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THE RED BLAZER GIRLS



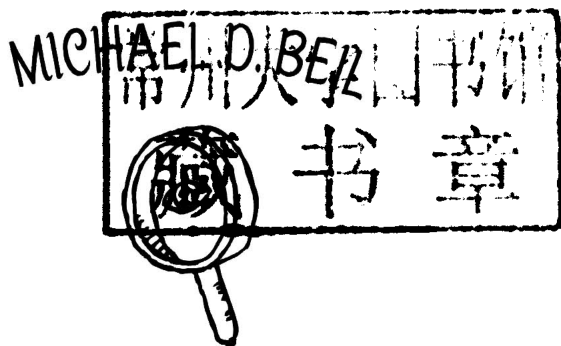
A coded
mystery!
A mystery with
codes!

The **VANISHING VIOLIN**

Michael D. Beil

THE RED BLAZER GIRLS

The Vanishing Violin




Alfred A. Knopf
NEW YORK

My, isn't *this* puzzling?

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First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

June 2010

Printed in the United States of America

The text of this book is set in 12-point Bookman.

2009033984

[Fic]

PZ7.B38823425Reg 2010

4. Schools—Fiction. 5. Mystery and detective stories. I. Title.

1. Puzzles—Fiction. 2. Friendship—Fiction. 3. Catholic schools—Fiction.

ISBN 978-0-375-89627-9 (e-book)

ISBN 978-0-375-86103-1 (trade) — ISBN 978-0-375-96103-8 (lib. pkg.) —

a conviving classmate.

St. Veronica's School for late-night cleaning and redecorating, and outsmart

a trail of cryptic clues to locate a rare violin, catch the person sneaking into

p. cm.

The Red Blazer Girls : the vanishing violin / Michael D. Bell. — 1st ed.

Bell, Michael D.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

www.randomhouse.com/teachers

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Chapter 1



In which the true nature of detective work is revealed to be full of cobwebs, beady-eyed critters, and something sticky

Like a plaid-skirted Jedi Knight, I wave my trusty lightsaber—okay, really it’s just a flashlight—back and forth in front of my face, carving a swath through a tangle of spiderwebs. Convinced that my eight-legged enemies have been cleared from my immediate path, I aim the beam at the jumbled piles of broken desks and God only knows what else lurking in the far corners of the school basement.

“There’s definitely something dead down here,” I announce.

“It’s not the dead things I’m worried about,” Leigh Ann says. “There might be rats.”

Rebecca laughs deviously. “Might be? Um, Leigh Ann, this is New York. Just keep your feet moving and they won’t bother you.”

In spite of Rebecca’s sensible advice, Leigh Ann freezes. “Are you serious?”

“Rebecca. Sophie. Stop scaring her. There are no rats, and nothing is dead,” Margaret says.

I shine my light at a shelf just above my head and detect two beady eyes sizing me up. He’s so close I can see his whiskers moving. “Nah. There wouldn’t be rats down here. This is our neat-and-tidy school, after all.” I brush aside a few more spiderwebs and charge ahead.

Margaret pats me on the shoulder. She has spotted my furry friend, too. “All right, let’s concentrate. We have a job to do.”

Ah yes, the job.

After our triumphant recovery of the Ring of Rocamadour, we became minor celebrities at St. Veronica’s School. Malcolm Chance, the ex-husband of our first client, and someone all my instincts were absolutely, 100 percent wrong about, told the neighborhood newspaper, the *East Sider*, all about us. They sent a reporter to the school for an interview, and we ended up splashed across the front page, with a picture and this story:

“Red Blazer Girls” Solve Local Mystery

It seems that Sherlock Holmes, Nero Wolfe, and Hercule Poirot have some competition right here on the Upper East Side.

Four St. Veronica’s School students solved a 20-year-old mystery when they discovered one of the famed Rings of Rocamadour in its hiding place beneath the floor of St. Veronica’s Church on Lexington

Avenue. The students—Rebecca Chen, Margaret Wrobel, and Sophie St. Pierre, all of Manhattan, and Leigh Ann Jaimes of Queens—followed clues, cracked a devilishly clever mathematical code, and outwitted a pair of fiends who appear to have taken lessons from Boris and Natasha of *Bullwinkle* fame.

The ring, hidden by the late, noted archaeologist Everett Harriman as part of a birthday puzzle for his daughter, dates back to the first century and is alleged to have certain mystical powers—including the power to make dreams come true—according to the girls, who refer to themselves as the Red Blazer Girls in honor of their St. Veronica's School uniforms.

"These girls have done the city, and the whole world, a huge service," says Malcolm Chance, professor of archaeology at Columbia University, and the son-in-law of Everett Harriman. "The ring is priceless—and it almost certainly would have been lost forever without their intelligence and persistence." Professor Chance reports that the ring has been donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and reunited with the other of the pair, believed to be wedding rings given to a young couple in France by St. Veronica herself. According to Catholic tradition, St. Veronica was the woman who wiped the face of Jesus as he carried the cross to the site of his crucifixion.

“It was an awesome experience,” Miss St. Pierre says. “We were happy to help out Ms. Harriman and her family, and then finding the ring, holding it in our hands—it’s like we’re part of its amazing history now. Which is pretty cool.”

The drama began in September, when Ms. Elizabeth Harriman, Everett’s daughter, found a letter he had written the day before his death, nearly 20 years ago. The letter contained the first of many clues, and after a chance meeting between Harriman and the girls, the hunt for the ring was on.

What does the future hold for these crime-fighting tweens?

Miss Wrobel, acknowledged by the other girls as the “true brains” of the outfit, reports that for now she is concentrating on school and the violin.

Her eyes light up, however, when Miss St. Pierre suggests that there are always new mysteries to be solved.

So, Upper East Side miscreants and ne’er-do-wells, take heed, the Red Blazer Girls are in your neighborhood, and on the case.

So we are famous. Sort of.

The day after the article appeared, Margaret showed up at school with a box of business cards personalized for each of us. Here’s one of mine:

Red Blazer Girls Detective Agency

No Case Too Small

Reasonable rates



Sophie St. Pierre

And just like that, we were in business. Two days ago, Sister Bernadette, the principal at St. Veronica's, dragged Margaret and me into her office, a place that was becoming all too familiar to us.

"Miss Wrobel and Miss St. Pierre. Sit."

You have to love Sister Bernadette's just-the-facts-ma'am style.

"Hey, you rearranged the furniture," I said. "This is much better—and now you can see out the window."

"Humph."

I guess she didn't want to talk about it.

She continued: "Let me preface my remarks by saying that I have not forgotten about the week's detention you owe me. Just because you and your friends have become the darlings of the local media does not mean that all your past offenses have been pardoned. Quite the contrary. As I learn more and more about this recent adventure of yours, I am more and more convinced that I

was far too easy on you. Sneaking into the church at all hours, digging up the altar's floor. Good Lo—er, my goodness.”

“But, Sister—” Margaret started.

Sister Bernadette held up her hand. “Stop. I’m not going to add to your punishment. I want to do business with your, er, agency.” She held up one of Margaret’s cards.

Margaret and I looked at one another, eyebrows at attention.

“I have a little case for you, if you’re interested. Of course, there will be no fee, but if you do this for me, I will remove your names from next week’s detention list.”

“That seems totally fair,” I blurted out.

“Sophie, wait. We haven’t heard what’s involved yet,” replied my more pragmatic friend.

“Indeed. I like you, Miss Wrobel,” said Sister Bernadette, resting her chin on her interlocked fingers, but without even a hint of a smile. “I’m starting to understand how you managed to do whatever it was you did over there in the church. This situation is nothing like that. It’s a matter of a few . . . unexplained events. I merely want you to seek—no, I demand—an explanation.”

“Ooohh. What kind of unexplained events?” I asked, sliding forward on my chair. My brain ran riot: sinister spies, ghastly ghosts, evil extraterrestrials.

“Calm down, Agent St. Pierre. These are the kind

of events that can be explained—they simply have not been. Put simply, someone has been cleaning and straightening up around the school—after hours. Things that the janitor is not responsible for. Take the refrigerator in the teachers' lounge. Please understand that this is not just a refrigerator, but more a biology experiment gone horribly wrong. In my twenty years here at St. Veronica's, no one has ever cleaned it voluntarily, and if a teacher did, he or she would rightfully expect a medal, and perhaps a hazmat suit. And every night, someone is loading paper into every single tray of every copy machine, getting it ready for the next day. They're stacking the reams of paper neatly in the supply closet, instead of merely leaving them scattered around the room, as is the usual practice. The other day, Sister Eugenia jammed the machine in the faculty room so badly that we had to call a repairman, but when he showed up the next morning, somehow it had been fixed.

Last night was my turn. As Miss St. Pierre so astutely pointed out, all the furniture in my office was rearranged. Nothing missing, not a paper on my desk is out of place. And do you know what I find the most vexing? This arrangement is much better. Now, I do believe in miracles, but I also believe that the good Lord has more important things on his mind than cleaning nasty refrigerators and redecorating offices. I want an explanation, and you girls are going to find it for me. You may snoop around to your hearts' content. So, do we have a deal?"

Margaret stood up and shook hands with Sister Bernadette. "You came to the right place, Sister."

"Satisfaction guaranteed," I added.

"I'll be counting on that, Miss St. Pierre."

Gulp.

Which explains, more or less, why we are spending a Friday afternoon in the subterranean rat kingdom that is St. Veronica's basement. Murder and intrigue. Espionage. Missing persons. Heck, even a lost dog. But tracking down some misguided do-gooder who is sneaking into the school at night to clean and straighten? Oy.

"I guess this is what we meant by 'No Case Too Small,' eh, Margaret?" I grumble, spitting out a mouthful of cobweb.

"Not all detective work is glamorous," she replies. "The real world isn't like TV."

"Yeah, on TV you miss out on the funky smells of places like this," Rebecca says. "Hey, how come nobody ever came up with smell-evision?"

Margaret forges on and then stops abruptly in front of a refrigerator-size pile of old textbooks. Rebecca and I clunk into each other and then into Leigh Ann, who wobbles like a bowling pin before regaining her balance.

"Why are these down here?" Margaret asks. "Do you know how many trees it took to make these books? I'm going to talk to Sister Bernadette about recycling these."

(Please add "environmental activist" to Margaret's

résumé, right after “straight-A student” and “violin prodigy.”)

Meanwhile, my flashlight reveals something chrome-bright on the other side of the books, and I move closer to investigate. “Hey, a doorknob.”

Margaret, Leigh Ann, and Rebecca crowd around me as I shine my light around the edge of the door.

“Where do you think it leads?” Leigh Ann asks.

“It’s just a storage room,” Margaret says. “Probably full of more textbooks like these. In fact, that probably explains why these are stacked right here. They’re going to go in there. Try the door.”

I reach for the knob, and just as I am about to put my hand on it, Rebecca gasps really loudly right in my ear. I almost have a heart attack, and she laughs hysterically.

“Oh, you are just a regular riot, Miss Chen,” I say, and stick out my tongue. I try the knob, but it doesn’t budge. When I put my shoulder against the door and shove, nothing happens.

“They don’t make ’em like this anymore,” Rebecca says, pushing against it with me.

Margaret shakes her head sadly. “Well, your first problem, geniuses, is that the door opens out.”

Becca and I look sheepishly at each other.

“What do you think about that lock, Becca?” Margaret asks, still smirking at us. “Think you can pick it?”

Becca, whose lock-picking skills came in handy in our previous case, takes my flashlight and kneels down

for a closer look. “There are two locks. I could probably open the one connected to the knob with my school ID. But this one up here is a dead bolt. I’ll need a few tools.”

“Can’t we just ask Sister Bernadette for the key?” Leigh Ann asks.

Za-zoink. A perfectly reasonable question, no?

Margaret slaps her palm to her forehead and says, “Jeez, I keep forgetting that we have permission to be doing this. Okay, let’s take a quick look over there and then get out of here. Soph, lead the way.” She points to the darkest, creepiest corner in the basement.

“I am oh-so-happy to get my recommended daily allowance of spiderweb gunk.” I step forward, swatting madly at the scurrying spiders, and completely miss what is on the floor right in front of me—a gooey puddle oozing out from beneath a set of metal shelves. As my stomach does a double backflip with a twist, I point my flashlight at my brand-new Chuck Taylor. I pry it loose—icky-ick-icky-ick. The ooze I’m standing in is red—blood-red.

Chapter 2



But whose shoes left those too-few clues?

“Ohmigoshohmigoshohmigosh.”

“What’s wrong?” Margaret grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me.

“I—I just stepped in . . .”

“Blood,” says Rebecca.

A mere step behind us, Leigh Ann swallows loudly enough for me to hear her. “Bl-blood?” Her voice is barely a whisper.

“Nobody move!” Margaret orders.

I drop my lightsaber, something I have an unfortunate history of doing in stressful situations. Rebecca gasps, and poor Leigh Ann’s death grip on my arm is cutting off my circulation as she starts to say a Hail Mary.

“Wh-what is it?” I manage to stammer.

Margaret shines her light on our faces and giggles. That’s right—Miss Wrobel is giggling. Margaret will smile frequently, chuckle occasionally. But until this moment, she has never giggled.

"It's paint! Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you more. I just didn't want anyone to disturb the evidence."

"We oughta—" I start.

"Kill you," Leigh Ann says.

"Twice," adds Rebecca.

"Is that so?" Margaret says, stifling another giggling fit and crouching down to find the source of the puddle. "Look, here's the paint can." She points to it, lying on its side behind the bottom shelf.

"Now, since it is still wet, we have to assume that it must have been very recently knocked over. Maybe the someone we're looking for was just here and heard us. Let's survey the crime scene before it's completely compromised."

For someone who supposedly doesn't watch a lot of television, Margaret sure knows all that *CSI* lingo.

"Crime scene? Compromised?" Rebecca sputters. "You just took a month off my life. Someday I'm gonna need that time."

Margaret is already busy "surveying." "See these footprints in the dust? Definitely new." She lifts the overturned paint can and gives it a good shake. The lid is on, but there is a dent in the top, where paint continues to ooze. "Still quite a bit left. It would be empty if it had been knocked over more than a day ago. Ah, I bet that's what they were after." She stretches her neck to get a look at the top shelf. "Cleaning supplies. Whoever it was doing the reaching had to stand on the bottom shelf to reach up to the top. When they did that, their feet must

have pushed this can right off the back of the shelf. It landed on that pile of rags, so they never heard it fall.”

“Which could explain why a person who’s obviously a neat freak didn’t pick it up,” I say. “Assuming this was our guy—or girl.”

“Right.” Margaret claps her hands together, shaking off the dust, and turns to Leigh Ann, the “new kid” at St. Veronica’s we got to know during our first case. “Okay, based on what we have observed, what do we know about our suspect?”

“Um, he’s clumsy?”

“And?”

“He’s short. Or she’s short. For a grown-up, anyway. I mean, I’m only five foot six and I can almost reach the top shelf.”

Margaret nods. “Excellent. And?”

Leigh Ann’s face scrunches up. She starts to reach for my flashlight but, after noting its lovely spider-webby coating, turns to me. “Um, Sophie, would you shine that over there, on the floor?” she says, pointing to a spot next to the shelves. She bends over to take a closer look.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Footprints. Kind of small—not much bigger than mine—but they’re smooth. Definitely not sneakers.”

“One more question,” says Margaret. “Right- or left-handed?”

“How is she supposed to tell that from the footprints?” Rebecca asks.

“Which hand did he use to grab the cleaning supplies?”

I raise my hand, excited because I think I know the answer. “Call on me! Call on me!”

Rebecca clunks me on the head with her flashlight. “Suck-up.”

“Go ahead, Sophie, tell them,” Margaret says primly.

I point to the shelves where our suspect has stepped with his or her right foot, and then to a shelf at eye level where a right hand has made a clear imprint in the dust. “Based on the angle of the fingers, he was holding on to this shelf with his right hand . . . which means that he grabbed the bottle of cleaning stuff with his left.”

Applause from Leigh Ann and Margaret and a hearty Bronx cheer from Becca.

“There’s one big problem with all this,” she scoffs. “How do you know it wasn’t just the janitor coming down here to get cleaning supplies? Isn’t that what he does? He’s probably down here getting stuff off that shelf every day.”

Leigh Ann beams. “I’m starting to get this detective stuff. Think about the janitor for a second, Becca.”

“What about him?”

“How tall is he?”

“I dunno. Pretty tall. Definitely over six feet. So?”

“Soooo, he wouldn’t need to stand on this shelf to reach the top one.”

“Ohhhhhh,” we chorus.