. If they believed half of it, they'd send me down to Richmond to stay with my aunt."

"Maybe that's not a bad idea, if these guys are for real."

Keybo stared at his empty plate for several seconds. "I followed one of them," he said.

"You what? That's insane!"

"I know, it was stupid and dangerous movie stuff, but I did it and I'm glad."

"What happened? Where did he go?"

"Some upscale apartment, way out in west Arlington. One of those new towers. I barely had pocket change for the

Metro ride back.”

The Metro was Washington’s underground commuter train. Rose had seen pictures but had yet to take her first ride.

“And?” she prompted.

“I followed him to the sixteenth floor. Fancy place with locks all over.”

“How did you get inside the building? I mean, forgive me, Keybo, but you’re a black kid in an upscale white neighborhood. You stick out.”

“Don’t I know it. But see, I learned a few things on the street. I mean, where I live, certain things go down, you know. Sometimes pretty bad things.”

“You’re telling me you pick locks. You learned how to pick locks, and that’s how you got in.”

Keybo shook his head no. “They don’t use keys in those new places. Plastic card with an embedded electronic stripe.”

“So you picked his pocket for the card.”

“Better’n that, I used a computer.”

“Oh, come on, Keybo! How did a computer help you break into someone’s apartment?”

“Sh-h, Rose, keep it down.” Keybo glanced around nervously at the nearby diners before lowering his own voice. “You got the wrong idea. I didn’t physically break in.”

Rose whispered. “Then what did you do? Tap his phone?”

“Now you’re getting close. I used his address to do some research. Took a while, but I finally got his e-mail address from a supposedly secure web site where he bought luggage. After that I monitored his e-mail traffic.”

“You’re a hacker? You’re twelve years old and you hack into people’s computers?”

Keybo Stokes pushed his plate aside and leaned forward in his chair to balance on the front legs. “I’m thirteen. And

yes, I hack around, but it's mostly a learning experience. I don't snoop. I hate people who snoop, and the federal government is one of the worst bunch of snoops around, but that's beside the point. I found out who this guy is, who he's dating, how much he owes his bank, what kind of car he drives, and even his mother's maiden name. It's what I didn't find out that's more interesting."

"I'm on pins and needles, Keybo. What's missing?"

"Any record of employment. It's like this guy never worked a day in his life. He's got all the trappings of a normal American six-foot, one-eighty Caucasian male, including the debts and fast cars and electronic toys. He's got money to spend, but he doesn't go crazy with it. I can track his family background, but nothing about *him* goes back beyond six years."

"Maybe he's an extraterrestrial, like that guy in the movie."

"You promised not to make jokes."

"I'm not joking. If you don't believe in what you can't see or understand, then we might as well end this conversation."

"Rose Doolittle, who in the heck *are* you?"

"I'm still listening, Keybo, and I don't think you're quite finished."

"You want the rest?"

"All of it."

"Okay, it's three guys that I know of for sure, maybe others. They talk about a guy called the captain, no name, and they're taking out this Poquette person. Out of the White House, or out of commission, or out of this world, if you let your imagination run wild. They mention a big house near a river, again no names. And a high-stakes prize for their efforts. Something very important and very "audacious" is

the word one guy used. Whatever they're doing is supposed to shake the country to its roots."

"How could they do worse than what we've already been through?"

Keybo shrugged. "I'm just telling you what they said."

"You're certain you have the context right? I mean, these guys aren't just mapping out some movie script or play? They really mean dirty business?"

"Rose, for two months I've been picking up pieces of e-mail conversations. You ever hear of PGP?"

"Sounds like some kind of nerve gas."

"It stands for Pretty Good Privacy and it's a way to encrypt anything you want to send over the Internet. Almost unbreakable because it requires a public key and a private key. The private key is controlled by the parties involved, which cuts out everyone else. I found the guy's private key on his computer."

"He must not be very careful."

"He's meticulous, but he doesn't know jack about encryption. It took me a long time to find the key on his hard drive and parse it. Could have been any length, see, so I had to extrapolate the probabilities using Kensington's Rule and then run a linear regression on each tuple in the byte array..."

"Keybo, you lost me on the word parse. I'll take your word that it was a tough job, because you sound like you know what you're doing. What are you going to do about it?"

Keybo ran his hand over his short-cropped head. "I don't know. I've thought about it a lot. What's got me worried is that it's a really short time fuse. Like it could go down any day of any week."

"Can't take it to the FBI, huh?"

“Are you nuts? I’ve already broken the law just finding this stuff out. I can’t prove anything. They’d call it pure conjecture, *if* they even listened to my story.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“Because you know something about crime and criminals.”

“So do thousands of police officers and detectives, and they’ve got a whole lot more experience. What else?”

“The article in that California paper. I only recently recalled it, and when you showed up on the Trumby Tour, well, I had to talk to you.”

Rose didn’t remember much about the article. She had put the whole incident behind her after returning home to Sherman. In fact, until just a couple of hours ago at the Printing and Engraving Office, she’d thought no one else knew.

Keybo had more on his mind, and Rose feared she knew what it was. Worse, no matter what he believed, she could never trust him with the truth. He was watching her intently while he chewed a thumbnail.

“There are people in this world,” he began, “who see stuff the rest of us only believe in books and movies. I’ve read enough to know that most of these people suffer from doubt and ridicule. Which means a lot of what they know, stuff that could help other people, gets lost because they’re afraid to tell anyone else. How’m I doin’?”

Rose felt a shudder, and for a sickly moment thought she was going to lose her lunch. She swallowed hard and took a gulp from her water glass. Keybo read her response as a signal to continue.

“You saw what other people saw at the Fair, but you watched with different eyes. You saw what could be mistaken for normal movements, but were in fact passes of

contraband, stolen tickets. You saw bags of cash appear and disappear, and the sheriff didn't believe you until it was obvious to everyone what had gone down. You saw something in that Indian kid and knew he could be trusted, when everyone else thought he was a thief. In fact, they were ready to haul him in on charges when you busted the crime wide open."

Rose was trembling all over. She wanted to get up and run outside, but she didn't trust her legs to support her. What she had dreaded most from her closest friends, what she had managed to avoid for an entire school year, was coming to roost in a public cafeteria three thousand miles from home. Worse than any ridicule Allison Sweet could drum up, and far more humiliating than Miss Prill's icy criticism, was the chance of being branded a lunatic, certifiably mad, a candidate for the insane asylum. Perhaps Keybo Stokes was sincere in his interpretation of what had happened. He could only guess, and most of his guesses were wrong, but Rose dared not correct him, for the truth might prove far more damaging than anything he could dream up.

And so she used the best defense she knew. It pained her to do it, but she could not endure another moment of Keybo's probing.

"There's nothing very subtle," she told him, "about suggesting I'm psychic. I hate to disappoint you, but you're wrong. In fact," she said, "I'm disappointed that it isn't true. Most boys confuse girl's intuition with something more glamorous. It would have been nicer," she added, "if you'd approached me without all this business about secret codes and plots."

Keybo's expression hardened, and the muscle in his jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth. He had been spurned in more ways than she could imagine, and this was just one

more insult for him to bear. She hated herself for hurting him, because she was actually beginning to think of him as a friend. But the wall between them was one she had created. The act was done.

“Sorry I blew it with you,” he said, getting to his feet. She noticed he did not come around the table to move her chair this time. Instead, he stood coldly to one side and waited for her to unhook her purse from the chair. With polite chagrin, as if she had caught him dead to rights, he added. “A guy just never knows, but he’s gotta try, doesn’t he?”

Rose said nothing as she walked past him toward the exit, afraid to trust her voice. Inside, her heart was breaking.



Seeing Too Much

As she inched through the large crowd outside the JFK Center for Performing Arts in Washington, Rose Doolittle realized she was sweating in the heat. Priscilla Prill, on the other hand, looked cool and unfazed. And Miss Prill apparently approved of Allison Sweet's revealing attire, a low-cut burgundy dress that clung tight to her figure. Allison kept tossing her hair for a Senator who couldn't keep his eyes off her bosom. Meantime, Rose was dying in a skimpy light blue sheath with dark sweat rings under her arms. She should have worn black.

It was half-past seven at night, but the Capital was suffering from steamy weather. Rose wished she was back home in Oregon where you could jump into a river without contracting a horrible disease. It was bad enough being twelve and surrounded by Washington dignitaries and socialites who had years of practice at appearing to enjoy tight, ill-fitting clothes. Rose was wearing her first pair of low heels and just knew she would stumble and make a

scene right when the President and First Lady showed up, because *he* would be with them and she'd just die if he even looked her way. Which he probably wouldn't.

Mister Trumby had shown up in a tuxedo, and the kids all sat in quiet amazement as he piloted his bus to the performance with elegant pride. Even Keybo Stokes kept his jokes to himself, if he had any.

The big surprise was Toni. The miniature bombshell from Little Neck was a completely different person tonight, with her red hair swept up from her neck and piled high behind a stunning tiara. A light brush of sparkle dusted her shoulders, and she looked like a petite grown woman as she moved around gracefully on high-heeled pumps, her full-length gown of dark green satin swirling prettily around her feet. Obviously Toni Dench had experience appearing in public.

Just then a well-dressed woman with silver hair zoomed out of the crowd and approached Toni. As she drew near, Toni went kind of stiff and forced a smile as the woman gushed.

"Good heavens, Antonia! What a marvelous surprise to see you here!"

Her name was Amanda Tottle, and she was a New York socialite who had crossed paths with Toni's parents in the past. She took one look at Rose and opened her mouth in surprise. "And who have we here?"

Toni made the introductions. "This is Rose Doolittle. She's in Washington for the first time."

The smile froze on the woman's face as she caught sight of the necklace around Rose's neck. The rawhide thong failed to match the rest of Rose's outfit, but the stone had stayed with her wherever she went for the past year. Carrying its power was an unspoken promise she had made

to herself, for, as far as she was concerned, Chumash Bear medicine had once saved her life.

Amanda wrinkled her nose with distaste, and her false eyelashes and fat jowls and upturned nose reminded Rose of Miss Piggy. Rose swallowed hard to suppress a giggle.

“Well, yes, so glad you came, dear,” said Amanda Tottle. “Starting college next fall, are we?”

That was happening a lot because of Rose’s height, and she still wasn’t used to it. Amanda Tottle obviously didn’t know much about kids, and Rose wanted to tell her *WE aren’t doing anything*, but she smiled politely instead. “I’ll have to finish junior high first,” she said. Why was she always such a wuss?

The Tottle woman frowned at Toni as if she’d just played a rude joke. “But she’s so big!”

Right, like Rose was some kind of giant, a freak.

At that moment, a small fleet of black cars pulled to a stop under the portico, followed by a burst of noisy applause. The First Family had arrived.

“There he is,” Toni whispered in Rose’s ear, nodding at a sleek black limousine that glided past them and pulled to a stop only a few yards away.

“You mean President Clamdollar?” Rose inquired, just to make sure.

“You were expecting maybe Vee Bee Ray?”

“Oh, Toni!” The famous L. A. rapper was the last person Rose expected to show up at a violin concert.

“Maybe we’ll get a look at our real hero,” Toni said with smile.

Rose knew who she meant. Actually, she *was* kind of hoping for a glimpse of Percival Quince Clamdollar. At age fourteen he was already a news icon, even though he was soft-spoken and wore thick eyeglasses. He might not be

much to look at, but Rose admired his principles. Behind the glasses lurked a soul full of courage.

Another limousine drew to a stop behind the Presidential vehicle, then a third pulled alongside the President's car and then a fourth slid into place behind that. A bunch of Secret Service men got out of the cars and positioned themselves on the pavement and along the curb.

Rose thought the last-minute arrival of the guard was a trifle strange, but everyone was so focused on the President that the new cars were largely ignored. The crowd parted as several Secret Service agents formed a wedge, and then President and Mrs. Clamdollar emerged to the flash of cameras and mild applause. Rose kept her eye on the other side of the car, waiting for a sign of Percy.

And suddenly there he was, but just for a second, as one of the agents opened the left rear door and held it for him to step out. Rose caught the glint of light on the boy's glasses, the touch of lavender color at his throat—his bow tie. Percy liked lavender, and right now the color lavender was the rage with all the girls.

Rose felt a rush. Percy Clamdollar himself was just a few paces away! In a few seconds he'd head right in her direction!

But what happened next stopped her heart, for it took place with such blinding speed that Rose was to doubt her own eyes for many days afterward.

As she watched, someone called to the agent holding the door for Percy, and he swung his head around to face the caller. In that brief moment, the rear door of the outboard car swung open fast and nearly collided with Percy's door. Two figures emerged from the second car, so close together that they appeared as one. The first figure stepped directly in front of Percy and headed around the rear of the President's

limo. The second, a man in a black tuxedo, quickly clamped a strong grip around Percy Clamdollar's wrist and shoved him into the unlighted compartment of the waiting limo, then got in behind Percy and slammed the door shut. As the limousine glided forward in a graceful exit, the Secret Service agent returned his gaze to his charge and followed Percy's double as he joined the entourage.

Rose shifted her attention from the agent to the second boy and drew a sharp breath. He looked just like Percy Clamdollar! He had the same brown hair parted in the middle, the famous goggle-sized eyeglasses, and his outfit was an exact duplicate of Percy's, from the black tuxedo pants to the white tux jacket and right down to the lavender bow tie. Rose thought he was a little taller, but before she could think further, Percy's twin closed up behind the President and followed his two "parents" into the lobby.

At first Rose thought the double might be a Secret Service trick, calculated to confuse any attempt on the Clamdollar offspring's life. Maybe they did that sort of thing, although it seemed terribly elaborate and sort of "Hollywood" for a place as sedate as Washington, D. C. Besides, they would have switched earlier, not in front of a crowd.

Rose turned to Miss Prill to ask about it, but the crowd chose that moment to surge after the President's entourage, and in her haste to keep up, Rose tripped in her high-heeled pumps.

Toni caught her by the elbow to keep her from falling, and then Miss Prill led everyone in her tour through the huge glass doors.

"Toni, that guy isn't—" Rose started to say, but her voice was drowned by the loud murmur of excited patrons crowding the spacious lobby of the JFK Center. The other

girls were already presenting their tickets to a uniformed guard, and then the crowd thickened as they approached the doors to the auditorium.

In the line ahead, Rose saw Keybo Stokes standing head and shoulders above the rest of the girls, moving easily through the crowd. Keybo, almost a friend, but now—

Suddenly, her stomach flipped, and a hot surge of adrenaline raced through her whole body.

Take him out, Keybo had overheard. The kidnapping!

Keybo had warned her, and she had just now watched it happen!

She had to tell Miss Prill, but the crowd had thickened and the woman had disappeared into the concert hall. No one else seemed to have noticed what went on between the two cars. The largely adult crowd wasn't remotely interested in the Clamdollar kid. Even Mrs. Clamdollar wasn't aware that her son had added an inch of height in the last ten minutes.

What was the matter with all these people? Wasn't the Secret Service even looking?

As Rose marched down the aisle behind a distinguished elderly couple, she saw Miss Prill in position at the end of a row of seats, ushering her charges to their places. When it was Rose's turn, she paused and touched Miss Prill's sleeve to get her attention. "There's something wrong about Percy," she said.

Miss Prill's black eyes snapped in anger. "Take your hands off me!"

"But it's important, Miss Prill."

"You're creating a scene. Now get in your seat!"

"But I saw..."

"Behave like a lady!" the woman hissed, "—*if* you know how!"

"Somebody should check on the President's son, Miss

Prill.”

“I have had it up to here with you, Doolittle. Adolescent infatuation indeed! Sit down immediately. Or would you like to be sent outside to the bus by yourself?”

Several people in the audience were glowering at Rose with disapproving looks. Her neck grew very hot and she flushed with embarrassment. “N-nevermind,” she stammered and scooted to her seat.

Her mind flew with wild speculation. Maybe she hadn’t seen what she thought she saw. If the fake Percy actually was a Secret Service plant, as she’d thought for a moment, calling attention to him might upset a delicate operation. Or was he another of her illusions, a ghostly look-alike? What were the odds of her being the only witness to a kidnapping right under the noses of the First Family and their protectors? Maybe none of it had happened at all.

Keybo had talked about psychics, people who saw alter-egos living in other dimensions. Nobody would believe them at first, but a few were accepted as aids to police searching for clues. Rose wasn’t convinced she possessed anything resembling psychic powers. It was easier to believe she had watched a crime committed free of detection, a crime Keybo Stokes had discovered in the planning stages.

Where was Keybo? Probably down the row in the audience with the other boys. She should have pushed her way to him and told him, even insisted on it, despite the fact that he might be mad at her.

Keybo would appreciate how it had gone down, the switch done with perfect timing, the distraction of the nearest agent, the capture limo’s unhurried escape, each detail confirming his own deduction that a masterful team had carefully rehearsed every move and carried out their plan with such perfection that the most visible of their lot was

able to sit, unrecognized, right next to the President himself!

But Rose alone was witness. Meanwhile, the real Percy was out there miles from his family in who-knew-what kind of terrible circumstances.

Like waking from a dream, Rose became aware of the orchestra making *squee-squaw* sounds tuning up, and almost immediately afterward the lights dimmed and the orchestra struck up a lively piece. Her program said it was the Sonata for Trumpet by Purcell. A lady behind Rose sniffed and muttered something about a terrible choice.

The interplay between solo trumpet and answering strings was a torture to be endured. Rose was too keyed up to fall asleep, but she couldn't make a scene about Percy now.

Or should she? She *had* to sound some kind of alarm! It was her American duty. Unless she hadn't seen what she thought she saw.

She fidgeted throughout the Purcell piece, which mercifully lasted only minutes but seemed like hours before it closed to listless applause. The audience craned their necks to see the small figure that appeared from behind the left curtain. Rose joined the thunderous applause, not fully understanding the enthusiasm, but happy to be doing something with her hands.

A dark-haired girl in a flowing blue gown took her place beside the concertmaster, struck a few tuning strokes, and waited patiently for the conductor to start. The piece opened with violins sawing away at a morose dirge, then suddenly the girl came alive, and Rose forgot her concerns as she was transported to another realm.

Samova Dossarian was not only an awesome musician, she was a way cool performer. She worked her audience with feverish energy, for the piece was demanding. Rose was enthralled by the sheer complexity of execution by this girl

only one year older than herself. How did she do it? Did she practice all day long? Did she never do anything besides play the violin?

Rose wondered what the girl was like in person, because right then Samova Dossarian was totally absorbed in the music she was bringing forth from her violin. Would she even acknowledge the existence of an ordinary human being? Especially one with the humble surname of Doolittle?

As Samova embarked on the second movement, creating a somber mood of melancholy, Rose's attention faltered. She admired the girl's work, but the mood sent her thoughts drifting back to Percy Clamdollar. *I'm responsible for his safety*, she thought. *It's like I'm his only witness, his last hope.*

She scanned the crowd ahead until she could pick out Percy's stand-in. The boy sat in the dark, two seats to the left of the President. A man and a woman sat between them, dignitaries or family or perhaps even a governess and butler. Of course, all eyes were riveted on the stage. Rose kept her eye on the imposter. She would watch him closely. She must for Percy's sake.

As Samova took her bows, the boy left his seat and started up the aisle. The house lights came on, and Rose got a good look at him.

He wasn't a boy at all, but a small man! Very short, with Percy's coloring and build, he made his way unnoticed to the aisle with light steps. During the darkened performance he had removed the eyeglasses and rearranged his hair. He had removed the telltale lavender tie and replaced it with a plain black bow. He looked nothing like Percy Clamdollar now, and his rapid exit was a dead giveaway to Rose, but to anyone else he was just another patron.

Rose promptly got up and excused herself before anyone

could raise an objection, using a woman's advantage to make a sudden departure without question. By the time she scooted over feet and knees to the aisle, Percy's look-alike was far ahead, almost to the lobby, moving with reckless oblivion to the complaints that followed his rude passage. Rose hiked her skirts and skipped up the aisle after him, muttering polite excuses as she dodged slower patrons in the boy's wake. When at last she burst into the lobby, the hall was full of people milling about like cattle. The imposter was nowhere to be seen.

She approached a uniformed attendant. "Have you seen a boy about Percy Clamdollar's size?" she asked. "He's my date."

The man peered at Rose like she was a dead fish. "Probably went to the men's."

She couldn't go in there after him, so she stood outside the door, scanning the men leaving. Presently the attendant came over.

"You can't loiter here, miss."

"I'm not loitering, I'm looking for my boyfriend. Maybe one of the other attendants saw him."

The man gave her a withering look. "Hold on a second."

He pulled a cell phone from his pocket, flicked a button, and muttered a few terse remarks into the mouthpiece. After listening for several seconds, he returned the cell phone and shook his head. "Nobody's seen a kid like that. Now, I suggest you return to your seat and wait for the next performance. Or call a cab."

Suddenly Rose knew the man's problem with her. She was conspicuous, blond trouble in a tight dress. She would have to give up on Percy's imposter and wait for his absence to be discovered.

As if in answer to her thoughts, the hall suddenly rang

with shouts, and a loud commotion resounded from the auditorium. Several men in dark suits burst into the lobby and paused, looking this way and that.

Rose quietly walked up to the nearest of them. He was a big man, strong and heavily built inside a suit that seemed too tight. He looked down at Rose, a flat-chested girl in a long blue dress clutching her purse and program. Before he could brush her aside, she spoke to him.

“I saw them take him,” she said.