

NOW

POCKETFUL OF STONES

*Never trust a guy who says, "Trust me."
Never give your real name to a cop.
Never let someone steal your getaway car.*

It was that last piece of his father's advice that March McQuin found himself contemplating at three in the morning on a picturesque bridge over a dark canal in Amsterdam. Only it wasn't a getaway *car*, it was a getaway bike, and someone had pinched it.

Just about the worst thing you can do to a thief is steal his stuff. March was especially indignant. He'd actually *paid for* the bike!

He checked the time on his cell. He felt the pressure in his drumming pulse, but he wasn't about to panic. He just had to steal a bike. In about seven minutes, his old man, world-famous cat burglar Alfred McQuin, was going to have a fistful of diamonds and be looking for an exit.

That would be March.

Mist curled along the surface of the canal. All the good citizens of Amsterdam were snoring underneath their eiderdowns. The weeping edges of a yellow moon dissolved and re-formed on dark water as the flow of the tide moved through. March intently scanned the row of bicycles chained to the railing, searching for his target.

Timing is everything, bud. The difference between a million bucks and twenty-five-to-life can come down to thirty seconds.

The red one with the basket and the combination lock called to March: *Steal me!*

Battered fenders, but the chain was oiled and the tires were good.

There were roughly sixty-four thousand different number sequences possible in one combination lock. He could find the correct one in a minute flat. All it took was the right touch. March felt for the slight drag as the chamber hit the number. Again. Got it. Then counterclockwise. Clockwise again. The lock swung open.

He took the time to let out a long, shaky breath. If he messed up, Alfie would forgive him, but he'd never forgive himself.

He threw his brown-paper sack in the basket. The cover story had been decided on a week ago. If he got stopped by a cop, he was bringing his night watchman father his breakfast. There was *bruine boterham met kaas* — brown bread and cheese — and an apple in the sack.

Remember, the right prop can save a shaky cover story.

March flew over the bridge, legs pumping hard. He'd been over the route many times. He had walked it with Alfie, both of them munching on herring sandwiches, looking like what Alfie called ham-and-egggers, the normal American tourists their fake passports claimed they were: Dan Sherwood, from Syosset, Long Island, and his son Dan Jr. Then he'd ridden it a half-dozen times, with Alfie timing him. They'd gone over every detail, and nothing could go wrong.

Even though Alfie always said: *If you think nothing can go wrong, you'd better think again.*

He flew down the last street and turned the corner. The grand hotel rose up from the canal like a tanker about to sail to the North Sea. He cut the bike toward the rear courtyard,

bumped over the cobblestones to the loading dock, and skidded to a stop, only a minute late. Any second his pop should be shimmying down the drainpipe and tossing him the jewels.

Trying to slow the urgent racing of his heart, he scanned the façade of the hotel.

No Pop.

When trying to spot Alfred McQuin, it was always smart to check the roof.

March craned his neck and looked up. Alfie was just a dark shadow moving along the dormers, high above the cobblestone courtyard.

The first faint alarm began to ding inside him. There was improvisation in even the tightest plan, but something must have gone wrong. Unless his timing was off. He checked his cell again.

March glanced back up, and this time Alfie was looking down at him.

They had a secret signal when they bumped into each other accidentally in public and Alfie didn't want March to acknowledge him. He would smooth his left eyebrow.

It meant, *I'm working, get out of here.*

But why now? Had something gone wrong? Alfie's hand moved, and he tossed something off the roof. It seemed to catch the moonlight, then hover and spin, something bright and bluish white and as small as a star.

Before he had time to think, March ran toward it. It seemed to fall in slow motion, and he felt as though he had all the time in the world to catch it. He opened the paper bag, and it fell inside with the slightest little ping.

March looked inside to see what it was. It was that smallest space of a moment, that beat of a heart, that counted. Because the next time he looked up, his father was falling.