

Result: they end up as rare collector's items.'

'Precisely!' cried Ed. 'There are certain comics that are legends in the world of collecting. Like, for instance, the Action Comics issue in which Superman first appeared in the 1930s, or Batman's arrival in Detective Comics a little later. Or Issue 15 of Marvel's *Amazing Fantasy* - that's the origin of Spider-Man; that comic's worth a fortune.'

'And *The Tomb of Death* is as famous as those?'

'Weeeell,' said Ed, pulling a face and rocking his head from side to side. 'It's less sought after, but it's *so* unusual that its value is at least their equal.'

My earlier thoughts about another collector being the thief sprang to mind. 'Did you keep the comic a secret? Did other collectors know you had it?'

'Of course they knew!' cried Ed. 'I mean, what's the point of having Issue 1 of *The Tomb of Death* in your collection if you don't tell the world?'

'You weren't worried one of them might try to steal it?'

'To be honest, no,' said Ed. 'It was in that safe, locked away.'

'And it never came out of the safe?'

'Never. Well, except on special occasions, and on those occasions it never left my sight.'

'What sort of special occasions are we talking about?'

THE TOMB OF DEATH

'Er, let's see,' said Ed, wrinkling his nose up in thought. 'Comics UK magazine did an article on my collection about a year ago. They took a picture of me holding the comic. Then I took it to a trade fair shortly after that.'

'What's a trade fair?' I said.

'A kind of comic convention,' said Ed. 'Lots of traders, lots of buying and selling goes on, comic publishers show off their latest stuff, that sort of thing.'

'An ideal opportunity for a thief!'

Ed shook his head. 'That comic was in a sealed, see-through case that never left my hand. I even took it to the loo with me! It was perfectly OK.'

'Was that the last time the comic was taken out of the safe?'

'No, there was one more time, about four months ago. I took it out to show to Rippa. He's another collector. He's got a shop in town, right opposite the restaurant I work at. That's how I got to know him. Odd bloke. Not really someone you'd trust.'

'I see,' I said quietly.

Ed could see what I was thinking. 'I can see what you're thinking,' he said. 'No, he never even touched it. You shouldn't touch comic books that old, anyway.'

'Not touch them? Why?'

'They were printed on very cheap paper. High acidic content in the wood pulp, you see, so after a few years the paper literally starts to crumble. That's another reason why certain comics are so rare. Most copies have simply fallen apart. You've got to keep the air off them, and keep them out of sunlight. Like vampires.' He pointed to the neatly stacked comics on his shelves. 'Why else do you think I keep all of those in plastic wallets?'

'So this Rippa didn't even touch it?'

'Nope. I did take the comic out, and turned the pages so we could both admire the thing. Wonderful smell comes off them, you know, the smell of history. Of course, I wore cotton gloves. Even the tiny layer of sweat on your fingertips can damage that paper.'

All this time, Charlie was being oddly quiet. He kept sipping at his smoothie and staring at the rows and rows of sealed-up comics on the shelves.

'So,' I said, 'if the rest of the collection is kept in this room, rather than the safe, I assume none of these are anywhere near as valuable?'

'Correct,' said Ed, 'but there's some very interesting stuff here. Take this one, for instance . . .'

Ed Foster might have dressed like a walking rubbish dump, but he was clearly an expert on the history of

comic book publishing. He showed me what made particular issues of a comic more collectable than others (Issue 33 of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, for instance, worth more than Issues 32 or 34, because it contains a very well-known story. Or, Issues 12 to 22 of *The Purple Avenger*, worth only fifty pence each because the artwork was rubbish. Fascinating stuff!). By the time Ed had given me his eager guided tour of the shelves, I was ready to rush out and start a collection of my own!

Charlie kept peeking over his brother's shoulder, trying to get a look at whatever Ed was showing me. Drips from his almost-empty glass of smoothie plopped on to the carpet.

'Oi, Charlie!' cried Ed. 'Watch it! You get any of that on these comics and you're for it! You know you're barred from the entire collection.'

'Barred?' I said.

'Yeh,' said Ed, eyeing his brother moodily. 'Ever since I let him borrow one of my 1960s *Fantastic Fours* and he got jam all over it.'

Charlie stuck his tongue out at Ed. (Actually, no, he didn't do that. Actually, he said a short sentence that included the words 'complete' and 'you', and which I can't repeat here!)

'Can I see the crime scene now?' I said quickly.

We went downstairs. The safe was recessed into the wall of the living room, and concealed behind a painting that swung back on hinges like a door. The rest of the room was just an ordinary living room: sofa, a couple of chairs, TV in the corner.

The safe had a standard combination lock, a big dial in the middle of the door that you turn back and forth to line up with a series of numbers. Ed opened it up, standing close to it so that nobody could get the combination by watching him. All that was inside the safe was a small pile of papers.

'That's all stuff of Dad's,' said Ed. 'Stuff about the house, insurance and so forth.'

'And the comic was propped up at the back there?'

'Yup.'

'In full view, so you'd know straight away it was gone?'

'Yup.'

'No way it could slip out of sight, or get mixed up with those papers?'

'Nope.'

I remembered my earlier deduction, from Chapter Two: if the safe hadn't been broken into, then the thief had to be someone who knew the combination.

I asked Ed where the combination was kept. He

THE TOMB OF DEATH

tapped the side of his head. 'In here,' he said. 'There's only me, Mum and Dad who know it. None of us has got it written down. None of us has ever told anyone else what it is.'

'I don't know the combination,' said Charlie. 'They won't even tell me what it is. I've never opened that safe in my whole life.'

At that point, I had to admit I was out of ideas. The theft of the comic book seemed almost impossible. So only those three people could have opened the safe?

Suddenly, I wasn't out of ideas any more! If the thief didn't *break in* to the safe, and the thief couldn't *open* the safe (assuming, of course, that neither Ed nor his parents were the thief!), then there could be one, and only one way the thief could have struck.

Can you see how?

