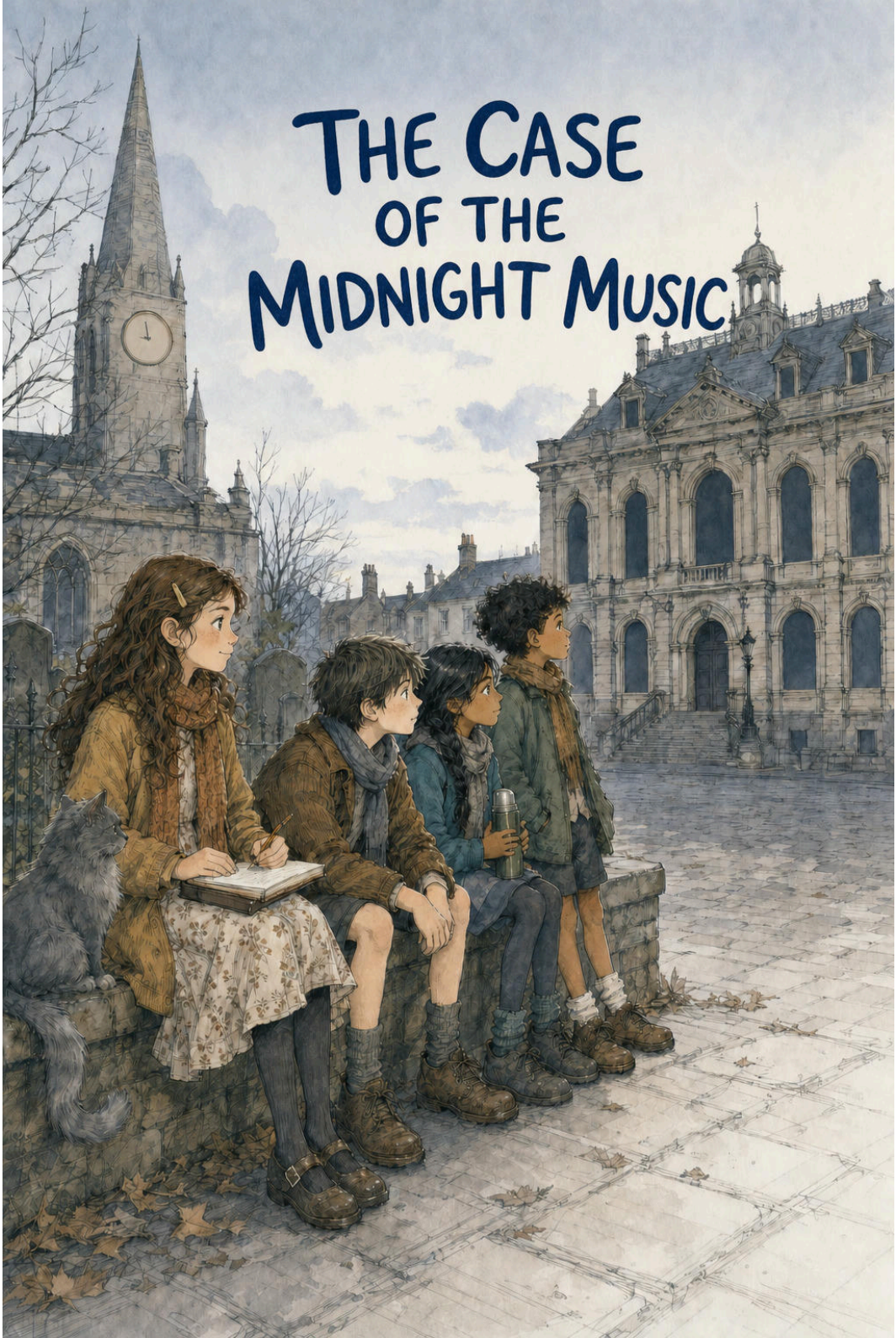

THE CASE
OF THE
MIDNIGHT MUSIC

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About This Book

At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2+ (CEFR) · American English
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 13 chapters · ±20,000 words

Edition

This is the **first edition** — version 1.1, published August 2026.

Version	Date	Notes
1.0	July 2026	First edition.
1.1	August 2026	Language corrections

About the Story

The Series

Above the second-hand bookshop on Ivy Lane, in the market town of Foxton, four children run a detective club: Leo, who sees everything; Ada, who writes every case in the casebook; Sam, who knows everyone; and Bea, who believes nothing without proof. Their cases are the friendly kind — lost things, strange sounds, puzzles nobody can explain — and their golden rule never changes: look properly, because a mystery is rarely what it seems.

This Book

Nobody lives in the Foxton town hall. So who is playing the piano in there at night?

A brown-paper parcel arrives for the Ivy Lane Detectives: one page of piano music, copied out by hand, and a note from somebody who will not give a name.

Ada, Leo, Bea and Sam wait on the churchyard wall in the cold. At a quarter to eleven the music starts — and there is no light in the window at all.

Finding the answer is the easy part. Because the answer belongs to somebody, and it is the kind of secret you do not put in a book and read out loud.

What do you do with a case you cannot tell?

Chapter 1: Case Number Two

The parcel sat on the attic table for eleven minutes before anyone opened it.

I know that. I wrote the time down. That is what I do.

It was the first Saturday in October, and the four of us had come straight up from the town hall. An hour before, in front of half of Foxton, I had read Case Number One out loud from the casebook: the green bicycle, and the mended brakes, and Mr. Mott, who could not stop fixing things. The market committee had said yes. Down in the square, right now, Mr. Mott was sitting at his new bench with a wheel in his hands and a board over his head:

F. MOTT — BICYCLES / est. 1948 / mending again

So that was Case One. Solved, written up, closed.

And a club with nothing to solve is just four children in a cold room.

Our room is the attic above my parents' bookshop, up a narrow stair behind the shelves. It smells of old paper and dust and, on good days, of my dad's tea. There is one small window under the roof. Mom keeps the key on a red ribbon and hands it over as long as the casebook stays honest.

On the wall, in Bea's chalk, are the five questions.

WHO. WHAT. WHERE. WHEN. WHY.

And under them, bigger, Rule One.

Look properly. A mystery is rarely what it seems.

"Open it," said Sam Potts.

"Not yet."

"Ada."

"Not yet. Leo isn't finished."

Miss Petherton had put the parcel into my hands at the end of the meeting, still in her coat. She runs the library, and she does not get excited about much. She had found it that morning in the library return box, under two

books about birds. The box is a slot in the wall by the library door. Anyone can push a parcel through it and walk away, and no one sees a thing.

It was not a book. It was a small flat parcel in brown paper, tied with string, and on the front, in careful old handwriting, it said:

To the Detectives of Ivy Lane

Leo Frost had been looking at that string for ten of my eleven minutes.

"Someone ties good knots," he said. "See? That is not a bow. That is a proper knot, pulled tight, and then a second one on top of it. People who wrap parcels every day tie them that way."

"So do old people," said Bea Khan. "My grandmother ties string like that. No one young uses string at all."

I looked at the writing again. Small, even, slow. Each letter leaned the same way, and each letter sat on the line.

"Old," I said. "Old and careful."

"Prove it," said Bea.

Bea says that all the time. She is not being rude. It is her way of asking.

"The r's," I said. "Look at the r's. My dad has a shop ledger from 1961 in the back room, and it is full of r's shaped exactly like these. No one writes them that way any more."

Bea leaned over the table and looked for a long moment and did not argue. From Bea, that is a medal.

"Now," I said.

Sam had the string off in four seconds. Leo took the brown paper, spread it flat instead of tearing it, and laid it down with the writing up. Leo keeps everything.

Inside were two things.

The first was a sheet of paper, folded twice. I spread it out, and we all leaned in together.

It was music. Piano music — two rows of lines that run side by side, with black notes crowded over them from one end to the other. Only it was not printed. Someone had drawn each line by hand, and written in each note, in pencil.

"Sheet music," said Bea. She said it quietly.

The second thing was a note, on the same paper, in the same pencil, in the same careful old handwriting. I read it aloud.

Somebody plays this in the town hall at night. Nobody lives there. I would like to know who.

Then, lower down, three more lines.

I cannot find out myself. You found Mr. Mott's bicycles. Perhaps you can find this.

No name. No address. Nothing else at all.

No one spoke. Down in the square a cart went past, and someone laughed, and the church clock started on twelve.

"The town hall," said Sam. "At *night*."

"At night," I said.

I opened the casebook to a fresh page. The last case had filled forty pages. I wrote at the top, in my best writing:

CASE NUMBER TWO

Then I ruled the five questions down the side, one under the other, with a space after each. My hand was steady this time. Practice helps.

"WHAT?" I said.

"A piano," said Leo. "Played at night. In a building where no one lives."

I wrote it down.

"WHERE?"

That one we all knew. The town hall stands on the north side of the square, pale stone, six wide steps, a green door with two brass handles. There are tall

windows along the front and smaller ones upstairs. It is the biggest building in Foxton and it is empty every night of the year.

"WHEN?"

"Night," said Sam.

"Night is not a time," said Bea.

She was right, so I wrote *unknown*. Unknown is an honest answer. Wrong is not.

"WHO?"

No one said a word. I left the line empty.

"WHY?"

No one said a word to that either. I left that line empty too.

Two empty lines. Last time we only had one.

Leo had the brown paper up against the window. He held it flat to the light and turned it slowly around.

"Nothing," he said at last. "No stamp. No address. No shop name. Nothing written in the corner. Nothing on the back of the music, nothing on the back of the note." He put it down. "Nothing anywhere."

"So — nothing," said Sam.

"No," said Leo. "That is a finding."

A finding, in Leo's world, is a fact you get by looking hard and *not* seeing something. An empty page can be evidence. He told us so once, for twenty minutes. We let him.

I wrote it down: *nothing on the back — LF.*

Then I asked Sam the question I should have asked first.

"Sam. What have you heard?"

Sam opened his mouth. Then he shut it again.

That does not happen. Sam Potts hears it all in Foxton half a day before the rest of us. He knows who has a new hen, who has a bad tooth, and what the fish man paid for his van. If there is news in this town, it goes through Sam on the way.

"Nothing," he said. "Not one word."

"About the town hall?"

"About anything. No one has said a thing about music, or the hall, or a light up there at night. Not on the market. Not at the baker's. Not from Uncle Ted, and Uncle Ted talks to two hundred people on a Saturday." He looked really hurt about it. "I checked."

I drew a line under it: *Sam has heard nothing.*

In Foxton, that never happens. Someone plays a piano in an empty hall at night, three people hear it, and by Saturday the whole market is talking. Either no one in this town had heard it — or someone had heard it and had said nothing to anyone.

I looked at the note again. *I would like to know who.*

Bea had gone quiet by then, and that is never nothing.

She was sitting on the floor with the sheet music flat on her knees, counting under her breath. Bea plays the recorder. She plays it badly and she says so herself; she practices on Thursdays and Dusty leaves the room. But she has saved up for music before, and it turns out that matters.

Dusty, our gray cat, was already asleep on the brown paper. He always sleeps on whatever you need next.

"Ada," said Bea. "How long do you think this took?"

"The copying?"

"Every line. Every note." She turned the sheet around so we could see it. "There are five lines in a stave. There are twenty-four staves on this page. Someone ruled all of them by hand with a ruler. Then they wrote in every note, one at a time. Count them. There are hundreds."

Leo counted one corner and stopped at forty.

"Hours," said Bea. "Whole hours. Days, maybe." She looked up at us. "And you can *buy* music. There is a shop in Marlow that sells it. It does not cost much. I saved up for mine in three weeks."



"So?" said Sam.

"So no one sits down and does this for fun," said Bea. "There are only two reasons."

She got up and put the sheet on the table, right in the middle, under the chalk questions.

"One," she said. "You cannot buy it. It is in no shop at all, so there is one copy in the world, and it is not yours."

"And two?" I said.

Bea put her finger on the pencil notes.

"Two," she said. "The copying is *how you learn it.*"

Chapter 2: The Building That Is Empty at Night

You cannot watch a building you have never been inside.

Leo said that on Sunday, on our step, with his hands in his pockets. Sunday came and went. The town hall stayed shut. So we waited for Monday and went around after school.

We could have gone at night and looked in at the windows. Our first case taught us what is wrong with that. Looking properly does not mean looking secretly. So we did the simple thing instead.

We walked in the front door and asked.

There is a desk inside the door of the town hall. It has a small glass window in it. Behind the glass sits a lady. On a Monday she takes the market rents. She looked at the four of us over the top of her glasses.

"We would like to see the hall, please," I said. "The whole of it, if that is allowed."

"Why?"

Sam opened his mouth. I got there first.

"We are looking into something," I said. "We would rather not say what yet. It is nothing bad."

I felt Sam go stiff beside me. Sam likes telling people things. It is what he is for. Standing there with his mouth shut cost him something. It was not the last time that week.

The lady looked at us for a moment longer. Then she leaned back and shouted, without turning her head, "*Mr. Speight!*"

The caretaker of the Foxton town hall is a short, wide man. Brown coat. A ring of keys on his belt. You hear him before you see him. He has looked after that hall for forty years. He told us so in the first minute. He told us again in the fifth. After that I stopped counting.

He was also pleased.

Nobody ever asks a caretaker to show them anything. We were an audience, and Mr. Speight had not had one in years.

"Right," he said, and pulled his coat straight. "We start at the floor."

The floor of the front hall is black and white stone, in squares. Mr. Speight polishes it himself. Then came the board of gold names on the wall. Every mayor of Foxton since 1802 is on it. Then the doors of the big hall. He pushed both of them open at once, an arm each.

"You know this room," he said.

We did. We had stood in it on Saturday morning. The whole market committee had sat in front of us.

"That," said Sam, pointing, "is the spot where Ada was famous."

I wrote nothing down about that.

The big hall is long and pale. Six tall windows run down one side. There is a wooden platform at the far end. Two hundred chairs stood stacked at the back, in towers of ten. Mr. Speight stacked them all on Saturday afternoon, by himself, and mentioned it twice.

Then the stairs.

They are wide stone stairs with a brass rail. There is a turn halfway up. They are the reason the town hall looks bigger inside than out. At the top there is a landing, a cupboard and one brown door.

"The small hall," said Mr. Speight, and opened it.

It is half the size of the one below. Bare boards. A smell of dust and floor polish. More chairs in stacks. Two tall windows look down over the square. From up there you can see the church. You can see the fountain too, and the roof of our shop.

And against the left-hand wall, on its own, stood a piano.

It was an upright. That is the tall sort, the sort that stands against a wall. Not the long sort on three legs. Dark brown wood, a little scratched along the bottom. On the front, above the keys, were two brass brackets. They swing

out to hold candles. That was from the days before the hall had electric light. Bea touched one and it turned with a small squeak.

"That is the old school piano," said Mr. Speight. "It came here when the school got a new one. Before you were born, the lot of you."

"Does anybody play it?" said Leo.

"Not for years. It is out of tune. And there is a note in the middle that sticks." He said it the way you talk about a bad hip. "Nobody touches it. Nobody comes up here at all now. There is the sewing circle on a Wednesday. They sit downstairs."

I wrote that down.

"They used to hold concerts up here," he said. "Years back. Chairs in rows, right to the door. The whole town came up those stairs." He looked around the bare room. "Not any more."

I wrote that down as well. At the time it was only a thing an old man said.

Bea walked the length of the room and back. She counted her steps, the way she does. Then she stopped at the far window and pushed up on the frame. It did not move. She tried the second one. That did not move either.

"Painted shut," she said. "Both of them."

"Shut since long before my time," said Mr. Speight, pleased again. "Nobody gets in through my windows."

"Mr. Speight," she said. "Who else has a key to this building?"

He tapped the ring on his belt, and it rang.

"These are the keys of this town hall," he said. "Every one of them is written in my book. My book is in my room. My room is behind the stairs. That is how it has been for forty years."

Leo looked up. A book of keys is exactly the sort of thing Leo dreams about.

"And you lock up at what time?" he said.

"Six. Every night."

"Every night?"

"Six o'clock, and out, and the front door locked behind me," said Mr. Speight. "Forty years. Nobody is in this hall at night. There is nothing in here at night but chairs."

Which is when Sam said it.

He did not mean a thing by it. Sam is eleven. It was a cold gray room with bare boards. The word was just sitting there.

"It's a bit haunted up here, isn't it," he said.

Bea did not even turn around.

"We don't do ghosts," she said.

"We do evidence," said Leo.

And that was the end of that. Sam went red, Mr. Speight laughed once, and nobody said the word again.

Evidence is a thing you can hold up, or write down, or point at. A house makes a noise at night. Then a hundred people tell you a hundred stories about it. We are not in the story business. We are in the *who, what, where, when, why* business. Each one of those has an answer somewhere. And the answer is always a person. A person doing a thing for a reason.

That is Rule One, more or less. Look properly.

So I looked properly, and asked the only question that mattered.

"Mr. Speight, has anybody asked you about this room lately? Or about the piano?"

He thought about it honestly. I liked him for that.

"No," he said. "Nobody has asked me about that piano in ten years. And you are the first to ask about my hall in a long time. The paper sent a man in the spring. Nobody since him."

Nothing there. But nothing is a finding, and I wrote it down.

We went out onto the landing, and Mr. Speight went first, still talking. Bea and Leo went after him. Sam was already halfway down. He took the stairs two at a time, one hand on the brass rail.

I was last, and I pulled the door shut behind me.

And then, in the last hand's width of the closing door, I saw it.

I stopped with my fingers still on the handle.

The piano stood where it had stood all along. Dark brown against the pale wall. But the lid over the keys was up. Not closed. Open, propped on its hinge. The whole long row of keys showed white in the gray light.



It had been open the whole time we were in that room. Four detectives in one small hall for twenty minutes. Not one of us had looked at the one thing we came to see.

Mr. Speight had not touched it. He had walked past it. He had talked about it. He had never laid a finger on it. I had watched his hands. Nobody in our club had gone near it either.

From the foot of the stairs, his voice came up through the empty hall, cheerful as ever.

"Six o'clock, mind. Every night, forty years. And I close that lid every night of my life."

Chapter 3: Tuesday, Ten Forty-Five

There is a way to do this badly.

The bad way is to slip out of a window at ten o'clock and tell nobody. We have a rule about that too. It is not up on the attic wall, so I will put it here. *We do not lie to get a case.* A case built on a lie is not evidence. It is only a story with our names on it.

So I did the slow thing. I told my parents at supper.

I put the note on the table between the bread and the butter. I laid the copied music beside it. Then I started at the library return box and went on to the open lid. Dad read the note twice. Mom did not touch it at all. She listened with her chin on her hand and let me finish.

"A piano," she said. "In the town hall. At night."

"Twice, at least. Maybe more."

"And you want to sit outside in October and find out."

"Yes."

Dad looked at Mom. Mom looked at me.

"Three conditions," she said.

Mom's conditions are always three. I have never worked out how she does it.

"One. Officer Hobbs knows before you go, and he says yes, or you do not go. Two. You do not go near that building. Not the steps, not the door, not the yard. You sit somewhere public and you watch."

"The churchyard wall," said Sam at once. He was at our table too. Sam is at our table a lot.

The churchyard is right across the square from the town hall. A low stone wall runs along the front of it. There is a lamp by the gate. You can sit on that wall and see the whole face of the hall.

"That will do," said Mom. "Three. A curfew. Quarter to twelve, home, all four of you. Dad will be at the church gate at half past eleven, and he will walk you back."

A curfew is the hour you have to be in by. Ours was quarter to twelve. There was no arguing with it. I did not want to argue with it. I wanted it written down, so I wrote it down.

Officer Hobbs said yes.

He said it at his own counter on Monday evening, before we went. The note lay in front of him. He kept a hand flat on either side of it and read it slowly. He is a slow reader and a fast thinker. I have stopped mixing those two up.

"Somebody is in that hall at night," he said.

"Yes."

"Somebody. Not something."

"Yes," I said. "Somebody with hands."

That got a short laugh out of him. Then he went serious, and gave us the boundary, the way he always does.

"Mr. Speight locks up at six. You are watching a public building from a public wall. That is allowed. You do not go in. You do not cross the square and knock on that door in the dark. If a door opens, you stay where you are." He tapped the counter once. "And you tell me what you hear. All of it, even the boring parts."

"That is most of it," said Bea.

"That is most of police work," said Officer Hobbs.

So we had a stakeout.

A stakeout is watching one place for a long time to see what happens there. In books it takes half a page. In real life it takes your whole evening. Both your feet go numb.

Monday night we got nothing.

We sat on the wall from ten to half past eleven, in coats. Mom filled a flask with cocoa. Sam carried it and Bea shared it out. The square was empty. The town hall stood there, pale and shut. Six steps, a green door, every window black. A dog barked twice behind the baker's. The church clock rang the quarters over our heads, four times an hour. The sound came down the back of my neck each time.

At eleven thirty Dad came to the gate, and we went home.

I wrote it up in the casebook that night: *Monday, 10:00 to 11:30. No music. No light. No person.*

Then I sat and looked at it.

It looks like a wasted evening. It is not. A night with nothing in it tells you one thing: it does not happen every night. That is a fact. Facts are what we collect. Nothing is a fact. I have written that line in the casebook more than once, and I meant it each time.

Tuesday we went back.

Same wall. Same flask. Colder. Bea brought the copied music in a folder. She sat under the lamp with it open on her knees. Leo brought his own flashlight and did not use it once. He sat at the end of the wall with his chin up. His eyes stayed on the upstairs windows. He barely spoke for an hour.

Ten o'clock. Nothing.

Quarter past. A man walked a bicycle across the far corner and did not look up.

Half past. Sam ate the last of the bread and butter he was not supposed to have brought.

Quarter to eleven.

The church clock started on the three quarters behind us, three high notes, slow.

And the piano came in on top of it.

I want to be exact here. Being exact is the whole job. The first note came with the clock still ringing. It came from the upstairs windows of the town hall, on the left. It came through glass and stone and forty feet of cold air. It was not loud. It was thin and far away and completely real.

Nobody on that wall moved.

Sam's mouth was open. Bea had both hands flat on the sheet in her lap. I got the casebook onto my knees and wrote *10:45*. I drew a line under it. My writing that night is terrible.

"It is ours," said Bea.

She meant the music. She had the copied sheet under the lamp. She was following it with one finger, note by note. Her finger and the sound went along together. Someone up there in the dark hall was playing our piece. The same piece a stranger had copied out by hand with a pencil, and posted to us through a slot in a wall.



"Slow down," Bea said to the finger. "Slow *down*."

The player was not good.

I want to be fair. The piece was not easy. You could hear that even from the wall. But it went along, and along, and then it fell over. It stopped dead in the middle of a run of notes. Then four seconds of silence.

Then it started again, from a few bars back. It came to the same place. It fell over in exactly the same spot.

"Twice," said Leo, not turning around. "Same place. Write that down."

I wrote it down.

The third time through, the player got past it. Not cleanly. But past it, and on. The piece went somewhere quiet and stayed there for a long minute. Sam let out a breath he had been holding for half of it.

We sat on that wall for three quarters of an hour. We listened to a stranger get slowly better at a hard thing.

It stopped at half past eleven. Not paused. Stopped, the way you stop when your hour is up. One held note. Then the lid. I could not really hear the lid at that distance. I have thought since that I heard it anyway. And then the town hall was a shut building again with nothing in it but chairs.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then everybody said everything at once.

"That was a person—"

"Three quarters of an hour—"

"Did you hear it stop at the same—"

"Quiet," said Leo.

He had not moved from the end of the wall. He had not said a word about the music. He had not once looked down at Bea's sheet. I do not think he had been listening at all. That is a strange thing to say about Leo. It is also true.

He had been watching the windows.

"Ada," he said. "How long did we sit here?"

"Three quarters of an hour."

"And what did you see up there?"

I looked across the square at the town hall. At the six steps. At the green door. At the two tall windows of the small hall upstairs.

Black. Both of them. The same flat black they had been at ten o'clock, and at eleven, and now.

"There was no light," I said.

"There was no light," said Leo. "Not a candle. Not a lamp. Not a match. Nothing moved up there for three quarters of an hour, and nothing showed."

Bea closed the folder slowly on the copied music.

"Then whoever that is," she said, "is playing in the dark."

Chapter 4: Playing in the Dark

Leo does a thing he calls reasoning.

You take what you know for certain. Then you walk it forward one step, and check the step, and only then take another one. No jumps. Bea says it is slow. Leo says a jump is how you land in the wrong field.

On Wednesday after school he reasoned it out in front of us, in the attic, standing up.

I had the casebook open to Tuesday night. Bea had the copied music flat on the table with a chair leg holding one corner. Dusty had the other corner. Sam had a cold nose and would not stop saying so.

"Facts," said Leo. "Only facts. Ada, read them."

I read them out.

Music from the small hall of the town hall. Tuesday, 10:45 to 11:30. Our piece, from the parcel. Played badly. Stopped in the same spot twice. Better the third time. No light in either window for three quarters of an hour.

"Good," said Leo. "Now. There are two reasons for a person to play a piano in the dark. Only two. I have been trying all day to find a third."

He held up one finger.

"One. You know the piece by heart. If you know a piece by heart, your hands do it without your eyes. A light would be no use to you. Some people can play a whole hour that way."

He held up a second finger.

"Two. You need the light not to be seen."

We sat with that for a moment.

"So what is it, then?" said Sam.

"Test it," said Bea.

That is the right answer, and Leo already had the test ready.

"Does this player know the piece by heart? No. We heard the proof ourselves. They stumbled." He looked at me. "Ada, how many times?"

"Twice," I said. "In the same place, both times."

A stumble is what your hands do when they lose the road. You are going along, and then a note is wrong, and everything falls over. That player fell over in the middle of the same run of notes twice, and the second time was no better than the first.

"So they do not know it by heart," said Leo. "And here is the other half. They cannot be reading it either. You cannot read music in a dark room. There is no light up there at all — I watched for three quarters of an hour."

"Then how are they playing it at all?" said Sam.

Bea's head came up.

"They are *learning* it by heart," she said.

Nobody spoke for a second.

"That is what copying it out is for," she said. "You copy it to get it into your head. Then you sit in the dark and you try, and you fall over, and you go back and try again. That is not a person playing in the dark. That is a person *practicing* in the dark."

I wrote it down word for word.

"That brings us to why," said Leo. "You do not learn a piece in the dark in a locked building for fun. There is a piano in the church hall. There is one at the school. Half the front rooms in Foxton have one. This person went to the coldest, emptiest, most locked-up room in town, at a quarter to eleven at night, with no light."

"They do not want to be heard," I said.

"They do not want to be *seen*," said Leo. "You could hear that piano from our wall. Anybody in the square could. But nobody can see who is at the keys." He sat down at last. "This is somebody hiding from being looked at. That is all I know about them."

I ruled a line under it in the casebook. It is one of the tidiest pages I have.

Then Bea, who had been quiet for four minutes, said the next thing.

"The windows are painted shut."

We looked at her.

"Both of them. I tried them on Monday. Nobody is going in or out of that small hall through a window." She put her chin on her hands. "And Mr. Speight locks the front door at six. Every night, forty years."

"So they have a key," said Sam.

"So they have a key," said Bea.

"And every key in that building," said Leo, "is written in a book behind the stairs."

We went around there before supper.

Mr. Speight was in his room with a mug and a radio, and he was pleased to see us for about nine seconds. Then he heard what we were asking, and he was not pleased at all.

He was offended. That is the word for it. It is what happens when you say a thing about a person without meaning to. His face went stiff. His voice went flat and polite.

"You are telling me," he said, "that somebody is walking into my town hall at night with a key."

"We are asking," I said.

"Nobody has a key of mine."

"We know," said Leo. "That is why we want to see the book. So we can cross the keys off one at a time."

That helped a little. Then Leo, who reads facts better than he reads faces, asked the next question in the flattest voice in the world.

"Mr. Speight, when did you last go up to the small hall?"

"I go up all the time."

"Before Monday, with us. When?"

Mr. Speight opened his mouth. He shut it. He looked at the ceiling, and then at his mug, and then he sat down on the edge of his table and rubbed the back of his neck.

"August," he said.

He admitted it in one word, and it cost him something. Nobody laughed. I want that written down. Nobody in our club laughed at him, and Sam, who is eleven and finds most things funny, looked at the floor and kept his face straight.

"I lock the front door at six," said Mr. Speight. "Every night. That part is true, and you can time me by it. But that room gets used four times a year. There is no reason to climb those stairs, so I do not climb them. And every time I *do* climb them I close that lid, so in my head the lid is closed." He looked up. "It is not closed, is it."

"No," I said. "It is open."

"Then somebody has been sitting at my piano." He stood up. "Right. You had better see the book."

The key book is long and thin, with a hard green cover, and it lives in a drawer under the window. Inside there is one line for each key. Number. Name. Date given. Date returned.

There are eleven keys to the Foxton town hall.

I copied all eleven into the casebook. Mr. Prentice the mayor has one. The town clerk has one. The churchwarden has one, from the year the church roof was mended and the men needed somewhere to eat. Mrs. Cole has one for the sewing circle. Mrs. Ashby has one for the museum. The stores flood, so the boxes come here. The doctor has one, from the year the hall was a clinic. The bell ringers have one. The man who winds the church clock has one. And Mr. Speight has two. The second one hangs on a nail in his room, and he showed us the nail.

That is ten keys and ten names.

The eleventh had no name at all. It was key number seven, halfway down the page.

There had been one. You could still see the shape of it under the ink. Somebody had crossed that name out. Not with one stroke, the way you cross out a wrong word. They had gone over it and over it, backward and forward. The whole name was a hard black bar now. The paper had gone thin and shiny under it, the way paper goes when you rub it too long.

The date given said 1958.

The date returned was empty.

"Somebody still has key number seven," said Bea.

"Somebody nobody is allowed to know about," said Sam.

Mr. Speight was staring at the page like a man who has found a hole in his own floor.

"That is not my ink," he said. "In forty years I have never crossed a name out of that book. Never once. You write *returned* and the date, and that is that." He put a thick finger beside the black bar. "Somebody has done that thoroughly."

That was the right word, and I stole it for the casebook. Thoroughly means all the way, with nothing left half done.

Bea had gone very still.

Then she picked the whole book up, walked to the window, and held the page flat against the last of the gray afternoon light.

"Ada," she said. "Come here."

I came. Bea turned the page around.

Ink only goes so deep. From the front, that name was a black bar and nothing else. From the back, with the light coming through the paper, it was a name written backward — and every letter of it was perfectly readable.



I read it twice to be sure. Then I read it out loud in Mr. Speight's little room, with the radio still going.

"*M. Prewitt.*"

Chapter 5: Sam Keeps His Mouth Shut

Sam Potts solved half of this case on a Thursday, standing at a bus stop, without meaning to.

We were walking back from school. Bea had the parcel paper in her bag, flat between two library books. Leo will not let anyone fold it. At the corner by the post office there is a bus shelter. It has a bench in it and a card on the wall. The card is the timetable for the Marlow bus. A timetable tells you what time things go.

Sam stopped in front of it.

He stopped the way you stop when someone says your name behind you.

"Ada," he said. "Get the paper out."

The card in that shelter is not printed. Someone writes it out by hand in black ink and pins it up. It gets done again every time the times change. It has been mended twice with tape. I have waited under it a hundred times, and never once looked at it properly.

Bea got the parcel paper out. Sam held it up beside the card.

Same small letters. Same slow, even line. Same r's.

"That is the same handwriting," said Leo. He did not even sound surprised. For Leo, that is a shout.

"Who writes it?" I said.

"Mr. Dabney," said Sam. "He does the card. He has done it for years. When the bus times change he writes a new one and pins it up and takes the old one home." He shrugged. It was nothing to him. "I read it every week. My aunt goes to Marlow on a Tuesday."

Sam reads it all. Market lists, stall cards, the board outside the church, the prices in the fish man's window. He does not do it to learn a thing. He does it the way other people hum. And it had just handed us a name.

Mr. Dabney was on his bench in the square. He wears the same brown coat from October to April. He was watching Mr. Mott mend a basket on a bicycle.

We sat down along the bench beside him. One, two, three, four. Nobody said a word for a moment.

"You four," he said.

"Mr. Dabney," I said. "Did you send us a parcel?"

He looked straight ahead at the bicycle. Then he said it. I counted the words afterward. There were nine of them.

"Yes. That was me. I did not know who else."



That is what admitting is. You say the true thing out loud. It costs you a little, and then it is done. He did not wriggle. I like Mr. Dabney.

The rest came out slowly, in the order he wanted to say it.

He found the sheet of music on the town hall steps. Wednesday morning, early, folded twice and wet along one edge. He thought someone had

dropped it. He picked it up to hand it in, but the hall was not open yet. After that it lived on his table for a week.

"Then I heard it," he said.

"Heard what?"

"That." He nodded at the town hall. "The piano. Late. Coming out of those upstairs windows." He rubbed his knee. "I drove the last bus out of this town for thirty years. My legs still think eleven at night is work time. So I walk. Around the square, down the lane, home."

"How many times have you heard it?"

"Three Tuesdays running," he said. "Running means one after the other. And the Thursdays, twice."

Bea wrote that on her hand.

"Did you tell anybody?" said Leo.

"Who?" said Mr. Dabney. He did not say it crossly. He said it as a real question. "Go to Officer Hobbs with what? *Somebody is playing a piano.* That is not a crime, and it is not even a nuisance. You cannot hear it inside a house from there. Only out in the open. And only if you are standing still at eleven at night. Nobody is, but me." He turned his hands over. "It is not police work. But it is *something*. I have been walking past it for three weeks. It has got so I cannot stop thinking about it."

"So you wrote to us," I said.

"You found every bicycle in this town," said Mr. Dabney. "I sat on this bench and watched you do it."

Then he asked for the one thing he wanted.

"Do not use my name."

Sam said "All right" before I could open my mouth. Before he thought about it. It came out of him the way *bless you* comes out when someone sneezes.

Mr. Dabney turned his head and looked at Sam for a long second, checking that it was real.

"I am not ashamed of it," he said. "But a town this size runs on talk. Say it gets about that old Dabney asks questions about his neighbors. Then that is what I am. A man who talks about his neighbors. I would rather be the man on the bench." He looked back at the town hall. "Find out who it is. If they are in trouble, help them. If they are not, leave them be. Only I would like to know that somebody knows."

I wrote none of that down in front of him. I wrote it in the attic an hour later, word for word, and it took me two tries.

And that is how Sam Potts got a promise around his neck.

A promise is a small thing to make. It is a heavy thing to carry. You can make one in half a second at a bench. Then you carry it for five weeks.

It started that same afternoon.

We went around by the market yard so Sam could drop his bag at his uncle's. Uncle Ted was breaking up boxes. He is a large, cheerful man who talks the whole time he works.

"Sam! What are you four up to? You have been up and down this square all week with that big brown book."

Sam opened his mouth.

I have watched Sam Potts open his mouth a thousand times. It is the surest thing in Foxton. Words come out. Usually the right ones, sometimes too many, always fast.

Nothing came out.

"We have got a case," he said at last. "That is all I can say."

"A case! What case? Who brought it to you?"

"Can't say, Uncle Ted."

Uncle Ted laughed and went on with the boxes. He was not hurt, and he had forgotten it by the next box. But Sam stood there with his hand flat on the top of the pile. He was not laughing, and he said nothing more all the way out of the yard.

Then it happened again, forty minutes later, and that one was worse.

Ned from the bakery came past on his bicycle. It is the bicycle with the mended brake, from our first case. He stopped with one foot on the curb.

"Is it true you have got another one?" he said. "Somebody said you were sitting on the churchyard wall at eleven at night."

"We were," said Sam.

"Well? What is it? Come on."

Sam looked at the ground. Ned is his friend. Ned told us all he knew in our first case. All of it, straight out. He got nothing for it but his name in a casebook.

"I can't," said Sam.

"You can't."

"I gave somebody my word," said Sam.

Ned stood there a second longer. Then he put his foot back on the pedal. He said, "Right," in the voice people use for *fine*. He rode off, and Sam watched him all the way to the corner.

"That," said Sam, "is horrible."

"Yes," said Bea.

"You said one word to a man on a bench—"

"Yes," said Bea.

"—and now I have to be like this for *weeks*."

"Yes," said Bea. "That is what a promise is. Would you take it back?"

Sam thought about it honestly. Sam is eleven, and he thinks about things honestly. It is one of the best things about him.

"No," he said.

Up in the attic I filled two pages.

I wrote what Mr. Dabney told us. I wrote the times: three Tuesdays running, two Thursdays. I wrote that the sheet had been dropped on the steps. I wrote that it was picked up by a man who could not leave it alone. And then, at the bottom of the page, I wrote the name from the key book. I had carried it around in my head since Wednesday.

Key number seven. Crossed out. 1958. Never returned.

M. PREWITT.

I was still looking at it when the attic door bumped open with a knee.

Mom came up the last three stairs with four mugs of cocoa on a tray. She was saying something about supper at six.

Then she stopped.

She stood on the top step with the tray in both hands. She was looking down at the open casebook on the table. Mom reads upside down better than anyone I know. She has read price lists and letters upside down across a shop counter since she was younger than me.

She did not say anything at all.

She just stood there on the step and read that name upside down. And her face went somewhere I had never seen it go.

Chapter 6: Forty Years of Scales

My mother put the tray down on the table.

She did it slowly. Four mugs, no spills. Then she stood with her hand on the back of a chair. She looked at the casebook again, the right way up this time.

“Where did you get that name?” she said.

I told her. The key book, line seven, the black bar, the light through the paper. Mom heard all of it with her chin down.

“Marion Prewitt,” she said, “taught me my scales.”

Scales are the runs of notes you go up and down. You do them before you are allowed to play anything nice. Every piano child in Foxton has done them. Mom did hers in a cold front room on Cross Street. She was eight.

“She taught me for six years,” she said. “She taught half this town.”

“Is she nice?” said Sam.

Mom took a long time over that. Too long.

“She is very sharp,” she said at last. “She is funny. She does not put up with nonsense.” She picked up the empty tray. “You had better drink that before it goes cold.”

And she went down the stairs.

That is the first strange thing, and I want it written down. My mother says what she thinks. She says it to customers. She says it to my father. She said it to me at eleven at night once. She said it to a man who tried to sell her a book with the last forty pages gone. She does not pick her words.

That night she chose every single one.

At supper Dad said grace, the same short grace he says every evening. Then he passed the potatoes. Mom did not say the name again. Neither did I.

Then we went out and sat on the wall again, with the flask. Stakeout number three.

Thursday night, quarter to eleven: the piano started with the clock, the way it had on Tuesday. Same piece. Same run of notes in the middle. This time the player got past it on the second try instead of the third. It stopped at half past eleven. There was no light in either window, and Dad met us at the church gate.

Thursdays too, I wrote. *Confirmed. A little better than Tuesday.*

Then I lay in bed and thought about my mother picking her words.

You do not find a person like Miss Prewitt in one afternoon. You assemble her. That is Bea's word. To assemble is to build a thing out of separate parts. It is exactly what we did on Friday and Saturday. Three piles of paper and three grown-ups.

The first pile was Miss Petherton's.

The library has kept every copy of the *Foxton Weekly* since 1901. They are in the back room, in stacks. Stacks are the tall rows of shelves where the old papers live. It smells very good in there. Miss Petherton let us in and stood over us the whole time. That is her way of helping.

We found the name eleven times in one hour.

Foxton Autumn Concert. At the piano, Miss M. Prewitt.

School prize day. Songs by the choir, accompanied by Miss M. Prewitt.

The Christmas service, the summer fair, the flower show, the choir, the choir, the choir.

An accompanist is the person at the piano when other people sing. Nobody claps for them first. They sit sideways at the keys and watch everyone else. They hold the whole thing together. At the end they stand up and nod once. There is a photo in the paper from 1969. A hall full of children in rows. And at the side, half cut off by the edge of the picture, a young woman at a piano. Her face is turned away, toward the singers.

"That is the job," said Miss Petherton, over my shoulder. "Forty years of it."

"Did she teach you too?" said Sam.

"She did not," said Miss Petherton. "I sing. She once told me I sing like a person shutting a gate."

Bea laughed so hard she had to sit down on a stack of 1954.

The second pile was Mrs. Ashby's, and that took Saturday morning.

The museum is one room and a hallway, and Mrs. Ashby is in charge of both. She let us in the front door before opening time. She was in her coat, with a mug in her hand. She has an old silver spoon in a glass case. The card beside it says only *SPOON*. She still will not explain it, and I have stopped asking.

"Programs," she said. "You want programs. Everyone wants the wrong thing. Then one day they want programs."

She brought out a long gray box.

The town's concert programs live in that box, in order. They are tied in bundles of ten with brown tape. A program is the little folded card they hand you at the door. The pieces of music are listed inside, with the names of who is playing. Foxton has kept every one since 1931.

Mrs. Ashby cleared the table with one arm and laid them out.

It took twenty minutes. At the end of it, thirty years of Foxton concerts lay in front of us, corner to corner. Sam and Bea had to stand on chairs to see the far end.

I read the same line thirty times.

Accompanist: Miss M. Prewitt.

Accompanist: Miss M. Prewitt.

Accompanist: Miss M. Prewitt.

She is on nearly all of them. Not on the front. Never on the front. She is at the bottom of the inside page, in small letters. Under the singers. Under the man who did the lights.

"She wrote them out herself," said Mrs. Ashby.

"Wrote what?"

"The programs. All of them. She lettered them by hand. Then she took them to the printer in Marlow, every year, for about thirty years." Mrs. Ashby turned one around for me. "Look at the *g*. Nobody letters a *g* like that any more. That is a Prewitt program, and I can spot one across the room."

I looked at the letters. They were lovely. Small, even, upright, each one the same size as the last. It was not the handwriting from our parcel. Our parcel is Mr. Dabney, and his letters lean. This was different. This was someone who had decided, once, how a letter should be made. And had made it that way for thirty years.

Then Leo, at the far end of the table, said, "It stops."

We went down to him.

The programs went on past the last one with her name in it. There was one for the next year. And the year after that. And every year since, right up to last spring. Foxton has gone on having concerts.

But the line at the bottom of the inside page had another name in it. And then a third. And then a man from Marlow who came over with his own keyboard.



"Ten years," said Leo. "Ten years of programs with someone else at the piano."

"And no goodbye," said Bea. "Look at them. Nobody wrote *with thanks to Miss Prewitt* or *after forty years.* She is on this one, and then she is not on any of them ever again."

Mrs. Ashby did not say a word for a moment. She was looking at the two programs side by side. The last one with the name, and the first one without.

"No," she said. "There was no goodbye."

We got back to the shop at one o'clock. The market was in full noise outside. Mr. Mott had a line of people waiting at his bench. Dad was arguing happily with a man about the price of a book on bees.

Mom was at the window bench mending a spine with a small brush.

I put the casebook down in front of her. I opened it to the page with the thirty programs on it.

"Mom," I said. "Just tell us."

She put the brush down. She looked out of the window at the square for a second. Then she told us plainly, and plainly means straight out, with nothing wrapped around it.

"Marion Prewitt stopped playing in public about ten years ago," she said. "She did not say why. There was no notice in the paper. There was no last concert. She simply stopped. And she has not taught one pupil since. Not one, and she taught this town for forty years." She looked at me. "People asked at first. She has a way of answering a question with a joke. After a year or two, people stopped asking."

"Nobody knows why?" said Leo.

"Nobody knows why," said Mom.

The market shouted away outside. Someone dropped a crate.

"Ada," said Mom, and she said this part slowly. "You are going to knock on that door. I can see it from here." She picked up her brush again. "Then be sure of one thing before you do. Some people keep a thing shut for ten years, and they are waiting for someone to ask. And some people keep it shut because it hurts."

"And which one is Miss Prewitt?" I said.

"I don't know," said Mom. "That is the trouble. Be sure you want the answer."

Chapter 7: The Ambush That Didn't Happen

We had our first real argument that Saturday afternoon.

Not the ordinary kind. We have those all the time. About the cocoa. About Leo's rulers. About whether Dusty counts as a member. This was the other kind. This was the kind where four people who like each other end up on their feet.

Bea started it, and she started it well, with a drawing.

She had done it in the twenty minutes since the museum. It was neat. It had the square on it, and the town hall, and the six steps. There was a little X at the bottom of the steps, with a time beside it.

Thursday. 11:30.

"It is simple," said Bea. "We know she comes on Tuesday and Thursday. We know she stops at half past eleven. There is one door out of that building. So we stand at the bottom of the steps at twenty-five past. We wait. The door opens. We see who comes out." She put the pencil down. "One night. Then we know."

Nobody said anything.

"It is efficient," said Bea.

Efficient means it does the job with nothing wasted. Bea's plans usually are. That is not the same as good. It took me most of that day to find the words for the difference.

"It is the shortest route to a fact," said Leo.

A route is the way you go to get somewhere. Leo has never in his life taken the long one on purpose.

"We have spent nine days on this," he said. "We have a name from a key book. We have a stack of old programs. Do you know what none of that is? Proof. We have not seen one person. Thursday night we could *see* the person." He looked around at us. "Then it is done."

"No," I said.

And then I had to say why. That was harder than I thought. I knew it before I could explain it. Knowing a thing is not the same as saying it out loud in a cold attic, with three people looking at you.

"That is not evidence," I said. "That is an ambush."

"A what?"

"An ambush." I had to hunt for it. "It is when you wait for a person who does not know you are waiting. You hide. They come around the corner. And there you are."

"We would not be hiding," said Bea. "We would be out in the middle of a public square. Anyone can stand in a square. Officer Hobbs said so himself."

That was a good answer. Much better than I wanted it to be.

"Say the words out loud," I said. "Say what happens. A person comes out of that door at half past eleven at night, in the dark, on their own. And four children are standing at the bottom of the steps looking up at them."

Bea opened her mouth. Then she shut it again.

"They would think—" said Sam, and stopped.

"They would think they had been caught," I said. "And they would be right. That is the whole of it. Whoever that is has spent three weeks making sure nobody sees them. They play in the dark for that. They come at a quarter to eleven for that. And our plan takes it away from them in one second. In a dark square. With no warning."

"To get the answer," said Leo.

"Yes," I said. "That is the part I do not like. We would get the answer."

Nobody spoke for a bit. Down in the shop somebody rang the bell on the counter twice.

"Rule One," I said. "It is on the wall behind you. *Look properly.* It does not say catch somebody. There is a difference between looking at a thing and jumping out at it. That difference is the whole reason people let us into their houses."

"That is not evidence, that is manners," said Bea.

"Yes," I said. "It is manners."

I refused. That is the plain word for it. I wrote it in the casebook that night in the plain word, and I will not make it sound nicer. *Bea's plan: refused. AQ.* To refuse is to say no when you could have said yes. It is not an easy thing to do to your friends.

Bea went and stood by the window with her arms folded.

"I would like to say something," she said, "about how you cannot measure manners."

"Go on then."

"I would like to. But you would win." She was still looking out at the square. "I hate that."

And then Sam, who had said almost nothing all afternoon, said the thing that ended it.

He had been sitting on the floor with his back against the table leg. He had carried a promise around all week. He had said *I can't* to his own uncle and to his best friend. He had done it four times by then. I think he was the only one of us who knew what that upstairs room felt like from the inside.

"How would you like it?" he said.

Bea turned around.

"If you had a thing you were doing on your own, in the dark, for a reason nobody knew," said Sam. "And four kids were waiting at the bottom of the stairs."

He was not angry. That was somehow worse.

Bea looked at him for a long moment. Then she came back to the table and picked up her drawing. She folded it once, and then again, and put it in her pocket.

"Fine," she said. "Then we do the slow thing."

The slow thing is a door and daylight.

We agreed on it in about four minutes, once nobody was arguing. We would go to her house in daylight and knock. We would say who we were and what we wanted. And she could shut the door in our faces if she liked. That is allowed. A shut door is an answer too.

"And if she says nothing?" said Leo.

"Then we have got nothing," I said. "And she has still got her Tuesday."

I did not tell them the last part for a long time. It is this. The slow way is not the weaker evidence. It is the better evidence. A thing a person tells you at their own front door, in daylight, with their own name in their mouth, is worth ten of anything you take off them in the dark.

Miss Prewitt lives at 4 Cross Street. My mother learned her scales in that front room.

We went on Monday after school, all four of us, in a row on the sidewalk. We were all much more nervous than we said.

It is a narrow gray house at the end of a row. Two windows up and one down. A green door, and a brass mail slot that someone polishes. The step was swept. There was a pot by the door with something neat growing in it. It was the tidiest house on Cross Street. And it looked shut in a way that other houses do not.

Leo knocked. Three knocks, not too hard.

We waited.

He knocked again.

Nothing. No feet, no light, no curtain. I looked up at the front window and there was nothing to see but the gray of the afternoon on the glass.

"Out," said Sam.

"Or in and not answering," said Bea.

"Out," said Sam. "Look at the mail slot."

There was a folded paper sticking out of it, half in and half out. That is how they go when nobody has been home since morning.

We went back on Tuesday. We went back on Wednesday. We knocked properly each time, and each time nothing came of it. By Wednesday I had begun to think about that upstairs room at a quarter to eleven. It was making me feel strange.

It was on the Wednesday that Leo said, "What is that?"

He was standing back from the house, at the edge of the sidewalk. He was looking at the bottom corner of the front window.

There was a card taped to the inside of the glass.

It was small, about the size of a postcard. It had been taped there a very long time. You could see four brown squares where the tape had gone hard and stayed. The card itself had faded almost white. To fade is what the sun does to paper and curtains and everything else it can reach. It works slowly, over years, and the color goes out of the thing.



There were two words on that card. They were hard to read now. But you could read them, in lettering I had seen thirty times, two days before. Lettering is writing done letter by letter, on purpose. You do it that way when the thing is going to be looked at.

Small. Even. Upright. Every letter exactly the same size as the last.

PIANO LESSONS

I stood on that sidewalk and read it, and my neck went cold.

I have walked down Cross Street my whole life. I walked down it on the way to school for four years. That card has been in that window the whole time, going quietly white in the light. And I have never once seen it.

Chapter 8: Found Out

We went at half past ten on Thursday night. We went in through the front door. And I knocked.

I want that on the page first. No window. No ladder. No creeping. Mom knew. Dad walked us across the square himself. He stood at the bottom of the steps with his hands in his pockets. Officer Hobbs knew. I told him at his counter on Wednesday, and he said one thing, twice.

"Knock first."

The green door of the town hall was not locked.

Leo pushed it and it went, quietly. A lock turns that way when the person is coming back out in an hour.

Inside, the front hall was almost black. The white squares of the floor showed a little. There was a smell of floor polish. And somewhere above us, up the wide stairs, a piano was playing.

Out on the wall it had been thin and far away. At the bottom of those stairs it was in the room with us. You could hear the wood of it. You could hear a foot on the pedal. You could hear the player breathe in before a hard part.

We went up in single file, a hand each on the brass rail. We were inside our curfew and outside nobody's boundary. I had checked both. Nobody said one word.

At the top, the brown door of the small hall stood open the width of a hand.

There was no light behind it. Not a candle in the brass brackets, not a lamp, nothing. Only that piano, coming out of a dark room. And the two tall windows at the far end, pale gray, with the town outside.

The player stopped in the middle of the same run of notes.

Four seconds of silence.

Then it started again from a few bars back, and got past it.

Bea's hand was flat against the wall. Sam had gone completely still. I stood on that landing with the casebook under my arm. And I understood

something all at once. This was the moment. Not the moment we found out. The moment we chose *how*.

We could go back down the stairs and never know.

We could stand in the dark and listen for another forty minutes. That is nearly the same as hiding.

Or I could knock.

I knocked.

The piano stopped dead.

A silence in the dark is a horrible thing to leave lying about. So I said the whole thing at once, at the crack of the door, in my ordinary voice.

"My name is Ada Quill. I am from the bookshop on Ivy Lane. There are four of us and we are all children. My father is at the bottom of the steps outside. We are not here to make trouble. Somebody heard the piano and asked us to find out who it was. We have found out. And now we are knocking on the door instead of watching you from the square. That is all."

Then a voice came out of the dark, quite close. It was not the voice I had built in my head.

"Well," it said. "That is the politest ambush I have ever had."

The door opened.

She was smaller than I expected. One hand was on the door, the other on the piano. She had a coat and a scarf on — that room is freezing. Her hair was pinned up, silver-gray. Reading glasses hung on a chain, not being used.

Miss Marion Prewitt looked at the four of us for four seconds.

I counted them. She was frightened. There is no kind way to write that, so I will write it plainly. For four seconds an old woman who was doing nothing wrong was frightened. Alone, in a dark room, with four children in the doorway.

Then she was angry, and that lasted about six.

"Do you know what time it is?" she said. "Does your mother know where you are? Who *told* you? And which one of you knocked? That was a proper knock. I should like to know who taught it to you."

"My mother taught me," I said. "You taught my mother."

Miss Prewitt's hand came off the door.

"Who is your mother?"

"Jane Quill. She was Jane Foss."

There was a small silence. Something in the shape of her went different.

"Jane Foss," she said, "had the fastest left hand in this town. And would not practice her scales."

"She still won't," I said.

And then Miss Prewitt laughed.

She laughed so hard she had to sit down on the piano stool. She laughed at herself, not at us. She took the glasses off the chain and wiped them on her scarf. Then she put them down on the piano without ever putting them on. It is the best sound in this whole case, and I did not write a word of it down. I was laughing too.



"Four children," she said. "I have been coming to this room for six weeks. I have counted every footstep on that square. I have gone home the long way around twice. Once because a cat looked at me. And it is four children with a book."

"Five," said Sam. "There is a cat. She is at home."

"Of course there is," said Miss Prewitt.

Then she said, "Shut that door, you are letting the cold up the stairs." And we all came in.

That is how we had the strangest talk of my life. Four of us on a stack of chairs in a freezing hall, and an old woman on a piano stool. Nobody put the light on. I asked her at the start if we should.

"I have got this far in the dark," she said. "I am not turning a light on now for four people who already know."

So we sat in the dark. It came out sideways, in pieces, in the order she wanted to give it.

Her sister is Edith. Edith Prewitt turns eighty in five weeks, on the twenty-second of November.

"There are two of us and there always were," she said. "Our mother taught us both. Edith is the elder by three years and has never let me forget it."

The piece is their mother's. She used to play it in the evenings. The two of them learned it as girls, one part each. Side by side on the same stool, with their feet not reaching the floor.

There is no printed copy of it, and there never was. There is a copy in Edith's head, and there was one in Marion's. A month ago Marion wrote the whole thing out by hand, in pencil, from memory, to be sure of it.

"That is what took the hours," said Bea, quietly.

"You are the one who worked out the hours," said Miss Prewitt. "Good."

Then the last part. She said it the way you take off a bandage.

"My hands went stiff about ten years ago."

She held them up in the gray light. I could not see much. Only the shape.

"They are not sore," she said. "They are stiff, and in this weather they are worse. Some things I could do at fifty I cannot do at seventy-seven. One of them is the third line of my mother's piece."

"So you stopped," said Leo.

"So I stopped." She said it without one drop of self-pity. "I had played for this town for forty years, and I was good. I was not going to sit in front of two hundred people and be *nearly* good." She turned around on the stool. "It was pride. I know it was pride. I have had ten years to work that out, thank you."

"And now?" I said.

"And now my sister is eighty." Miss Prewitt shrugged. "There is one piece I can still get right. Six weeks of work, every Tuesday and every Thursday. That is what I am doing. And I do it in the coldest room in Foxton, in the dark, where nobody can hear me fail." She laid a hand flat on the keys

without pressing them. "I would much rather be found out by four children than heard by one neighbor."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"The key," said Bea. "Number seven."

"Nineteen fifty-eight," said Miss Prewitt. "For rehearsals, when I still played in public. I never gave it back. And when I stopped, I crossed my own name out of that book. I used the caretaker's own pen. He was making me a cup of tea at the time." She almost smiled. "Write that down. I rubbed at that page till it went shiny. I have felt bad about it for ten years."

"And the lid?" said Leo.

"The lid bangs," she said. "It is a heavy old lid and it bangs like a door. So I leave it up. In six weeks nobody has noticed."

"Mr. Speight noticed on Monday," I said.

"Mr. Speight," said Miss Prewitt, "has been telling this town he does everything every night for forty years."

I had the casebook open on my knees in the dark, writing blind. I had been at it for twenty minutes.

Miss Prewitt saw the pale shape of it. And I saw her see it.

"That," she said. "The famous book. My sister reads the paper. She told me four children in this town found every stolen bicycle in it."

"Yes," I said.

"And you write everything down in there. Names and all."

"Yes."

She was quiet for a second.

"So," said Miss Prewitt. "Are you going to put me in that?"

Chapter 9: A Case You Cannot Publish

"Are you going to put me in that?"

I gave her the only answer I had.

"I don't know yet," I said. "But whatever goes in it will be true. That is the one thing I can promise you tonight."

Miss Prewitt looked at me in the dark for a moment.

"Good," she said. "Now go home. It is nearly midnight and I am seventy-seven."

We went down the stairs and out past my father. He had been on those steps for fifty minutes. He did not ask us one thing all the way home.

I did not sleep much. I had a page to write and no idea how to write it.

Here is the problem, set out the way I set it out on Friday in the attic.

The casebook cannot be falsified. To falsify a thing is to make it untrue on purpose. You can falsify a page by writing a lie in it. You can also do it by leaving out the part you do not like. That is the quiet way, and it counts just the same.

It is the rule the attic key hangs on. Mom hands it over as long as the casebook stays honest. A case is never solved with a lie. Evidence is never improved.

So we could not write *unknown*. We knew.

And we could not write nothing at all. A blank page after all that would have been a lie with tidy edges.

But there was the other side of it. Sam said the other side out loud.

"If it goes in the book, it gets read."

He was right. That is what the book is *for*. A casebook gets read aloud. My mother reads it upside down from three feet away. In our first case I stood in a hall and read it out to the whole town.

And on the twenty-second of November an old woman is going to walk into a room. She is going to play her mother's piece for her sister. Her sister will be eighty that day. Her sister knows nothing about it.

"So the truth goes in," said Leo. "The question is when it comes out."

I looked at the empty page for a long time. Then I ruled a line across it, three inches down, and wrote above the line in capitals.

SEALED SECTION — CASE NUMBER TWO

TO BE OPENED AFTER 22 NOVEMBER

To seal a thing is to shut it so you can tell if anyone has opened it. You fold the pages over. You tape the edge down. You sign across the tape.

Under that I wrote the two rules of the thing. A good idea with no rules is only a nice feeling.

1. Everything in the sealed section is true. Nothing is left out to make it kinder.

2. It gets opened. It has a date on it.

The second one matters more, and it took me a day to see why. A secret with a date on it is a surprise. A secret with no date is not. By then it is not being kept *for* the person any more. It is being kept *from* them.

Bea read the page twice.

"That is not weaker evidence," she said. "It is the same evidence in a drawer." She looked up. "I would like it noted that I said that."

It is noted.

We went to 4 Cross Street on Saturday morning, in daylight, and knocked. This time someone was in.

Miss Prewitt's front room has a piano in it.

I did not expect that. It stands by the fireplace with the lid down and a green cloth over the top. Six photos stand on the cloth. It has been shut for ten years.

She saw me looking at it. She did not make a speech.

"Thin walls," she said. "Mrs. Dean is on the other side of that wall and she hears it all. I would have to be very good indeed to play in this room. I am not, yet." She put the teapot down. "There is no sad story here, so do not go hunting for one."

Then I put the casebook on her table, open to the ruled line, and asked her for permission.

Permission is when a person says yes to a thing that is theirs to say yes to.

She read the two rules with her glasses on this time. She got to *TO BE OPENED AFTER 22 NOVEMBER* and made a small noise. I think it was a laugh with the lid on.

"Case Number Two," she said. "I am Case Number Two."

"You are."

"After the bicycles."

"After the bicycles."

"Well," said Miss Prewitt. "That is the most entertaining thing that has happened to me in ten years."

Entertained is what she was for the rest of that hour. Pleased, and interested, and a little amused at herself. She asked whether Dusty was a full member or an honorary one, and got a long answer from Sam.

Then she took my pencil and lettered her name under the two rules, in that small upright hand.

M. Prewitt.

"You have my permission," she said. "Write all of it. And if you go soft and leave out the part where I crossed my own name out of a book with a borrowed pen, I shall be very annoyed."

Officer Hobbs got told at four o'clock, at his own counter, with the sealed section open in front of him.

I told him all of it. Who it was. Why. Her hands. The birthday. The key from 1958 that never went back. I told him we had knocked first. He read the two rules twice.



Then he approved it in one sentence. To approve a thing is to say it is all right. He said the boundary had been kept, and from Officer Hobbs that is a medal.

"You found a person doing nothing wrong," he said, "and you shut the door quietly."

That was all. He wrote three words in his own notebook and put it back in his top pocket.

"One thing," he said, as we got to the door. "The twenty-second of November. I should like to be invited."

We invited him on the spot. He said he would come out of uniform.

After that the case went quiet for a week, and Sam Potts had the worst of it.

I counted. It was four times.

His aunt asked him on Saturday, over the dishes. Was it true the club had been out at eleven at night? Sam said yes. What had they found? Sam said, "A thing we can't say yet," and dried one plate for a very long time.

The market got him on Saturday — not one person but about thirty. Sam went the length of the square with his head down. He said *can't* eleven times. By the end, two men on the stalls were calling him Officer Potts.

His two school friends got him on Monday, one on each side, from the gate to the corner. Sam came into the shop after that looking gray.

And then, on Tuesday, there was Mr. Dabney.

He was down at the river with a rod. That is what he does when it is too cold for the bench. Sam went down the bank on his own. He asked us not to come. I only know what he told me after.

Mr. Dabney did not ask a single question. That was the worst part.

He said, "Any good?"

And Sam stood there with the whole of it in his mouth. The name. The sister. The piece. The hands. The date. And this was the man who had started it. He had wrapped the parcel. He had tied a proper knot and posted it through a slot in a wall.

"Somebody knows," said Sam.

Mr. Dabney looked at his line for a bit.

"That was all I asked for," he said.

Sam came back up the bank. He told me after that it was the first time all week that keeping his mouth shut had not felt like losing something.

So we had five weeks. We had permission, a date, a sealed section and a plan.

Then, on Tuesday evening, Bea put her hand up in the attic.

She had been quiet all week. With Bea that means she is working.

"There is a problem," she said. "None of you have noticed it. I have been waiting."

She put her notes on the table.

"Middle C," she said. "The note in the middle, the one everyone finds first. It sticks. Mr. Speight told us that on the first day, and we wrote it down and forgot it." She tapped the page. "It has stuck in every rehearsal I have heard. Twice on Tuesday. Three times last Thursday. She plays around it. She is so good at playing around it that you have to listen for it."

"Can it be fixed?" said Leo.

"A piano tuner fixes it," said Bea. "That is a man who comes with a case of tools and makes a piano right again."

"Then she gets a tuner," said Sam.

Bea looked at him.

"From where?" she said. "There is one in Marlow. He drives over. He parks in the square. He carries a case up the town hall steps in the middle of the morning. And he asks Mr. Speight for the key to the small hall."

Nobody said anything.

"By lunchtime," said Bea, "the whole of Foxton knows there is a piano being tuned in an empty building. And by teatime somebody has worked out who has been playing it."

Chapter 10: The Man Who Cannot Stop Mending Things

Leo said it first, and he said it in four words.

"We know a mender."

There was a silence in the attic. Then Sam laughed out loud. "He does *bicycles*," said Bea. "Yes," said Leo, in the voice he uses when he is already three steps past you.

"A piano is not a bicycle," said Bea.

"No," said Leo. "It is a box with two hundred moving parts in it. Every one of them is metal or wood or felt. And it makes a noise when it is wrong."

Nobody had an answer to that.

We found Mr. Mott on Saturday at his bench by the fountain. He had a wheel upside down in his hands and three bicycles waiting in a line. His board was over his head.

F. MOTT — BICYCLES / est. 1948 / mending again

Bea asked him. She had written the question out on a card, and then she did not use it.

"Mr. Mott. Can you mend a piano?"

Mr. Mott put the wheel down.

"I am a bicycle man," he said.

"We know."

"Forty years. Bicycles. My father before me." He picked a spoke key up off the bench and put it down again. "Not pianos."

"But could you look at one?"

Mr. Mott is a thin, neat old man in a gray buttoned coat. He is very careful about what he says he can do. That is one reason the whole town trusts him now. But something was going on in his face. It went on for about six seconds.

"What is wrong with it?" he said.

"One note sticks," said Bea. "Middle C. It goes down, and it comes up slowly. About one time in four it does not come up at all."

Mr. Mott looked at the fountain for a moment.

"That is not the string," he said.

"Sorry?"

"If a note *sticks*, that is not the string. A string is a tuner's job, and I would not touch it. Sticking is the parts that move." He was talking to the fountain, not to us. "Something is rubbing. Or something has gone hard."

"So you *can*," said Sam.

"I am a bicycle man," said Mr. Mott. Then, after a bit: "What time?"

We told him the whole case first. All of it, sitting around his bench on upturned crates, with the market going on behind us. Miss Prewitt. The birthday. The sealed section. The twenty-second of November. He listened the way he listens to a wheel spin.

At the end he said one thing.

"Does she know you are asking me?"

"Yes," I said. "We asked her yesterday. She said, and I am quoting her, *if he can do it without telling the county, he may.*"

Mr. Mott almost smiled.

Then he did the thing that made the whole chapter worth writing down.

He put his tools in his bag. He walked across the square with the four of us behind him. He went into the town hall and asked Mr. Speight.

Out loud. In front of us. In the middle of the front hall, with his cap in his hand.

"Mr. Speight. There is a note on your piano upstairs that sticks. These four have asked me to look at it. I would like your permission to open the front

of it and put my hands inside. I will put back what I move. And if you would rather I did not touch it, I will not."

Mr. Speight went pink. He looked offended for about a second, and then he did not.

I do not think anybody had asked Mr. Speight for permission to do anything in about fifteen years. He straightened his coat. He said, "Well now." He said it twice.

"I will want to watch," he said.

"I should hope so," said Mr. Mott.

I want to write down what that was, in case it is not plain. In our first case a man mended a whole town's bicycles and asked nobody. It took us a whole case, and a hall full of people, to work out what was wrong with that. A kindness has to be asked for first. He knew it. He has not forgotten it, and he never will.

The piano came apart in about ninety seconds.

That surprised all of us. The front of an upright piano is not screwed down. There are two catches at the top. There is a board that lifts out at the bottom. Take those off and you are looking straight into the thing. Two hundred strings going up. And a row of little wooden hammers standing in a line, one for each key, waiting.

A hammer is the small wooden thing that hits the string. It has a pad of felt on the end. Felt is thick soft cloth, pressed together. It is what makes a piano sound round instead of hard.

Mr. Mott looked into it for a long time and said nothing at all.

"Play me the note," he said at last.

Miss Prewitt was not there. Mr. Speight did not know that we knew her, and I have never worked so hard at not saying a name. Bea pressed middle C. It went down. It came back up like a tired thing, and the fourth time it did not come back up at all.

"There," said Bea.

"I heard it," said Mr. Mott, and he was not looking at the key. He was looking at the hammer.

Then he took out the smallest tools I have ever seen. He keeps a roll of them in a cloth, each one in its own pocket.

He worked for forty minutes.

Mr. Speight brought a chair, sat on it backward and watched every second. Leo lay on the floor to see up inside. Sam held the flashlight in the wrong place for ten minutes, and in the right place after that.



Two things were wrong, and Mr. Mott found them both.

The first was the felt on that one hammer. It had gone hard. Felt goes hard over the years. It is pressed and pressed by the same note, and in the end it is not soft any more. It does not let go of the string cleanly. Mr. Mott did something to it with a needle. He pushed the needle into the felt over and over, in rows. It made a small dry sound each time.

"Picking it," he said, when Leo asked. "Lets the air back in."

The second thing was a wire.

Every key has a thin metal wire that stands up from it and carries the push along to the hammer. This one was bent. Not much. Mr. Mott held it up against the light with a pair of small pliers and showed us.

"That much," he said.

He held his finger and thumb almost shut, with a gap you could hardly see.

"About a sixteenth of an inch," he said. "An inch is this." He showed us with his hands, a small distance. "Cut that in sixteen. That is what is wrong with your piano."

"That is *nothing*," said Sam.

"That is everything," said Mr. Mott. "Rub a wire on a bit of wood a hundred thousand times. Then it does not matter how small the bend is. It matters that it is there."

He straightened it. It took him about three seconds and he took about four minutes deciding to do it.

Then he put the front board back and clicked the two catches shut.

"Play it now," he said.

Bea sat down on the stool and pressed middle C.

It went down and came straight back up. She did it again. And again, faster, ten times, twenty. It came back every single time, quick and even, the same as every other note on that piano.

Mr. Speight made a noise I can only describe as *ha.*

"Forty years," he said. "Forty years that has done that."

"Then it has been bent for forty years," said Mr. Mott, and started rolling his tools up.

And then he sat down on the stool.

Nobody had asked him to. He did it the way you sit down on a wall you have walked past every day for a long time. He put his hands on the keys.

I watched him find the place with his thumbs, without looking. And he played four bars of something.

He played them badly. He hit two wrong notes. He was slow. But it was a tune, a real one, with a left hand and a right hand. And it came out of his head, not off a page. At the end of the fourth bar he stopped. He took his hands off the keys and put them in his coat pockets.

Nobody in that room said one word.

"Well," said Mr. Mott. "That is the note mended."

"Mr. Mott," I said. "What was that?"

"That is the note mended," he said again. He picked up his bag and thanked Mr. Speight for his time. Then he went down the wide stairs and back across the square, to a wheel that was waiting for him.

I have written it in the casebook exactly as it happened, and there is no answer after it. Some pages are like that. Leo says an unanswered question is untidy. Bea says we should have asked him twice.

I say a man is allowed to have four bars of his own.

Chapter 11: Five Weeks

Miss Prewitt came to a stop about a week later, in the middle of the third line, and put her hands in her lap.

"This is no good," she said. "I can play it right through to an empty room. An empty room proves nothing."

"You want an audience," said Bea.

"I want to be nervous," said Miss Prewitt. "Being nervous is a thing you practice, the same as the notes. My hands will shake. They had better shake in front of you first."

So we became the audience.

Two things had to happen first, and she did both of them herself.

She went to Mr. Speight.

She walked into his little room behind the stairs on a Monday morning and sat down. Then she told him who had been using his hall at night for six weeks. It was her.

I was not there. I would have paid money.

Mr. Speight told us about it after. Three times, in the same words, in the same order. He said, "Well now." He said he had thought as much, and looked offended when Leo asked how. He had not. He had stood in his own room while I read that crossed-out name off his own page, and he had gone on telling us all week that it must be the man from the paper. Then he said the thing I have put in the sealed section. It is the best line Mr. Speight has ever said.

"Miss Prewitt, I have kept the keys of this hall for forty years. I can keep one more thing for five weeks."

And he did. Five weeks. A market square. Thirty people a day asking how he was. Not one word.

The second thing was the time.

We could not sit in a cold hall at eleven at night for five weeks. Mom said so in about four words. So the rehearsals moved. To rehearse is to practice a thing over and over before you do it in front of people.

Tuesdays and Thursdays, six to seven. It is dark by six in November. And now Mr. Speight locked up at six as always, and let us in at the side door with the lights on. The small hall turned out to be yellow.

Nobody had ever seen it in the light. Even Miss Prewitt had not.

"My word," she said, from the stool. "It was cream in 1961."

There were four of us at every rehearsal, and we each had a job. Miss Prewitt gave them out on the first evening.

Leo turned pages.

That sounds easy. It is not. I enjoyed watching Leo find that out.

The first time, he turned when the page ran out. That is what you do if you are reading the page. She had to stop. The second time he turned two bars early and she stopped again. Leo went red to the ears. "Sorry," he said. "I was reading ahead."

"Do not read the page," said Miss Prewitt. "Read my hands."

So Leo stopped looking at the music.

I watched him do it. For twenty minutes he sat at her left shoulder and looked at nothing but a pair of old hands going up and down a keyboard. I could see him building the rule in his head. Then he turned a page and she did not stop.

"Good," she said.

By the third week he could see it coming. Her left hand does a small lift two bars before the turn. Leo found that on his own, and he never got it wrong again.

He said a thing to me on the way home in the fourth week.

"You cannot get it off the page," he said. "The page is right and the hands are the truth."

I wrote that down.

Bea made a chart. She also stopped bringing her recorder, and nobody complained.

A chart is a picture of numbers. Bea drew a line along the bottom for the rehearsals and a line up the side for the mistakes. Every evening she put a dot where the two met. A stumble was one dot. A full stop and start again was two.

The first evening had eleven.

She did not show it to Miss Prewitt for two weeks. I never asked why. There is nothing kind about a chart in a bad week.

By the fourth week the line was near the bottom. Bea began leaving the paper out on the chairs.

Miss Prewitt found it. Of course she found it.

"Four," she said. "I did *four* on Tuesday?"

"Four," said Bea. "You did eleven on the first night."

"Do not tell me the eleven."

"You asked."

"I asked about the four."

Bea was quietly delighted for about three days. She said nothing at all about it. With Bea, that is a shout.

Sam guarded the stairs.

To guard a place is to stand where you can see it and stop people coming through. Sam sat on the top step with a book he was not reading. If anyone came into the front hall he would say, "Mr. Speight's just gone around back." That was true. Mr. Speight had.

Nobody ever came. Sam guarded that landing for five weeks, and I have never seen him prouder of anything.

Dusty attended.

To attend is to be there — at a class, a meeting, a rehearsal. Dusty attended eight rehearsals out of ten. Basket, front row, chair of his own. He slept through every note of every one. Miss Prewitt said it was the most honest answer she had ever had from an audience.

And I wrote.

The sealed section got fat. She talked in the gaps between runs, and I wrote it all down. Her mother's hands. Edith at nine, counting out loud. And the fact that neither sister ever had a lesson from anybody else.



Then came the cold week. I am not going to pretend any of this was easy.

Her hands are worse when it is cold. She had told us that in the dark on the first night, in one sentence, and made nothing of it. In the second week of November there were three days of hard frost. On the Thursday she could not play the third line at all.

Not badly. At all.

She tried it four times. The fourth time she stopped in the middle. She sat with her hands flat on her knees and looked at the wall.

Nobody said one word. Even Sam, on the stairs, had gone still.

"Right," she said at last. "Then we simplify it."

To simplify is to make a thing less hard on purpose, so it can be done at all. She took my pencil. She crossed out two bars of the piece her mother used to play. Two bars she had known since she was seven. Then she wrote something plainer above them in that small upright hand.

Then she played it through with the change in, and it worked, and she hated it.

She played it badly twice more, and then she stopped failing at it. She hated it for exactly one day. I know that. On the Tuesday she came in, took her coat off, sat down and said:

"I have decided to accept it."

To accept a thing is to stop fighting it and take it as it is.

"It is not the piece," she said. "It is nine-tenths of the piece, played by a woman of seventy-seven. My mother would have had a word to say about that."

"Something kind?" said Sam.

"Certainly not," said Miss Prewitt. "She would have said, *Marion, nobody is counting except you.*" She put her glasses on. "That is a joke, and it is also true. I shall now play it from the top."

That is the whole of Miss Prewitt in one page, and I have not changed a word of it.

The cards went out in the third week. Twenty people. Mrs. Ashby took on the small hall and promised something with the programs. Officer Hobbs was already invited. My mother was invited, and cried in the shop. She will deny that.

And Sam invited Mr. Dabney.

He did it on the bench, on a Saturday, in about eleven words.

"There's a thing at the town hall on the twenty-second," said Sam. "Three o'clock. You should come."

Mr. Dabney did not look up. "What thing?"

"A birthday," said Sam.

There was a pause about four seconds long.

"Right," said Mr. Dabney. "I have got a coat."

Two days before the birthday, on the Thursday, the bell over our shop door went at ten past four.

I was behind the counter. Dad was up a ladder in the back, looking for a book about canals.

An old lady came in. She was tall, in a good gray coat, with a straight back and white hair set in waves. She walked down the shop looking at the shelves, the way people do when they are not really looking.

She picked up a book from the table by the window. She did not read the cover.

She brought it to the counter and put down the exact money. I started to wrap it. She watched my hands for a moment.

Then she said, "You are Jane Foss's girl."

"Yes," I said.

"You have her chin." She took the parcel and did not put it in her bag. "I am Edith Prewitt."

Everything in that shop got very quiet, in the way rooms do when only one person in them knows why.

"Now," said Edith Prewitt, and she said it perfectly pleasantly, straight out, the way you ask the time. "You are going to tell me what my sister has been doing in the town hall on Tuesday nights. I have known about it for three weeks."

Chapter 12: Two Sisters

I did the only honest thing I could think of. I told her the truth about what I could not tell her.

"Miss Prewitt," I said. "I can't answer that."

Edith Prewitt looked at me over the counter.

"Can't, or won't?"

"Both," I said. "I gave somebody my word. Break it for you, and it was never worth anything."

There was a silence. A silence is a gap where words ought to be. This one lasted about three seconds and felt a great deal longer.



Then Edith Prewitt did a thing I did not expect. She smiled.

"Good," she said. "Then I shall tell *you*. You may do as you like with it."

She sat down on the chair by the door, the one nobody sits on. Then she told me all of it in five minutes.

She heard it first from Mr. Dabney.

He did not mean any harm by it. I want that written down plainly. He drove Edith Prewitt to Marlow and back for eleven years. He said one line to her at the bus shelter, under his own timetable card, about four weeks ago. It was the way you say a small strange thing to a neighbor.

"Somebody plays a piano in that town hall at night."

That was all he said. He did not know he was talking to a sister. He did not know the answer himself. It simply came out of him at a bus stop, once.

Edith Prewitt went home and did not sleep.

"I do not know why I knew," she said. "But I was not going to lie in bed guessing, at my age. So the next Tuesday night I put my coat on and walked to the square. I stood by the drinking fountain in the dark. And I listened."

She heard the piano.

"Four notes," she said. "That is all it takes. You do not forget how your own sister plays. I have known those hands for seventy-seven years." She looked at the window. "She was making a mess of the third line. She always did."

"And you have never said."

"I have never said one word."

"Why not?"

Edith Prewitt took a moment with that.

"My sister has not been pleased with herself about one thing in ten years," she said.

Pleased with yourself is when a thing you did comes out well. And you know it.

"She was pleased with herself for forty years," said Edith. "Every concert, every prize day, every year. Then it stopped. She made a joke of it, and the joke got very old." She stood up. "Three weeks ago she began to be pleased with herself again. She has been humming in her kitchen. She has been

buying pencils." She put the wrapped book under her arm. "I was not going to be the one who stopped it."

She got as far as the door and turned around.

"I am eighty on Saturday," she said. "I have been asked to a tea at the town hall that afternoon, at three, by four children and a caretaker. I am old, not simple."

Then she said the thing that made it our problem.

"But she does not know that I know. And you will have to decide what to do about that."

The attic, half past five, all four of us around the table with the sealed section open. I wrote the argument down as it happened. It is the only page in the book written *during* instead of after. The writing is bad. I would not change a line of it.

"Nothing has to happen," said Sam, first, and honestly. "Saturday still works. Edith comes, Miss Prewitt plays, everyone is happy. Nobody has to say a word to anybody."

"That is true," said Leo. "It is also the thing we should not do, and I cannot yet say why."

"Then say it slowly," I said, and picked up my pencil.

So we said it slowly. It took us most of an hour. This is where it came out.

A surprise is not a lie. We had settled that back in the first week. A surprise is a true thing that arrives late on purpose. At three o'clock on Saturday it all comes out, and everyone knows it all. That is what the date on the sealed section is *for*.

But there was a second thing sitting under it, and Bea found it.

"Marion believes Edith does not know," she said. "That belief is false. We know it is false. And we are thinking about leaving her in it."

"For two days," said Sam.

"For two days," said Bea. "But look at the shape of it. That is not the same shape as a surprise."

Leo got there next, in his flat voice.

"A surprise is a thing the other person finds out. This is a thing we would be keeping from her, knowingly."

Knowingly means you know. You do it anyway. It is the whole difference between a mistake and a choice.

"And she is the one this is all *for*," I said. "That is the part I keep coming back to. We knocked instead of watching. We sealed the pages instead of reading them out. We asked her leave for every bit of it. And now we would be handling her. Deciding what she is allowed to know, two days before the biggest day she has had in ten years."

"To be kind," said Sam.

"Yes," I said. "That is how it always starts."

Nobody argued with that. Bea took the pencil out of my hand and wrote one line under the reasoning. Then she gave it back. That is Bea's way of voting.

A surprise is a true thing that arrives late. A false thing you keep on purpose is not a surprise. — BK

Reasoning is the working-out you do between a question and an answer. Anybody can have an opinion. Reasoning is the part you can show a person after. It is the only part worth writing down.

We decided to tell her.

Then the second question, and that took four seconds.

"Sam goes," said Leo.

We all knew why. Nobody said it out loud in front of him, so I will say it here. Sam Potts had kept his mouth shut for five weeks. He had said *can't* to his aunt and his uncle. To thirty people on the market. To his two best

friends. And to the man who started the whole case. He had learned the exact weight of a thing you are given to carry.

When someone like that opens his mouth, people listen.

We walked to Cross Street at half past six that evening. It was dark and the frost was coming down again. Sam did not say a word the whole way.

Miss Prewitt opened the door in her apron.

"It is Thursday," she said. "We do not rehearse on—"

"Can we come in?" said Sam. "There's a thing you need to know. I have to say it, and I would rather do it inside."

We came in. Nobody sat down.

Sam told her.

He did it in about nine sentences. He stood on her front-room carpet with his cap in his hands, exactly the way Mr. Mott stood in the town hall. He told her Edith had come into our shop. He told her Edith had known for three weeks. He told her about Mr. Dabney at the bus shelter. About Edith by the fountain in the dark. About four notes.

Then he told her the last part. It was the hard one.

"We talked about not telling you," said Sam. "For two days. It would have been easier, and Saturday would still have worked. Then we decided that is not the same as a surprise. And we think you would rather know." He swallowed. "So. Now you know."

Miss Prewitt did not say a word.

She stood in the middle of her own front room, by the shut piano with the green cloth on it. She looked at the six photos on the top of it. She did not move at all.

It went on a long time. Long enough that Bea looked at me. Long enough that I began to be afraid we had got it wrong — that being right and being kind had come apart in my hands at the last minute.

Then Miss Prewitt turned around.

She was not crying. She was not angry either. Her chin had come up and her eyes had gone very bright. She was standing the way she stands at the piano just before she starts.

"Exactly how much does she know?" she said.

"Sorry?"

"Exactly." Miss Prewitt took a step toward us. "Not roughly. Exactly. Did she say she had heard the third line? Did she say she had heard the *simplified* bars? How many Tuesdays was she out there, and how *long* did she stand?"

"She said three weeks," I said. "She said four notes were enough."

"Three weeks," said Miss Prewitt.

And then, very slowly, she smiled — and it was not a nice smile at all. It was the smile of a woman doing arithmetic.

"Ada Quill," she said. "My sister has known about this for three weeks. My sister has our mother's piece in her head, the same as I do. And my sister has therefore had three whole weeks, alone in her house, to practice the second part."

Chapter 13: Case Number Two

Miss Prewitt did not tell her sister that she knew.

We asked her about it on the Friday, at the last run-through. She gave us a look over the top of her glasses.

"Certainly not," she said. "She has said nothing to me for three weeks. I shall say nothing to her for one day. That is between sisters, and you four are not in it."

Then she played the whole piece from the top without one mistake, faster than I had ever heard it. That is how you play when you have a thing to prove. And the person is not even in the room.

Bea put a dot on her chart at zero. Then she drew a box around it.

There was one other thing I had to do on the Friday. I did it on my own.

"Mr. Dabney," I said. "Tomorrow I am going to read the case out. All of it is true, and none of it is changing. But your name is in it, and I gave you my word." I held the casebook on my knees. "So I am asking. May I read it out?"

Mr. Dabney watched the market for a moment.

"No," he said. "Say a man on a bench asked you."

"Then that is what I will say."

"Good," said Mr. Dabney. Then: "Is it a nice one? The answer?"

"It is the best one we have ever had."

"Right," he said, and went back to watching the market. So that was settled.

The twenty-second of November was a cold bright Saturday.

At three o'clock the small hall did not look like itself at all.

Mr. Speight had swept it twice and polished the piano, brass brackets and all. He stood at the door in a tie. The chairs were out in four rows of six, with a gap down the middle. A row is a line of seats going across. There was tea at the back. There was a cake from the bakery with eighty on it in white icing.

And all down the long wall, Mrs. Ashby had pinned up the programs.

Thirty years of them, in order, ending with the last one that had Miss Prewitt's name in it. You had to walk the length of the wall to read them. Everyone did. And on every single one, at the bottom of the inside page, in small letters:

Accompanist: Miss M. Prewitt.

"That is not decoration," said Mrs. Ashby, when I said a word about it. "That is the evidence. I thought you would like that."

Twenty people came.

My mother and father. Miss Petherton, who does not sit at the back for anything. Mrs. Cole from the sewing circle. Mrs. Finch, who rode her mended black bicycle up and left it against the railings. And Mr. Mott, in the same gray coat. Cap on his knee. Second row on the end.

Officer Hobbs came in a brown jacket and a green tie. It took Sam a second to work out who he was. A uniform is the clothes you wear for your job. It tells everyone what you are. Without it he was only a tall man who had brought flowers.

He sat in the back row, where he could see everyone. I do not think that was the whole reason.

Mr. Dabney came in last. He sat on the end of the third row, near the door, with his coat still on.

And Ned from the bakery came. Sam had gone around on the Wednesday and asked him.

I do not know what Sam said. I only know that Ned came in and punched him once on the arm. Sam grinned for about four minutes. That is the end of that piece of the case.

Edith Prewitt arrived at five past three, on Miss Petherton's arm, in a hat.

She looked down the wall of programs. She looked at the piano. She looked at her sister, over by the window, pretending to be interested in the square.

Then she sat down in the front row and put her hands in her lap. "Well," she said. "What a lot of trouble."

Marion Prewitt sat down at the piano at ten past.

She did not make a speech. She said one thing to the room.

"This is my mother's. She played it in the evenings. My sister and I learned it in 1945. I have not played it in public since." She put her glasses on. "You will have to take it as it comes."

Then she played.

I am not going to try to write down how it sounded. I have three pages about it in the casebook. They are the worst three pages in the book. But I can put down what happened.

She played the first line and the second line. They were right.

In the third line she stopped.

It was the simplified bars. Her hands went wrong in the exact place they had gone wrong on the coldest Thursday. The sound came apart. She took her hands off the keys.

Nobody in that room moved. Twenty people, and not one chair creaked.

"Again," said Miss Prewitt.

That is all she said. Not sorry. Not an excuse, not a joke, not a word about her hands. She put her hands back on the keys and went back four bars. She played it again. This time it came out, and she went on.

I do not think one person there minded. I know two people were crying and one of them was my mother.

She got to the end.

There is a bit at the end where the tune goes quiet and stops. She held the last note down with the pedal and let it fade. Then it was over. And the room made the noise a room makes.

And then Edith Prewitt stood up.

She did not say anything. She walked out of the front row and around the end of the piano. She stood beside the stool. Marion looked up at her.

Edith Prewitt sat down on the other half of that stool. She took her gloves off and put them on top of the piano. Then she put her hands on the keys.

"Second part," she said. "You will have to take *me* as I come." Then, to Marion only: "And I should have knocked on your door three weeks ago, instead of standing around in the dark."

Nobody had told her which piece. Nobody had given her one page of music. She had heard four notes at a fountain in the dark, three weeks before. Then she had gone home and worked out the rest.

They played it together.

It is not a long piece. They played it twice through. By the second time Marion had stopped watching her own hands and was watching her sister's. And Edith was counting under her breath at the corners. Out loud, at eighty years old, the way she did at nine.



At the end of it Miss Marion Prewitt put her head down on her sister's shoulder. About two seconds. Then she sat up straight again and said a thing to her that nobody else heard.

The room came apart. Mr. Speight blew his nose. Sam stood on a chair.

I unsealed the section at half past four, in front of everybody.

To unseal is to open what was sealed. You break the tape you signed across.

I read Case Number Two aloud. All of it, from the parcel in the library return box to the sealed pages themselves. I did not shake. It turns out you only have to do that once.

I read the part about the crossed-out name that was readable backward through the paper. I read the part about the two reasons for playing in the dark. Leo looked at the ceiling and went pink.

I read Bea's plan for the town hall steps. I read that I had refused it, and why, and I read Sam's four words. Bea sat with her arms folded and let me. Then she said one thing: "Read the next bit too." So I read her own line, the one under the reasoning. She looked at the floor and was pleased with herself.

And there was one name I did not read.

"There is a name in this book I am not going to say out loud," I said. "A man on a bench asked us to find out who was playing that piano. He asked not to be named. The book is true, so the name is in it. And it is staying in it."

Half the room looked at nobody in particular. Sam looked at the ceiling so hard I thought he would fall over.

And when it was finished, Miss Marion Prewitt walked the length of that hall. She went to the end of the third row. She shook Mr. Dabney's hand and said thank you. She did not ask him one single question.

On Monday morning I walked to school down Cross Street.

The card had gone.

There were four brown squares on the glass where the tape had been for ten years. Nothing between them. I stopped on the sidewalk with my bag on my shoulder.

Then I looked again, lower down. And there it was. A new one, taped square in the corner. White, in that small upright lettering. The ink was so fresh it was nearly blue.

PIANO LESSONS

BEGINNERS WELCOME. NO NONSENSE.

Bea signed up on the Thursday, the first pupil in ten years. She is giving up the recorder. Miss Prewitt says this is the best news the town has had in ten years.

There is one more thing. It happened on the way home from the hall on Saturday, in the dark. I nearly did not write it down.

We were crossing the square, all four of us. Then Leo stopped dead.

To stop dead is to stop all at once, in the middle of a step. He was looking up at the church clock.

"Ada," he said. "What does your watch say?"

I looked. "Half past five."

"The clock says twenty past."

"Then the clock is slow," said Sam. "It is a hundred years old."

"Yes," said Leo. He did not move. "It said the same thing on Tuesday."

"Then it has been slow since Tuesday."

"No," said Leo. "On Tuesday it was five minutes. Tonight it is ten."

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