

Footprints in the Barn

Chapter One

What's he doing now?" Andy was noticeably excited, and a little worried too.

"Keep your head down, Andy! Do you want him to see us?" replied twelve-year-old Jason, as he carefully peered over the bottom edge of the window sill. "He's sitting in his car like he has been for the last couple of minutes. He still seems to be staring right at our window! I wish Ben would hurry up with those binoculars."

"Why can't I look out the window too?" nine-year-old Andy returned. "I want to see what's going on."

"Like I told you before, Andy, if you look out the window too, he might notice us. If there is just one of us looking, he might not know we're looking at him," Jason explained for the third time.

Andy looked down at the small spiral-bound notebook he had cradled in his hands. With care and great attention to detail, he read the entries out loud:

Green car - old, probably doesn't run too well. Car is two-door. Long (not a small foreign car). Man, about Dad's age or younger, sitting in the driver's seat. Man is looking at the front left living room window, a lot! Time: right after lunch.
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The Farm Mystery Series

“Is there anything to add to our list of clues, Jason?”

“Yes, he looks like he has part of a beard. He may be wearing glasses,” reflected Jason, “... then again, he may just be drinking from a cup or something. Better not put that last clue down yet. When the binoculars get here I’ll be able to tell better. I wonder what happened to Ben?”

“Oh, you know how he is sometimes. He wants to help, but then he gets sidetracked so easily. Yesterday I asked him to please get me a hammer from the shop. When I went looking for him about ten minutes later, I found him sorting a big pile of rocks on the front porch! I asked him where the hammer was, and he just said, ‘What hammer?’ No, I wouldn’t count on those binoculars if I were you.”

But just then Ben came walking into the living room, dangling a heavy pair of metal binoculars from his left hand. “Hey Jason! Here’s those binoculars you wanted. I thought they were in the basement. But, no. I left them in the barn yesterday. What are you looking at?” Ben suddenly caught on to the stooped posture and subdued attitude of his two older brothers.

“Shhhh! Please talk quietly, Ben,” Andy whispered. It was the first time Andy himself had whispered since this situation began, but he suddenly felt like they should be talking quietly. “You don’t want the man out in that car to hear us, do you?”

Ben looked toward the road. “How can he hear us all the way out there?”

Andy didn’t really think the man would be able to hear, but he didn’t want to take any chances. “I’m

Footprints in the Barn

not sure he can hear us, Ben,” he whispered, “but we don’t want to learn that he can the hard way. We don’t know what he’s doing, either. He may be thinking about breaking into our house!” Then realizing that Ben was visible from the road, Andy added, “Better crouch down, Ben!”

The thought of someone breaking into the house sobered Ben a lot. “I’m afraid,” Ben said after a minute.

“Why don’t you go into the kitchen, then, with Mom? We’ll keep a good eye, don’t worry about that,” said Jason manfully.

As Ben raced out of the room, Jason continued to look through the binoculars. He dictated to Andy what he was seeing: “The man is wearing dark glasses . . . I can’t quite make out the name of the model on the side of his car. The car is running. I can just barely see some exhaust coming out of his tailpipe . . . Yes, he’s writing something down . . . on a note pad . . . he looks at the house for a few seconds . . . and then writes . . . in his notebook.”

Jason handed Andy the binoculars for a quick look. He got a pretty good view of the man and the car, and was about to tell Jason that he thought the man had black hair when Jason solemnly stated, “I wonder if he’s drawing a picture of our house. Wow, what if he’s going to use it to break in some night?”

Hearing Jason echo his own fears made Andy nervous. Should they run and tell Mom what was happening? Maybe this situation was too dangerous and important for he and Jason to handle alone. He told Jason what he was thinking.

“I guess you’re right. Let’s run and get Mom!”

The Farm Mystery Series

Jason said, heading to the kitchen even before he finished his sentence.

They didn't have to go all the way to the kitchen, however, because they met Mom walking toward the living room.

"What did you guys say to make Ben afraid?" Mom asked seriously. "He said something about someone breaking into our house."

"We didn't try to scare him. Honest we didn't, Mom. We're a little . . . ah, I guess you'd say 'afraid' ourselves! There's a man in a car out on the highway, and he's looking right at our house and taking notes in a notebook. We think he might be drawing a picture of our house so he can come back sometime and break in."

Mom didn't say anything. She just walked quickly to the living room window to have a look for herself. What she saw was a tractor-trailer load of logs whizzing by on its way to the pulp mill. As for someone staring at her house, if she was hoping to see that, she was disappointed.

"He must have left!" Andy said, a touch of regret in his voice. "Now we will never be able to know what his license plate number was. We should have stayed right here watching, instead of trying to get you, Mom. Sorry."

"Oh, don't worry about it, Andy," Mom replied. "Chances are that he was just someone working for the Highway Department, the phone company, or something like that. I'm sure it's okay." Then turning to Jason she noted, "Jason, it's time to start on your chores now. We will be eating supper soon and I want you to finish your jobs before Dad comes in."

Footprints in the Barn

And Andy, will you help Ben set the table for supper? Cathy is busy doing something for me and I'm running behind."

With new directions to follow the boys started to disperse. Before they split, however, Jason said to Andy, "We'll talk about it later. Let's meet under the stairs as soon as we can after supper."

"Right," Andy replied. Mom had already left the room with Ben and missed this exchange. As far as she was concerned, the Case of The Mysterious Car was closed. Not so for the two young detectives - Jason and Andy. This kind of case is just what they liked to work on and solve. To their credit it should be noted that they had had several successes at solving minor mysteries before.

For example, about a year ago, the two boys had solved the Case of the Missing Clothes. It seemed that a number of small items were disappearing from the clothesline on wash day for no apparent reason. One day Jason just happened to notice that Calico, one of the largest barn cats, was leaning far out from a tree to an undershirt and clawing at it gently. Setting up an observation command post behind a huge willow tree, he and Andy had been able to see Calico actually pull a sock off the clothesline. Later in the day they found where Calico was setting up a cozy place to have her kittens in the barn. Discovery of the answer to this mystery, along with the praise of Mom and Dad, had caused the two boys to form what they called The Great Detective Agency. They had even set up a small office under the steps leading down to the basement.

The Farm Mystery Series

On the post beside this office was a sign which read:

The Great Detective Agency
Jason and Andy, proprietors
NO CASE TOO HARD TO SOLVE!!
ALL CASES SOLVED FREE!!
LET US HELP YOU!!

The boys advertised for business (by placing a poster on the refrigerator, and by constantly asking if there were any mysteries that needed to be solved) which resulted in a few cases. A few months after the “cat case” Mom lost her nice cookie cutter and engaged the services of The Great Detective Agency. Andy found it behind the stove, adding yet another victory for the struggling new agency. Recently, Dad misplaced his knife but the boys never did find it. It was one of their unsolved mysteries that was still on the books. Even Ben secured the boys’ free service when he lost one of his house shoes - a mystery that was solved in under two minutes, much to the delight of Ben.

Once, Mom called Andy and Jason to the living room with a serious look on her face. “I’ve got a very important mystery to solve, guys,” she started. “Come with me and I’ll fill you in on the facts.” The determined look on Mom’s face got them all excited and the boys followed her eagerly up the stairs. She stopped by the bathroom door. “Here is the mystery, guys. Somehow, the bathroom gets very, very dirty not long after I have cleaned it up. It happened today

Footprints in the Barn

too! Look at the clues: the soap is lying in the sink instead of in the soap dish, the sink itself is full of bits of dirt, the towel is lying on the floor instead of on the towel rack, there is a little mud on the bathroom rug, the light is still burning, and there are muddy marks on the light switch. What do you guys think of this mystery? Think you can help me solve it?"

"Aw, Mom. I think you know the answer already," Andy sheepishly replied. "I guess . . . I guess . . . I guess I made the mess. I'm sorry. I'll clean it up right now." After a second he added, "And I'll try to be neater next time." The boys didn't count this one in their list of solved mysteries, however, for obvious reasons.

Anyway, Jason and Andy kept small spiral-bound notebooks and pencils with them at all times. They just never knew when a "case" might pop up. The Case of the Mysterious Car today was proof of that!