

Zyla, Private Eye, and The Case of the Robbery, Fingerprints, and a Creepy Doll

I named my fish ‘Lips’ ‘Crackers’ and ‘Ing’. Whenever I tell people, they scrunch their eyebrows and say “What? Why? Those are weird names.” No one notices that when you put ‘fish’ in front of them they say ‘fish lips’, ‘fish crackers’, and ‘fishing’. People don’t notice a lot of things, not even when they’re right in front of their noses. I don’t understand how they can miss so much.

I realized Mom was yelling something. I also realized I had been staring distractedly into the middle distance for quite a while, thinking about fish, probably because I was next to my fish tank. It’s placed on a table in the corner of the living room. Mom yelled again. Zyla, focus. “What?” I yelled back.

“Zyla, can you bring a few of those baby tomato plants over to my friend, Jen?” Mom called from the garage, based on the direction of her voice, “She lives in the light blue house by the park, remember?”

“Yeah, sure!”

You can tell when kids live in a house just by standing in the front yard and looking around. There’s always a picture in the window or a line of painted rocks or a tiny plastic watering can. This house had all three. Of course, I already knew kids lived here (an older girl and two younger boys, or three? I couldn’t remember). Our moms usually met up at coffee shops without us. I barely knew them. I squelched through the yard. (It had just rained and everything was mud). Carrying the plants up the front steps I discovered two things. One, there was some

sort of fight going on inside the house based on all the muffled yelling, and two, there was no doorbell, which sucks because I hate knocking, it hurts my knuckles. To avoid it, I made a bold move, opening the door uninvited (it wasn't locked) and catching a snippet of conversation.

“I didn't take your stupid money!”

“Well, someone did!”

“I was downstairs the whole time! I promise!”

“I didn't do it!”

Four kids froze as they heard the door creak open. They were siblings. Anyone could tell. Their skin was different shades, but they all had the same dark hair, dark eyes, and sharp noses. The oldest turned to face me, clearly embarrassed. She was a tall girl (maybe thirteen?) in a purple, collared shirt and a knee-length skirt.

I pointed to her, “Hey, your Saffron, right? Like the super expensive spice made from that nice, purple flower?”

The middle brother looked up at his sister, surprised. “Your name means a flower?”

“...yeah,” Saffron said, in answer to both questions, “And you're... Sydney?”

“Zyla.”

Saffron winced, “Sorry.”

“It's fine. My mom said to bring these,” I set the plants on top of the shoe shelf, “So there's been a robbery?”

“I guess,” Saffron said, “One of my brothers stole my money, but none of them will admit it.”

“It *wasn't* me!” cried the oldest brother.

“Ooh, a mystery!” I squealed. Saffron gave me a sharp look. “I mean, oh no, not your money. How terrible. I’ll help you look.”

Saffron shrugged, “Sure.”

“Yay! This is so cool! I’ve watched *tons* of mystery shows. I know how detectives do it. Oh! Do you have a little notebook I can write important stuff in? Detectives *always* have little notebooks.”

Saffron got me a little notebook. It had a unicorn on the cover. She said she got it at a birthday party when she was nine.

I would give their living room five stars. The couch was worn but comfortable and the shelves were piled with books, toys, and art projects. I lined the boys up along the only bare wall and examined them very closely until Saffron told me to ‘chill’ and ‘stop being a weirdo’. I turned to her. “Tell me the whole story.”

“I walked to the library this morning. I was gone for maybe half an hour. Before I left my money was here. When I got back it was gone.”

“And they were the only ones here?” I gestured at the boys.

“And Mama,” Saffron said, “but she’s in her bedroom, on an important call.”

“So it had to be one of these rascals.” I eyed them suspiciously.

“We have names!” Cried the oldest boy.

“Fascinating. What are they?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m Kayden.” He looked about my age (eleven). He was wearing a blue T-shirt and sports shorts. “This is Jasper.” Kayden gestured to the middle boy. He looked maybe seven, with wavy, chin-length hair and a purple Dragon on his shirt.

“And I’m Guppy!” cried the little one, “I’m Five.” Held out five fingers, to make sure I understood how impressive this was. His hands, face, and T-shirt were covered in paint. I tried to remember what was supposed to happen next. Oh! Motives. “Have these three suspects-”

“Names.” Kayden interrupted.

“Have Kayden, Jasper, and Guppy mentioned anything they might want to do with money?”

“...buy stuff?” Saffron suggested.

“Yes, but what stuff?” I pushed.

Saffron thought, “Jasper was complaining about how all the good video game boosters cost real money. And Guppy has been talking about this toy train he saw at Target. ...I don’t think Kayden mentioned anything, but he broke his toy T-rex.”

“Model T-rex,” Kayden muttered, staring at the carpet.

“Whatever,” Saffron said, “I’m just saying I don’t think he has enough money to replace it.”

“So they’d all have a motive.” I jotted it all in my official detective notebook with the unicorn on the front, “Kayden, what’s your alibi? Where were you at... when did this happen?”

Saffron thought, “I left at about ten o'clock.”

“Where were you at ten o’clock today?!”

Kayden crossed his arms, “Outside.” He continued staring at his shoes.

Wait. “Your mom lets you wear shoes on the carpet? Mine never does!” Zyla, focus.

“Never mind. Jasper, where were you when Saffron was at the library?”

Jasper looked up at me, nervously, “In the basement, playing video games.”

I nodded. “Guppy, where were you?”

“I was doing finger painting,” Guppy grinned.

I scanned his paint-covered body. “Checks out. Now show me the scene of the crime! Please.”

Saffron's room was as neat as her clothes. Her bed was made. Green, purple, and navy skirts hung perfectly in her closet. Her books were arranged in rainbow order. At the pink end, I spotted a series of rom-coms my cousin used to read. She had all twelve except the first one. Weird. Zyla, focus. “So where was the money?”

“Right here.” Saffron pointed at a spot on her dresser next to-

I flinched, “Ack! What *is* that?!”

“It’s just a doll.”

“A freaky doll.” I couldn't help examining it. Maybe its head was a little too small. Or it smiled a bit too wide.

“It’s just a normal doll,” Saffron cried.

“It’s like it’s staring into my soul. Look at it.”

“I’ve seen it, Zyla! Ugh, you're just like Jasper. When he saw the doll he crawled under the couch and refused to come out.”

“I don’t blame him!”

“Well, I- wait, shouldn’t we be talking about my money?” Saffron asked.

“Oh, right, the money. Yeah, probably.” I examined her dresser.

“It was in a red box, right here,” Saffron said.

“Hmmm,” I searched for footprints or handprints or any clues at all, but I found absolutely nothing. I guess not everything is as simple as it looks on TV.

I was suspicious of Kayden so I asked him to show me his room next. His bed wasn't made. A few books and stray socks littered the floor. He liked sports. That was clear from the baseball bat leaning on his dresser and the basketball in the corner. Also, dinosaurs, based on the collection of expensive-looking 'models' lined up on his dresser. The T-rex was on its side, missing a leg. My eyes drifted to his bed and I spotted something in the shadows underneath. I only got a peek, because as soon as Kayden realized what I had seen he discreetly kicked it farther under the bed, but I'm pretty sure it was pink.

“Hmm,” I said.

“What?” asked Saffron, walking up behind me.

“Nothing,” I mumbled, “it doesn't matter.”

Next, I wanted to see where the brothers said they had been. I started with the middle one, Jasper. He showed me the basement. The kids owned this place. A table, covered in paper and markers sat in the corner, and pictures lined the walls. A wooden train track climbed over the coffee table and wound around the couch. Their TV was hooked up to a video game system. I'm not sure which one and I didn't want to ask Jasper because then I'd have to listen to him explain

it. I also spotted a controller on the arm of the couch, like someone had been playing. Of course, he could have planted it, or maybe it was still there from another day. I couldn't rule him out, yet.

Guppy, the littlest had been finger painting in the kitchen. The row of paints on the counter was evidence of that. He painted a picture of... something. "What is this?" I pointed to the picture.

Guppy giggled, "I don't even *know!*"

That explained a lot. The page was a smear of green. There was a different color on one side, maybe orange? It had mixed with the green to create a muddy brown, but there was one red blob that hadn't mixed with the rest. Weird. Zyla, focus. Guppy couldn't have taken anything, his hands were covered in paint. But that still left two brothers.

I would have checked outside, but I had a sneaking suspicion Kayden was never there. Instead I slumped onto the living room couch, thinking. I'd checked everywhere, but had I found any clues? Not really. Unless... I remembered what my favorite TV detective Page Private Eye always said, 'Anything could be a clue'. Maybe I already had everything I needed to solve this case. I started scribbling in my notebook.

I couldn't stop thinking about that finger painting. Why hadn't the red mixed with the green? Guppy must've let the green dry, but he hadn't cared about mixing colors before. Unless he had left after putting the green on to- I froze, then I sat up straight. Saffron looked up with interest, she'd been sitting on the arm of the couch waiting. Kayden looked up with alarm from his spot on the armchair and I felt a little bad. I *was* about to expose him, but it was better this way.

"Well, did you solve it?" Saffron asked.

"Depends," I said, "Is Guppy potty-trained?" Now everyone was confused. Saffron nodded. I leaped off the couch, "Then I know who did it!" I started pacing. "I know who the criminal is! Or should I say, *criminals*?" I may have been playing up the drama a little, but couldn't help it. This was too much fun!

"They worked together?" Saffron asked.

"No!" I cried, "But something sinister is afoot, something that has yet to come to light."

Saffron rolled her eyes, "Will you just tell us who did it?"

"I was getting to that. We'll start with *Jasper*!" I pointed to him dramatically, "Jasper, *you* didn't steal the money because you won't go near that *freaky, freaky* doll." Jasper nodded. I leaned toward him and whispered. "I don't blame you. That thing is cursed." Saffron heard and crossed her arms.

"*Kayden*!" I whipped around to face him, and he flinched. "You didn't steal the money, but you took something else, didn't you?" Kayden shook his head, fast in a 'please don't tell' kind of way, and again I felt a little bad. "Your fake alibi was the first clue. You never went outside because your shoes aren't muddy!" Saffron gasped. I *do* have a dramatic flair. I should

take acting. Wait, no. Zyla, focus. “Maybe you were going to play outside, but then you got a different idea, a *thieving* idea.”

“But nothing else was missing,” Saffron said.

“Something *was*,” I corrected, “when I went into your room, I noticed you had all the rom-coms in that one series my cousin used to read except the first one!”

“But I *do* have the first one.”

“*You* don’t. *Kayden* has it!” I cried, “Because he secretly likes rom-coms, but is too embarrassed to admit it!”

Saffron turned to Kayden, but he just crossed his arms and stared at the carpet. “I was gonna give it back,” he mumbled, “I told you I didn’t take your money.” He started blinking fast. Was he gonna cry? Kayden sure isn’t who I thought he was.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you,” Saffron leaned in for a hug and Kayden hugged back. I smiled, knowing I made this happen in some weird way. Kayden sank back into the chair, sniffed, and wiped his eyes.

Saffron froze, “Wait, does that mean... Guppy?” We all turned to Guppy. He had paint in his hair. He found a pretzel under the couch and Saffron snatched it away before he could eat it. “But he had fingerprint on his hands,” She said, “I don’t think it would occur to him to wash them.”

“The final clue was the fingerpainting!” I announced. Saffron and Kayden glanced at each other. I led everyone to the kitchen and pointed dramatically, “See? Here the red didn’t mix, because Guppy wasn’t here so the paint dried. He didn’t go play with his trains in the basement or find a snack. There would be fingerprints. Instead, he went to the bathroom where he washed

his hands just in time to *steal your money!* And I bet I know where he's hiding it!" I charged down the hallway, then stopped, "Which room is-

"Guppy's? That one." Saffron pointed.

I threw open the door, stepped over the toy trains, and stuffed animals littering the floor, and threw the covers off the bottom bunk, which I guessed was Guppy's because of the train blanket. "Wow, it's actually here. I wasn't sure about this one."

"My money!" Saffron cried, "Thanks Zyla, I don't know what I would've done without you!"

I grinned, "It's crazy! Like, I thought I was getting distracted when really all the things I noticed were the keys to solving the case. Noticing weird stuff is my superpower. I'm awesome!"

Saffron laughed, "Do you want to stay for lunch? We're having grilled cheese."

"Sure, I'll call my mom." I said.

"But I want the train," Guppy pouted.

"You know what?" Saffron whispered, "Don't tell Mama I told you, but she's getting that train for your birthday."

"Yay!" Guppy cried.

And that's how I became friends with Saffron, Jasper, Kayden, and even Guppy. I didn't know it then, but there would be many more mysteries to come.

I'm Zyla, Private Eye, and I'm ready.