

The thief could only have struck when the safe was *already open*.

'This Rippa bloke,' I said. 'Was he here in the room when you opened the safe to show him the comic?'

'Yes,' said Ed.

'Aha!' I cried.

Ed waved his hands about. 'Hang on, hang on! I wondered about that myself. But the comic was here when he left. Under lock and key, back in the safe. I put it back in there myself.'

'Was Rippa left alone with the comic?' I asked.

'Only for a couple of minutes,' said Ed. 'I'd just finished showing him the pages. I'd put it back in its plastic wallet, and the doorbell rang. As soon as I came back into the room, I realised what I'd done! I'd left the comic unattended! But Rippa was sitting over there, looking through some catalogues he'd got with him. The comic was untouched. Safely in its see-through wallet. He had *not* nicked it.'

I sat on the sofa. 'Hmm, yes. You'd have to be a pretty stupid and desperate thief to try to snatch that comic from right under your nose.'

'Exactly,' said Ed. 'Even if he'd *thought* about nicking it, he couldn't possibly have actually *done* it.'

'Hmm,' I said again. 'Well, someone "done it".'

I thanked Ed for the smoothie, took another biccie for the journey home ('Ooh, thanks, don't mind if I do!') and headed for the bus stop.

Once I was back in my shed, I sank into my Thinking Chair to mull over the facts. Then I stood up, pulled that wretched roll of super-tough heavy-duty repair tape off the back of my trousers, and sank into my Thinking Chair again.

A Page From My Notebook

Problem: Logic says 'You'd steal that comic in order to sell it'. BUT! Nobody could sell it without being noticed.

Problem: Logic says 'The only person who WOULDN'T steal it to sell it would be another collector'. BUT! As Ed explained, half the point of having a rare comic in your collection is to show it off. The thief would never be able to do that without arousing suspicion. (In fact, they'd have to go to some lengths to STOP anyone knowing they'd got it!)

Problem: Logic says 'EITHER the thief opened the safe, OR the thief struck when the safe was open'. BUT! Both those options now seem to be ruled out. Unless . . .

Question: COULD Ed have done it himself, for some unknown reason? OR, could his mum or dad have done it, for some equally unknown reason? Must investigate further!

Fact: Charlie is barred from looking at Ed's entire collection. Which seems a bit mean, but I suppose I can understand it. I'd bar Charlie from my shed if he started getting jam on my case files!

Fact: The rip on my Thinking Chair is getting worse. Must remember to phone Muddy.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SIGN OVER THE SHOP SAID: *Comix Nirvana* in big bouncy lettering, with *We buy, sell, x-change* in smaller bouncy lettering underneath. Beneath the sign, on a handwritten sheet taped to the shop window was *No Time Wasters!* (I assumed this sheet meant 'serious collectors only', rather than being some sort of sci-fi warning that the shop was out of stock of something called *The Time Wasters*. But I couldn't be sure.)

The shop was tucked away at the far end of Frizinghall Street, just outside the centre of town. Opposite it, and a few dozen metres up the road, was La Pizzeria, the restaurant where Ed Foster worked as a chef.

As soon as I entered *Comix Nirvana*, I got the distinct feeling I was being watched. And I don't mean they had

CCTV in there. Behind the counter, perched on a high stool and flicking through a DVD catalogue, was Rippa. His beady eyes followed me as I strolled around the shop, pretending to browse, keeping an eye out for clues.

It was a small shop, no bigger than our classroom at school. Racks of action-packed front covers stretched from floor to ceiling, right around the walls. The ceiling itself was papered over with old movie posters, announcing that *IT Came From Space* and *The Astro-Zombies Have Arrived*. Beside the counter was a huge wooden box raised up on thick legs, divided up into sections. Inside each section were some of the same kind of plastic wallets that Ed used, containing comics with covers that were slightly wrinkled and faded.

'These are the old comics?' I asked innocently. 'The really collectible ones?'

Rippa nodded. He was in his early twenties, thin with gelled-back hair, and wore a creased white shirt with a loosely knotted tie. Ed had told me that his real name was Tarquin, and that anyone who called him Tarquin got something thrown at them.

'You buying?' he said.

'Yes, I might be,' I said brightly. 'My dear old gran has given me a whopping great wad of birthday money, and I thought I'd invest it in some vintage comics.'

'Wise move,' said Rippa with a smile that made me think of cold gravy. I really don't like cold gravy.

My mission at Comix Nirvana had two aims: 1) to observe Rippa in his natural habitat, and 2) to see what useful information I could gather. My investigations would meet a dead end, and fast, if I couldn't establish more facts about the suspects.

'Anything in particular you're looking for?' said Rippa. He pointed to the wooden box. 'Lots of rare items in there.'

The rackings around the walls of the shop were crammed, overflowing even, but this wooden case had plenty of space in it. I wasn't sure what this might suggest: had there been a sudden rush on vintage comics lately? Or was Rippa simply not very good at keeping old issues in stock? I leafed through the box casually.

'How about those *Purple Avengers* there?' said Rippa. 'I got the whole run from Issue 10 to 25 there. Worth fifteen pounds each, because of their age, but I can let you have them for a tenner apiece.'

'Mmm, no,' I mooched. 'I'm not really a *Purple Avenger* fan.' (This was perfectly true – for more on this, see my earlier case file, *The Mark of the Purple Homework!*)

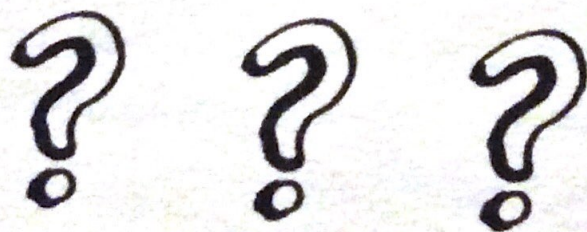
'See that one there?' said Rippa. 'That's it, the issue of *Mars Robot Rampage*. You can take it out of the wallet and

have a look. Printed in 1938, that was. Nobody's got a complete set of those, not anywhere in the world. I've only got the one issue so I'm selling it cheap, just thirty pounds.'

I took out the comic and flipped through it. Giant machines with laser guns for eyes zapped up at me from the smooth, brightly printed pages. *Destroy all Earthlings!, Run, Penelope – we don't stand a chance!*

That settled it. This short conversation had given me *proof* that Rippa was a crook, or at least that he was willing to rip off his customers. In fact, I now had *two* very specific proofs that Rippa was quite happy to engage in some dodgy dealing.

Thinking back to my meeting with Ed Foster, can you spot what these two proofs were?



Proof 1: Those issues of *The Purple Avenger* weren't worth anything like ten pounds each, as Ed had explained to me.

Proof 2: If that issue of *Mars Robot Rampage* really was printed in 1938, it ought to have been in a very delicate, crumbly state. No collector would let someone casually handle it like that! Rippa was clearly lying about its age.

'Mmm, I think I'll leave it for now,' I said.

'Don't leave it long,' said Rippa. 'You won't get offers like this from other dealers.'

'That's very true,' I said, nodding wisely.

I headed for the street. I paused with the shop door ajar. 'By the way,' I said, 'have you got the latest issue of *The Time Wasters*?'

'What?' grunted Rippa. 'No, I haven't! Can't you see the sign in the window?'