

THE MYSTERY ON APACHE CANYON DRIVE

A MYSTERY SEARCHERS BOOK

BARRY FORBES



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VOLUME 1

By
BARRY FORBES



The Mystery on Apache Canyon Drive

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SERIES PRAISE FOR BARRY FORBES

AMAZING BOOK! My daughter is in 6th grade and she is home-schooled, she really enjoyed reading this book. Highly recommend to middle schoolers. *Rubi Pizarro on Amazon*

I have three boys 11-15 and finding a book they all like is sometimes a challenge. This series is great! My 15-year-old said, "I actually like it better than Hardy Boys because it tells me current laws about technology that I didn't know." My reluctant 13-year-old picked it up without any prodding and that's not an easy feat. *Shantelshomeschool on Instagram*

I stumbled across the author and his series on Instagram and had to order the first book! Fun characters, good storyline too, easy reading. Best for ages 11 and up. *AZmommy2011 on Amazon*

Virtues of kindness, leadership, compassion, responsibility, loyalty, courage, diligence, perseverance, loyalty and service are characterized throughout the book. *Lynn G. on Amazon*

Barry, he LOVED it! My son is almost 14 and enjoys reading but most books are historical fiction or non-fiction. He carried your book everywhere, reading in any spare moments. He can't wait for book 2 – I'm ordering today and book 3 for his birthday. *Ourlifeathome on Instagram*

Perfect series for our 7th grader! I'm thrilled to have come across this perfect series for my 13-year old son this summer. We purchased the entire set! They are easy, but captivating reads and he is enjoying them very much. *Amylcarney on Amazon*

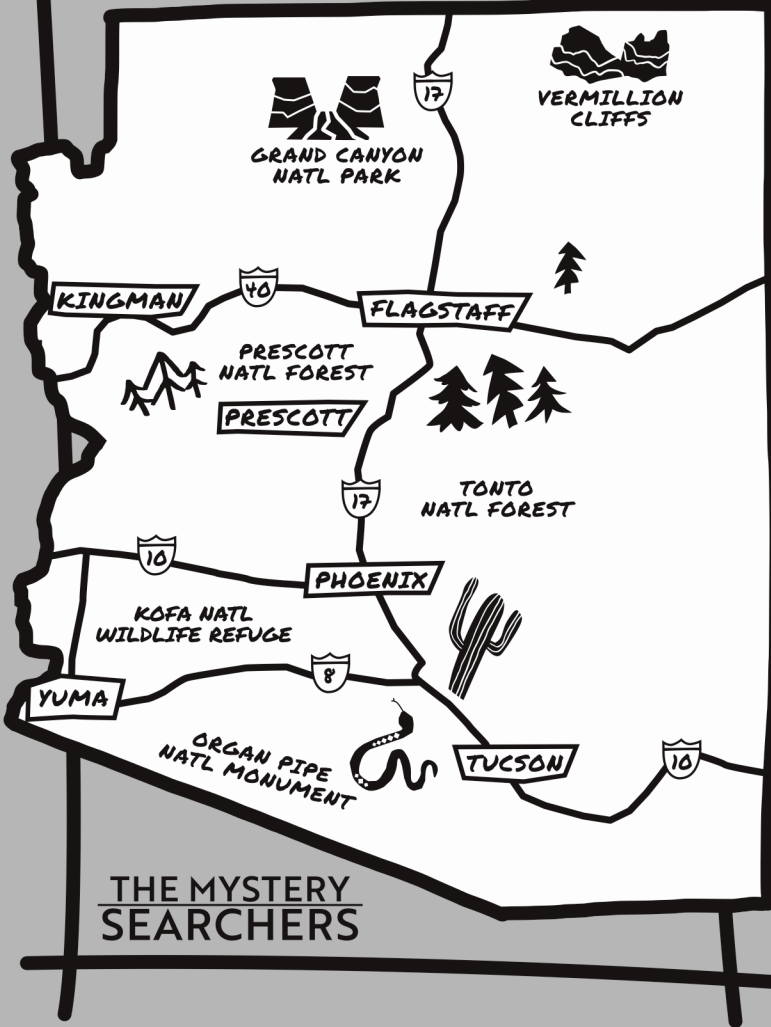
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Prescott, the former capital of the Arizona Territory, is considered by many to be the state's crown jewel. Aside from this central Arizona locale, *The Mystery Searchers* series is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, incidents, and other locales are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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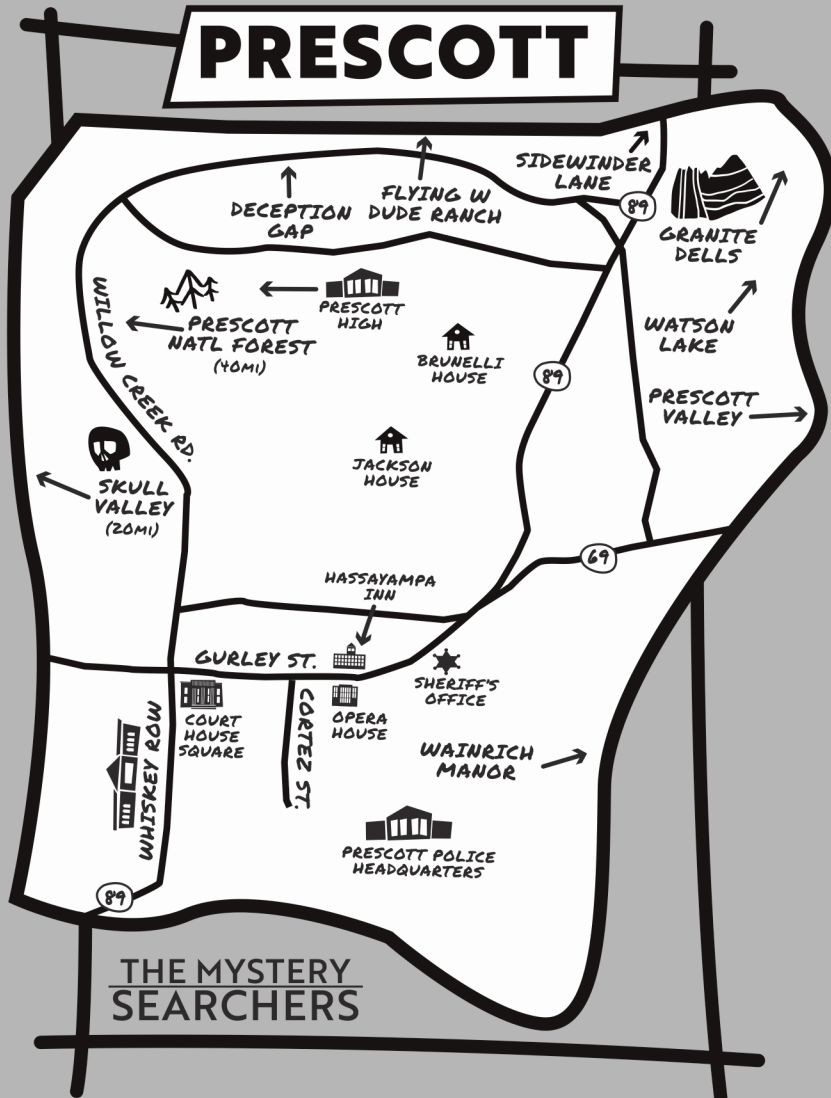
*For Linda,
whose steadfast love and encouragement
made this series possible*

ARIZONA



THE MYSTERY
SEARCHERS

PRESCOTT



THE MYSTERY
SEARCHERS

THE RESCUE

A rare heat wave smothered the northern Arizona countryside, shimmering in giant waves off the roadway ahead. Billowing, bright white clouds raced overhead, tracking Highway 89 as it ran through scenic boulder country. Natural canyon murals rippled past along both sides of the winding route.

Suzanne was at the wheel, thankful the early afternoon traffic was lighter than normal. The twins cranked up the radio. They often took turns driving the car, a recent surprise for their sixteenth birthday. The present had appeared that day when their father, Edward Jackson—*Chief* Edward Jackson of the Prescott City Police, that is—parked the gleaming white sedan in the driveway.

“Best used vehicle out there,” he said with a wide grin. “It’s a Chevy. Solid protection with low mileage.”

Elated beyond belief, Suzanne’s twin brother, Tom, couldn’t wait to get behind the wheel.

“Thanks, Dad!” he exclaimed. “We’ll take turns driving. I’m first.”

“What? *Wait*. No way!” Suzanne cried out, laughing. She grabbed the keys from her father and jumped into the driver’s seat, her auburn ponytail tossing back and forth.

“What the heck, Suzie,” Tom protested, employing a favorite nickname for his twin sister. “Why should you be first?”

“Because I was born first.”

“Very funny.”

“I thought so.”

She was right, of course. The twins, born five minutes apart, had arrived in the world with masses of thick, dark hair that had lightened over the years. They bore a startling resemblance to their mother but inherited their father’s height.

“Good thing it wasn’t the other way around!” the Chief had often joked.

At Prescott High, Suzanne worked hard to maintain a B average and excelled at tennis and track. She was the type of person who knew where she was going in life. When friends thought of the outgoing girl, one word came to mind: *confident*. “As long as your temper doesn’t get in the way,” her mother had warned. Often too, because it often did. As a small child, her parents called her “the spitfire.” Things improved with the passing of time. Still, sometimes...

Tom was the quiet, thoughtful type. Growing up, he fought hard to overcome a natural shyness—easy to ignore because his sister was the polar opposite. But technology helped—a lot. For Tom, technology was... well, *intuitive*. Like a duck to water. He learned to code in grade school and became a founding member of Prescott High’s prestigious high-tech club in his freshman year—the same year they won a national robotics competition.

“If there’s a technical issue in the family, Tom’s our guy,” his sister often said. “And he understands remotes, which is huge.”

Prescott, a small Central Arizona city nestled in a mile-high basin among pine-dotted mountains, is one of those sleepy little cities where nothing much seems to happen. Unless, of course, your father is the chief of police. That changes things. A lot.

As they grew up, the drama of mystery, crime, and law enforcement became a natural part of the twins’ everyday life. At dinner-time, their questions would fly:

“Okay, you can tell us, Dad. Are they guilty?”

“How did you catch them?”

“What happened? Did you find the missing person?”

The Chief smiled at their curiosity. “Sorry, maybe someday.”

With almost all the facts concealed, a case could swirl into an obscuring fog. *That* kept the twins guessing for weeks on end. They both loved mysteries and shared a common ambition: to follow their father’s footsteps into law enforcement. He encouraged them at every opportunity. Somehow, that day always seemed a long way off.

Today, at last, summer vacation had arrived. It was the first Monday of June. Calendars were chock-full and friends waited. In fact, the technology club president, Ray Huntley, had scheduled a summer meeting for one o’clock that same day. But Suzanne needed the car to meet her best friend, Kathy Brunelli.

“*Serious?*” Tom said, surprise crossing his face. “How come you never mentioned it before?”

“Serious,” Suzanne replied. “And I told you yesterday, but your head was off in the Cloud. No worries, I’ll drop you off.”

“Oh, man,” Tom groaned. He glanced at the kitchen clock. The morning had slipped away. “Okay, but I can’t be late.”

His sister rattled the keys. “You bet. I’m ready, bro.” That was her favorite nickname for her brother—except when they argued. Then she called him “hotshot.”

Ray lived on a ranch a few miles north of the city, half an hour from the Jacksons’ and straight up Highway 89 with its breath-taking marbled canyon walls. It was a typical summer day in Prescott - blue skies, gentle breezes, and warm weather heading toward hot.

“Ten more minutes,” said Suzanne. “I’ll get you there on—” She sat bolt upright, eyes riveted on the road ahead. “*What is that?*”

A second earlier, the margins of the twisting highway had been empty. Now—not far out front—something rippled the rangy grass in the ditch. Suzanne tapped her brake pedal. *An elk?* She tightened her grip on the steering wheel and caught her breath.

Tom—busy messaging Pete, Kathy’s brother, and his best friend—was rattled by his sister’s tone. His eyes tricked up, staring hard through the windshield. “What? I don’t see any—”

“*It’s a child!*” Suzanne yelled. A small head with short black hair had poked up from the tall grass.

Tom felt the car wobble and tensed right up. Without warning, the child sprang from the grass and swerved onto the blacktop, racing across the highway. Suzanne’s mouth went dry, and the hair rose on the back of her neck. She stomped on the brakes hard, her eyes whipping from the windshield to her rearview mirror: *No traffic coming from either direction.* She flipped her four-way flashers on and angled toward the center lines, screeching to an abrupt stop.

The twins darted out of the car, leaving both doors flung wide open, and sprinted toward a terrified little girl. She had fallen face down on the hard, hot blacktop in the far lane.

Oh, no! Suzanne screamed in her mind. She reached the child a second ahead of her brother. In one smooth move, she scooped up the tiny body without breaking stride. The child—in pain and desperate to escape—shrieked at the top of her lungs, flailing arms and legs.

“*Look out!*” Tom shouted. A pickup screamed past at high speed, veering around them with its horn blaring, passing so close—*So close!*—that a burst of driven air thrust hard against them, blowing their hair and clothes awry. Time seemed to stop as the pickup swerved to avoid their parked car. Suzanne spun about and bolted for the shelter of their vehicle. Tom scrambled behind, guarding her back before she leapt into the front passenger seat, grasping the squirming, screaming child tight with both arms.

Tom flung himself into the driver’s side, yanking the door closed as he edged the car off the highway, halting inches from the canyon wall. A cargo truck shot around the bend and tilted toward them, ripping by in the left lane. Behind it followed a slew of other vehicles, each passing with a deafening *whoosh* that rocked the Chevy.

Suzanne closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her hands shook, and she felt hot and clammy. The sound of the pickup played

in her mind, its horn drowning out the child's sobs. "He almost hit us," Suzanne whispered.

There wasn't a second to waste. "We gotta get out of here!" Tom said, raising his voice above the wailing child. They *had* to escape the narrow passage of the canyon walls.

He drove a few hundred yards north, beyond the cliffs and into open terrain. Then he pulled to the right, off the blacktop and onto gravel that crunched beneath the tires.

Tom gazed over at the little girl. It was difficult to wrap his mind around what had just happened. "One second everything's great, and then..." Country music still blared out of the car's speakers, like an echo from the past. Tom leaned forward and smacked the OFF button.

Suzanne continued to grasp the child with both arms, turning to gain eye contact without success. Tears poured down the sobbing girl's cheeks. "What's your name?" Suzanne whispered. "Where are your mommy and daddy? And what are you *doing* out here all by yourself?"

The twins' summer plans—and those of their best friends, Pete and Kathy—had just taken an unexpected, life-changing detour. The little girl had wandered onto the highway and into their lives.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

A MYSTERY CHILD

“Look, she quite ignores me,” Suzanne said with a wry half-smile.

The little girl wore a beige sleeveless top, shorts, and tiny sandals. She cried and squirmed, refusing to talk or even glance at the two strangers who had rescued—or *captured*—her. Blood oozed from cuts on both knees and the palms of her hands.

“Bet she speaks Spanish,” Tom said.

The twins both spoke better-than-average high-school Spanish. Neither one had the chance to use the language much, but their grades had been decent.

“¿Cuál es tu nombre?” Suzanne asked. “¿Dónde están tu mamá y papá?” No response. The girl, scared witless, avoided eye contact. She was filthy, her scratched arms and legs hot to the touch. Suzanne dabbed her knees with a tissue, forcing more screams.

Tom plugged his ears while his sister searched for a bottle of water in her purse. The sobbing child grew calmer as she drank, drenching her top as the liquid spilled down.

“Where did she come from?” Suzanne wondered out loud. “There’s *nothing* out here.”

“And nobody,” Tom replied. “But someone must miss her.” He

honked the horn off and on, but no one appeared. Alone on the deserted highway, the little girl had escaped injury or even death by mere seconds.

“Let’s call Dad,” Suzanne suggested. With one arm wrapped around the child, she reached into her purse. Finding her cellphone, she touched her father’s emergency number and hit speaker. The Chief, recognizing his daughter’s number, answered on the first ring. The story tumbled out in a rush.

“Where are you?”

Tom answered. “Just south of Apache Canyon Drive, parked on the east side of Highway 89.”

“Hold on for a second.”

They listened as their father ordered a nearby patrol officer to come to their aid. The little girl’s halting sobs slowed.

“Is the child hurt?” the Chief asked, returning to his phone.

“Her knees are the worst, but nothing serious. Scratched up, for sure.” Suzanne giggled. “She’s playing with the buttons on the dash.”

“How old do you think she is?”

“Four or five.”

Sudden movement in his rearview mirror drew Tom’s attention. A black van that had passed them seconds before had pulled an abrupt U-turn and parked only a dozen yards behind them.

Despite the van’s shaded front windshield, Tom observed a man with a huge head and a jowly, seamed face at the wheel. Dark, stringy hair hung down across his forehead, touching his sunglasses which looked too small for his face. The man leaned over his dash, stared above the shades, and scowled at the twins.

“Check this guy out, Suzie.”

She turned, her eyes darting through the rear window. The intensity of the man’s expression made her nervous. “Dad, a scary guy in a black van parked right behind us. He’s sitting there glaring—the guy’s freaking me out.”

Tom said, “He might know something about the little girl. Don’t worry—I’ll handle it.”

“An officer should be there any minute,” the Chief said, concern slipping into his voice.

Tom opened the driver’s side door and stepped onto the blacktop just as a siren wailed in the distance. The van driver molded his hand into the shape of an imaginary revolver, pointed it at Tom, and pulled the imaginary trigger. Then he did the same to Suzanne. Her blood boiled. *This guy is a creep! Dangerous too.*

The driver goosed the van, shooting past the Chevy, narrowly missing Tom before roaring off at high speed.

“See,” Tom said, chuckling nervously as he looked back at his sister. “I told you.”

Suzanne rolled her eyes and hid the emotion in her voice. “He’s gone, Dad, heading north. But the man was a lunatic. I don’t think he had anything to do with this child.”

“Got it. I alerted the Yavapai County Sheriff’s Office. You’re in their jurisdiction.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll call your mother. She’ll find a family to shelter the little girl.”

After the birth of her twins, their mother, Sherri—a social worker for Yavapai County—had accepted a part-time position working from home. She often worked with displaced children.

The sound of the siren intensified with every passing second, dying away as a Prescott City Police cruiser pulled in behind the Chevy, red lights flashing. An eerie silence descended along the highway. The twins relaxed. Traffic slowed as people rubbernecked and crawled past them. Their new little friend seemed to sense a change. Suzanne held a tissue up to her nose, and she gave it a good blow.

“One of your officers just arrived, Dad.”

“That’s Officer Kurt Jenkins. You’ll be fine.”

Two deputies from Yavapai County followed. An extensive search along both sides of the highway turned up empty. Tom trailed beside a deputy, excited to share in the action. Whomever the little girl was—or where she came from—remained a mystery.

The child didn't show up on the Lost or Missing Persons checklist either.

"My guess is that someone dropped her off at the side of the road," Officer Jenkins said, rubbing his neck. "The scrapes are from her fall. Still, that doesn't explain those scratches."

"A man in a black van parked behind us," Suzanne said. "He acted crazy and sped off that way"—she pointed north—"just before you arrived."

"You're being overly dramatic," Tom said.

"You're kidding, right? What *he* did was dramatic. He made a gun shape with his hand and pretended to shoot us. Only lunatics do things like that."

"Yeah, your dad mentioned him," the officer shrugged. "According to your description, he drove away in the same direction I was traveling, so I didn't see his vehicle. Better let the deputies know. No license plate number?"

Tom shook his head no, mentally kicking himself for failing to note the number. Then he called Ray Huntley, apologizing for missing an important club meeting. "No problem," Ray said. "Wow, I hope you find her parents."

Kathy called, worried that her best girlfriend hadn't shown up for their shopping trip. Suzanne apologized and explained what had happened.

"You've—got—to—be—kidding!"

"I wish. I'll call you later."

Other vehicles arrived, one after another, including a television mobile unit. Heidi Hoover, a reporter from *The Daily Pilot*, Prescott's hometown newspaper, had picked up the story from police radio frequencies. The star reporter had been the editor-in-chief of Prescott High's student paper in her senior year—just as the twins and the Brunellis were beginning junior high. They barely knew Heidi, but had admired her from afar in school. Her parents were refugees from civil war in Mozambique, arriving in Prescott when Heidi was an infant.

“You’re Suzanne, right?” the reporter asked with a big smile, extending her hand. “And is this your brother?” The three talked.

“They all want an interview,” Suzanne said to Officer Jenkins minutes later. “With us. Talk about feeling embarrassed!”

“Don’t be,” the officer replied. “People love hero stories.” Suzanne felt her face flush red.

Soon, Sherri arrived to take charge of the mystery child. It turned out the twins had been correct—the little girl was Spanish speaking. Like many other Arizona social workers, Sherri spoke the language fluently. Although the child refused to engage, it was obvious she understood.

Minutes later, Sherri briefed the officers. “She’s traumatized and refuses to talk. I couldn’t get a word out of her. It took time before I could establish eye contact with her, but we’re heading in the right direction. She understands Spanish, that’s for sure. I asked her where her mommy and daddy are, and huge tears fell down her cheeks.”

The little girl was starving. Sherri had brought food, and the silent girl munched on a slice of bread with peanut butter. “Suzie, she’s so tiny,” her mother said, sitting in the front seat of her car. The dark-haired child sat between them, quite content. “And look at those beautiful brown eyes.”

“What happens now?” Suzanne asked.

“Well, she’s traumatized, there’s no doubt of that,” Sherri replied. “I could place her with another family... but that might stress her out more. I think she should stay with us for a few days. At least until we figure what’s what.”

Ecstatic, Suzanne gave her mother a hug. “Oh, wow, that’s *great*. Did you hear, sweetie? You’re coming to our home.”

A little later, as things were wrapping up, Tom took his sister aside. “Suzie, you know what? This is awesome.” He paused, his mind racing. His voice dropped lower, almost as if he were sharing a secret. “*This could be our first mystery.*”

SCARY NEIGHBORS

“I’ll grab the paper!” Tom shouted as he tackled the stairs two at a time.

Still keyed up from the day before, he stepped outside and picked up Tuesday’s edition of *The Daily Pilot* before racing back into the house. “Suzie, check this out! *You won’t believe it.*”

His sister rushed downstairs as Tom spread the front page across the kitchen table.

“Good grief,” Suzanne muttered as her parents crowded around. “Why is this such a big deal? Anybody would have done the same thing.”

The headline read “Local teens save mystery child.” Included was a close-up photo of the little girl’s face. A smaller shot pictured the twins talking with deputies.

“Well, you were there,” her father said. “If it weren’t for you two...” He didn’t have to finish the sentence.

Sherri hugged them. “We’re proud of you both.”

“What an awful picture!” Suzanne grumbled. She tossed her head, pointing at the photo. Channel 5 had covered the story the evening before on the ten o’clock news. That was bad enough. This was worse.

Just then Kathy messaged her: *Congrats! Read the Pilot! U 2 r the best!*

“Okay, that’s it.” Suzanne grimaced. Her face turned bright red. “This is getting ridiculous.”

“Getting?” her brother said, just to bug her.

“Who asked you, hotshot?” She kicked him under the table.

Tom ignored her. “Dad, what are the next steps for the Sheriff’s Office?”

The Chief, dressed in uniform and ready for work, drained the last of his coffee. He didn’t sound hopeful.

“Well, with a little help from you, the deputies checked out the surrounding countryside. There wasn’t a single clue pointing to her identity, and she’s not listed as lost or missing. They’ve added her photo to the nationwide database for abandoned children, but that’s about it.” He paused. “Plus, summer is upon us. The sheriff is short of personnel—it’s vacation time.”

“No way will they ever find her family,” Suzanne said. The thought depressed her. “That is tragic.”

The twins’ mother spotted movement by the kitchen entrance-way. “Look,” she whispered. “We’ve got company.”

Sherri stood up and walked over. The little girl had woken from a long sleep and followed their voices downstairs. Now she stood hiding around a corner, her eyes averted.

“Buenos días, cariña Come and give me a big hug.” Sherri picked the child up and cradled her. The family fussed over her. Soon she was downing a bowl of cereal and eyeing the toast. Still, not a word crossed her lips.

Tom had an idea. “What if we showed her picture to the local ranchers? Maybe one of them knows something.”

Suzanne brightened. “*Super* thought, bro. We can find the time. Kathy and Pete will help too.”

Neither twin doubted for a moment that their best friends would pitch in. The four high-schoolers, inseparable since their early years at St. Francis Elementary School, shared common values and many of the same interests.

The child's plight had touched the whole family. "I like it," their father said. He knew of the twins' fascination with mysteries, and he encouraged it.

"Yes, it's well worth trying," their mother agreed with a smile. Sherri had a thing about discouraging anyone. Her positive attitude rubbed off on everyone.

"I'm off to work. Keep me informed." Chief Jackson kissed his wife goodbye and headed out through the garage door.

The twins gobbled down their breakfast and called their friends. Tom logged on to Yavapai County's property tax website. He downloaded a list of every ranch owner within a three-mile radius of the intersection of Highway 89 and Apache Canyon Drive.

Next, he scanned the child's close-up from the newspaper and printed thirty copies of a flyer they created on his computer. Under a large picture of the little girl appeared the following caption:

*I AM SEARCHING FOR MY FAMILY.
DO YOU KNOW ME?*

*ESTOY BUSCANDO A MI FAMILIA.
¿ME CONOCES?*

The text below aimed to tug at people's heartstrings, retelling the story of a deserted child found roaming along Highway 89. Right in Prescott's own back yard, but outside its city limits. Tom included Suzanne's cellphone number as the contact information.

"I have more time," she said. "Send the calls my way." They took turns proofreading their Spanish translation, hoping they had everything correct.

Soon enough, Pete and Kathy arrived, eager to meet the new guest. The little girl turned shy once more, cuddling with Sherri and observing the excited group from the corners of her eyes.

“It’s like having four giants in the house,” Sherri said, greeting the Brunellis with a warm smile.

The four friends high-fived one another, ready to dive into their first real-life case.

“You know what?” Pete asked. “This search is what plain-clothes police officers do.”

“You’re right—for a change,” his sister agreed.

“Yeah,” Pete said, ignoring his sister’s dig. “We’re, like, four—*mystery searchers*.”

Suzanne smiled. “Well, that’s intriguing.”

“Original,” Kathy said.

“I like it,” Tom said. “Count me in.”

With their coal-black hair and olive-hued skin, the Brunellis’ Italian heritage was unmistakable. And they looked enough alike to be mistaken for twins. “Sometimes you can’t even tell them apart!” the siblings’ father, Joe, told people. Both were shorter and a little heavier than their tall, willowy friends.

Pete, a year older, was the impulsive one who moved too fast, talked without thinking, and enjoyed pushing the envelope. Every so often, he paid the price. “Watch yourself,” his father often counseled, “or one day you’ll be in a world of hurt.”

Kathy was a noisy, natural-born comic who could keep everyone laughing until their sides hurt. Her quick sense of humor was a gift from her mother, Maria.

Their father, Joe, was an entrepreneur—the founder and editor of a popular national magazine that focused on world history. Maria, an emergency-room registered nurse, worked part time at Prescott Regional Medical Center, the city’s largest hospital.

The Brunelli siblings had driven over in their mother’s car, so the four brand-new mystery searchers broke into pairs. The boys agreed to handle Apache Canyon Drive on the west side of the highway while the girls scoured the east.

Tom set the plan in motion. “There are thirty ranches to cover. By splitting them up, we should be able to visit each one today.”

“Show the flyer to every rancher,” Suzanne advised. “If no one’s home, tape it to the front door.”

“Ask questions,” Tom suggested. “For example, ‘Have you ever seen this little girl? Did you spot something unusual on 89 yesterday between noon and one o’clock?’”

Pete nodded. “Okay, got it. Once we hear a yes to either question, we’ll dig deeper. We might find a clue out there.”

“In which case, you’ll have one for a change!” Kathy quipped, poking her brother in the ribs. The two often sparred, but nothing ever bothered Pete. Besides, he always got even with his sister. It was only a matter of time.

Tom called it. “Let’s roll!”

