

# CHAPTER 1

**T**he first thing I noticed was how quiet it was. I expected there to be a bustle of activity and plenty of noise, but it was so quiet I could hear the squeaking of my right sneaker as we walked down the freshly waxed hallway. I could see Justin looking around, taking in everything we passed. There were framed photographs on every wall with grainy black-and-white images of famous criminals who had been brought to justice by the FBI: Bonnie and Clyde, Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly, John Dillinger, and lots of others whose names I didn't recognize. We passed doors labeled Cybercrime, Tax Fraud, Terrorism, and Kidnapping. We went by a large cafeteria where agents were sitting at tables, finishing breakfast before starting their day. Even here, the volume was low as agents stared down at their cell phones or spoke quietly to each other over coffee.

Agent Carlson, who was leading the small parade of me and my friends, finally stopped at the end of the

## AN UNUSUAL PATTERN

long hallway in front of a door marked Cold Cases. He opened the door and herded us through the doorway.

“Well, here we are,” he said.

I looked around the room. Four large tables were covered with stacks of yellowing papers. The walls



were covered with old wanted posters with names I didn't recognize. A row of printers was overflowing with printouts. And one wall was lined with gray metal file cabinets with neat lettering across each drawer. Two men in matching gray suits looked up from their laptop computers as we entered.

Agent Carlson made the introductions.

“Kids, these are Special Agents Perkins and Wilson.” There was a nod from each agent as their name was mentioned. “And these are the Math Kids: Jordan Waters, Stephanie Lewis, Catherine Duchesne, and Justin Grant.”

The agents gave us a thorough look, like they were memorizing our faces for future reference.

Agent Perkins asked, “Duchesne? Wasn’t that the kidnapping case you worked on recently?”

“Good catch, Dan,” Agent Carlson responded. “It was Catherine’s dad who was kidnapped.”

“You made pretty quick work of that case, if I recall,” Perkins said.

Agent Carlson smiled. “I got credit for the arrest, but actually it was the Math Kids who did all of the work. Mr. Duchesne sent a coded message that the kids were able to solve with their math skills.”

“Impressive.” Agent Perkins nodded, looking at us with newfound respect. “So, what brings you to Cold Cases?”

“Care to explain, Jordan?” Agent Carlson looked my way.

How was I supposed to know? I’m just a fourth-grade student at McNair Elementary School. All I really knew was that Agent Carlson had asked us if we wanted to work for the FBI, although I guess “volunteering” is more accurate since, as Justin had correctly pointed out, we weren’t getting paid.

“Agent Carlson thought we might be able to help with an old case that has some math in it.”

“Wait, you’re not talking about the Robbins bank robbery case, are you?” Agent Wilson asked.

“That’s the one,” Agent Carlson said with a smile.

“Good luck with that.” Agent Wilson shook his head. “We haven’t been able to make any progress on it at all.”

I saw Justin’s eyes light up. We had started the Math Kids club because we all loved math and solving problems.

## AN UNUSUAL PATTERN

“I don’t know if we’ll be able to solve it, but we’d love to try,” I said.

“Great, then let’s let these guys get back to work and we’ll get started,” said Agent Carlson.

We settled in at one of the long tables. Justin pulled out notepads and pens from his backpack so we could take notes.

Agent Carlson proceeded to outline the case that had baffled him and the other FBI agents working in Cold Cases.

“Fifteen years ago, there was a bank robbery in Dallas, Texas. Two men wearing masks and carrying shotguns entered the bank just as it opened on a Saturday morning. They pushed the customers and bank tellers into the manager’s office. While one of the robbers kept an eye on their captives, the other forced the bank manager to open the vault and load up large duffel bags with cash.”

Justin interrupted with a question. “How much did they steal?”

“It was a little over two million dollars,” the agent replied.

Our mouths dropped open. None of us could comprehend that much money, especially in cash.

“They were preparing to make a clean getaway,” the agent continued, “when the bank’s security guard walked into the bank carrying a drink holder with four large cups of coffee. The guard saw the men and went for his gun, but one of the robbers clubbed him over the head with a shotgun and the two made their escape.”

“Did they leave any clues behind?” Stephanie asked.

“Not a trace. They wore masks, so no one could give a good description of the two men, and they wore gloves, so they didn’t leave any fingerprints. Despite the best efforts of the police and the FBI, no trace was ever found.”

“But how can we help?” asked Stephanie. “We’re just kids. We don’t know how to catch a bank robber.”

“It’s not about what happened at the bank that day, Stephanie,” Agent Carlson said with a smile. “It’s what happened twelve years later.”

“Twelve years later?” she asked.

“Three years ago, one of the bank robbers died.”

“How do you know it was one of the bank robbers?”

“Simple. He told us,” the agent explained. “Walter Robbins had a change of heart as he was dying in his hospital room. He wanted to make up for the bank robbery, even though he insisted until the end that he was not the one who knocked out the security guard. He confessed his crimes to the FBI before he died.”

“What about the money? Did you get it back?” I asked.

“No. When he found out he was dying, he left all his savings to the Dallas Veterans Hospital.”

“Well, at least the money went to a good cause,” Justin said.

“Since the robber died, the case is closed, then, right?” I asked.

“Except for the other robber,” said Agent Carlson. “And the other million dollars.”

“Did Robbins say who the other robber was?” asked Catherine.

## AN UNUSUAL PATTERN

“Or where the money was?” added Stephanie.

“No, but I think he was trying to tell us,” the agent answered.

“Trying to tell us? What does that mean?” I asked.

“He left us a poem,” Agent Carlson said, adding, “and that’s where the Math Kids might be able to help.”

The agent pulled a single sheet of paper out of a thin file folder labeled First National Bank of Dallas. He placed it on the table and we all crowded around to read it.

*I've lived a life with many faults; I've tried to fix a few  
My partner in the theft of vaults? I'll leave you with  
a clue*

*It's hidden in the middle of a dessert that's not sandy  
No pattern there, and GPS won't come at all in handy  
More difficult to find than a single grain of sand  
Slipping through your fingers, the digits on both  
hands*

*To make a shape you need at least these to arrange  
Add it makes it bigger, but multiply doesn't change  
The wonders of the ancient world so many miles away  
The colors soar above us on a sunny rainy day  
Up or down it stays the same, but on its side, it goes  
and goes*

*The only prime that stands alone as everybody knows  
Now it's time to start, right where the clues do end  
Is anybody smart enough to call upon my friend?*

There was silence in the room while we read and reread the poem. Agent Carlson finally broke the silence.

“So, Math Kids, any ideas?”

We looked at each other but nobody said a word. We had agreed to volunteer for two reasons. First, we were hoping to get some cool FBI stuff. Justin really wanted a badge. I was pretty sure that was out of the question, but maybe we could at least score some FBI jackets or hats. The second reason was that Agent Carlson had gone to bat for us with the classroom bullies and we owed him one.

Those reasons didn't matter now, though. All I could think was that we were in way over our heads on this one.