

Finder's Keeper

By Anne McCaffrey

PETER TURNED IN FOUR DOZEN GOLF BALLS

including the monogrammed ones that Mr. Roche had been yelling about. The course manager was almost cheerful as he counted out Peter's finder's fee.

"You've got a positive genius for scrounging balls, Pete. Don't know how you do it."

"My mother says everyone's got something they're good at," Peter replied, and began to edge out the door of the stuffy office. Comments like that made him nervous: he half-expected he'd given away his secret, and that he and his mother would be forced to run away again.

The manager only grunted and muttered about keep-ing the members happy. Peter ducked out, running home with his pocketful of dollars. Mother would be pleased, although she didn't like him using his trick of "finding" for "material gain," as she put it. But since she'd been too sick to work at the diner, they had precious little choice. Peter had wanted to get a full-time job as a caddy but his mother had resisted.

"You can't be like me, Peter. You got to have education and training. Your father was a smart man, but he didn't have enough education." Dedication made her eyes bum in her thin face. "It's education that matters in this world, Peter. You got to go to school." She emphasized her last statement by stringing the words out and enunciating them clearly.

Peter adored his mother but he hated her attempts to imitate a "country club" accent: her habit of quoting country clichés only ruined the effect she wanted to produce.

Seven dollars he was bringing home today. Not bad, added to the twenty-two he'd made caddying over the weekend. This week's rent, food, and some of the medicine were now paid for. If he could just talk Mother into letting him take a week off school now that the rains had stopped and spring sun was drying the greens, he'd really make some money! Mr. Roche always tipped a fiver, especially when Peter kept track of those monogrammed balls of his that he always swatted into

therough.

"Son, if you could patent that ball-homing instinct of yours," Mr. Roche had said more often than Peter liked, "you'd be a millionaire!"

It had made Peter almost scared to continue caddy-ing for Mr. Roche, but the money was too tempting.

He came around the corner of their house trailer and skidded to an abrupt stop in the mud. Ken Far-go's

green Mustang was parked on the concrete apron. The only good thing about his mother being sick, in Peter's estimation, was that she didn't have to be pleasant to creeps like Ken Fargo.

"He's pleasant enough and all that," his mother had said and then shuddered, smiling quickly to reassure Peter. "There's just something . . . slippery about him." She sighed. "I suppose he can't help being sour and suspicious. People do and say the most awful things to collect insurance! And he's lonely."

His mother would understand being lonely. And she'd understand the awful things people do and say - particularly if you're different in any way. But the knowledge hadn't made her sour, just more lonely, and sad, and cautious. Why she called Peter's knack of finding things a "gift," he didn't know. He felt it was a curse. It had brought them more grief, kept them moving around in the period before he'd learned not to "find" everything lost..

And why did Ken Fargo have to getunlost? They had thought him well gone when the insurance company that used him as an investigator had called off the search for the hijacked furs. There had been a reward of \$15,000 for the return of those coats. Try as he would, Peter hadn't been able to figure out a legitimate way to "find" those furs. He hadn't been with the searchers when they'd looked in the old lead mine, or he'd have "found" the furs under the concealing layer of rubble in the ore carts. He couldn't go there alone now. That old shaft was dangerous, the supports worm-ridden and damp-rotted. Every kid in town had been warned, on pain of a strapping, to stay away.

Peter paused at the front of the house. He didn't want to go in. He didn't like the way Ken Fargo looked at his mother, and there wasn't much a thirteen-year-old boy could do to a six-foot man who'd fought his way out of some nasty comers (Fargo's words), and looked it from the scars on his face and knuckles. Peter took a deep breath and stomped up the two boxes that made steps into the trailer.

Peter knew the moment he walked in that Fargo had been badgering his mother. She was flushed and wringing her hands.

"Peter!" She all but swooped down on him. "Did you have a good day?" She was terribly relieved to see him.

"Sure did, Mother." He held out the seven dollar bills. "Hello, Mr. Fargo." He had to acknowledge the man's presence or his mother would chew him out for bad manners no matter how much she disliked Fargo .

"Long time no see," the man replied, jerking his shoulders to settle a flashy gold sports jacket. He sauntered toward the back of the caravan. "Sorry your ma's been ill. Should've let me know".

Peter blinked at him in surprise.

"Seven dollars," his mother was saying, her voice more natural now. "Oh, Peter, that's wonderful. Were you caddyng?"

"That's just for scrounging golf balls." Something happened in the room, some indefinable change in the air: that registered against Peter's senses. When he looked at Ken Fargo, the man was occupied in lighting a cigarette. Peter glanced at his mother but she was proudly smoothing out the bills and arranging them all face up before she put them in her handbag.

"Peter's such a help," she said to Fargo, an artificial heartiness in her soft voice. "We've been just fine. I'll be back at work this week, but it was very nice of you to drop by and see us." She took two steps

toward Fargo, her hand extended.

Fargo ignored the hand and sat down as if he meant to make a long visit. The knock at the door was a welcome diversion and Peter nearly collided with his mother as they both answered the summons.

"Oh, Mrs. Kieman, have you seen my Victor?" It was Mrs. Anderson from two trailers down. Her three-year-old had such a perverse habit of straying that the distraught mother had taken to tying him to an old dog run. "I told Henry the rope was frayed. I was doing the wash and I just didn't notice. I suppose I should've checked when I didn't hear him fretting, but I wanted to finish ... so I don't know how long he's been gone. Have you seen him? What with being home and all?"

Peter bristled at the implied insult, but his mother shot him a look, for she'd often let him "find" Victor. Mrs. Anderson was a nice woman, his mother had said, and had more than a wayward child to burden her.

"No, Mrs. Anderson, I haven't seen Victor this morning," his mother replied.

"Which way is he likely to go, Mrs. Anderson?"

Ken Fargo asked.

"Oh, I just dunno. He could be halfway to town by now." The woman twisted back the lock of lank bleached hair that had escaped its pins. She swiveled her body slightly, looking pointedly at the green Mustang.

"Well, that's no problem. C'mon, Pete, you and me will take a little spin and see if we can locate the lady's wandering boy."

Peter gave his mother a swift look, and she gave him a barely perceptible nod.

"Shouldn't be no time at all before we have him safely back in your arms, Mrs. Anderson. Now don't worry. For one thing I'm an insurance investigator, and finding lost things is my business."

Again that electric feeling charged the air, but before Peter could appeal to his mother, Ken Fargo had hustled him out the door and into the car, all the time-driving reassurances to Mrs. Anderson.

"Roll down that window, Petey boy," the man said, and Peter set his teeth against the irritating familiarity.

"Keep a sharp eye out on your side. I'll take care of mine."

Fargo's tone, smugly confident, gave Peter fair warning. Somehow Fargo thought that Peter could "find" things. Somehow Peter had to discourage him.

"You just sing out when you see that brat, Pete. This car'll stop on a dime and hand you back six cents-inflation, you know, hahaha." Fargo deftly turned the Mustang into the road to town. Peter didn't protest although he knew that Victor Anderson was moving steadily in the opposite direction. "And I've got a bone to pick with you."

Startled, Peter looked around, but the man's frown was bogus.

"You should've let me know your mother was ill."

She's a fine woman, your ma, and deserves the best.

She could've had it if you'd let me know."

"We got along all right."

"Yeah, but she'd be much better now with the kind of food and care I could've provided. And I'd like to provide for her; you get what I mean?" An elbow prodded Peter in the ribs.

"We prefer to do for ourselves, thank you."

"You're a good kid, Peter, but there're things a man can do that a boy can't."

Peter wanted to wipe that look from Fargo's face.

"Hey, you keep your eyes peeled for that kid. Let's find him in a hurry and get back. I got something to ask your ma and you might as well hear it, too."

Peter obediently faced the window, but they reached the middle of the town without a sight of any child.

"How about that? We gotta search the whole town.

I thought you said the kid went into town."

"No, sir. Mrs. Anderson said she thought he'd be halfway to town by now.

"Well, goddammit, where is he?"

Peter looked Ken Fargo straight in the eyes. "I don't know."

The man's face turned grim, then as suddenly assumed a forced good humor. "All right, kid. If he didn't go into town, maybe he went out of town?"

"Maybe someone's found him already. There's Officer Scordus."

The policeman was not the least bit pleased to hear that the Anderson kid was missing again, and his remarks confirmed Peter's private opinion that Mrs. Anderson was a prime nuisance in the tiny community of Jennings, Colorado. Fargo brandished his investigator's credentials, an additional irritant to Scortius, who'd been forced to muck around the countryside trying to find the lost shipment of furs "alleged" to have been stashed somewhere near Jennings.

"Well, I'll see who we can find to help track the brat."

"I'll do the main road out of town."

Officer Scortius grunted and waddled off.

As they drew alongside her trailer, Mrs. Anderson was hanging over the bottom half of her door, the picture of maternal anxiety. Clearly Victor had not been recovered, but Fargo assured her heartily that it was only a matter of moments, and gunned the Mustang countryward.

"Okay, Pete, let's find that kid and end this soap opera," Fargo said between his teeth. "How far up the road is he?"

"Gee, how would I know?"

"How would you know? Because you'd know!" The man's tone emphasized his certainty and Peter felt sick fear curl up from the pit of his belly. "I get around the country, Petey boy. And I hear things, interesting things." He paused and his voice took on a conciliatory tone. "Look, Petey boy, I like your mother. I want to take care of her the way a man can. She shouldn't have to work herself sick to give you a decent place to live and a good education. I know how set she is to see you educated. But you don't need much book learning to get ahead. Not you. You know, with your trick, we could be a team, you and me. In fact, we would be a top-drawer unbeatable team of private investigators."

That insistent, persuasive voice was bad enough; the arguments were worse. Fargo knew exactly how to get to Peter.

"Wouldn't that be great? Your ma not having to work anymore? And you, kid, you've been handicapped. You've made mistakes. It was foolish, you know, to find Lyie Grauber's missing stocks! To say nothing of that Cadillac in Colorado Springs!" Fargo's laugh was unpleasant and Peter cringed. That Cadillac business had meant they'd had to leave one of the nicest apartments they'd ever had. That was when they had decided that Peter better check with his mother before he "found" anything. There'd been a fortune in old five-dollar bills hidden in that Cadillac-and he couldn't tell the authorities how he'd known where it had been hidden.

"Yes," Fargo was saying in an ominously casual way, "the police are still looking for the kid who told them where to find that Caddy-and skipped. They want him bad."

The Mustang, like the Cadillac, had become a trap.

"You're mistaking me for someone else, Mr. Fargo," Peter managed to say in a steady, apologetic voice.

"Oh, no, I'm not. I'm a top-flight investigator because I'm smart. I put isolated clues together and come up with open-and-shut convictions."

If you looked adults in the face, they tended to think you couldn't be lying; but it took every ounce of self-control that Peter had learned in thirteen years to look Ken Fargo squarely in the eyes.

"You are wrong, Mr. Fargo. I've never been in Colorado Springs. And gee, if I could find things like you do and get reward money, I sure would have tried to for my mother's sake."

"How do you know about reward money, kid?"

"Mother told me that your company gives you ten percent of the value of anything you recover for them."

Fargo grunted at that, but just on the other side of the town limit sign, he braked, swearing with impatience.

"Where's that brat? C'mon, kid, where is he? You know!"

And Peter did. Victor was cutting across the Omers' meadow, out of sight of the road, and heading

toward the old mines. Peter knew he'd better find the kid soon, but he'd have to get rid of Ken Fargo first and how was he going to manage to do that?

"No, Mr. Fargo, I don't know." Peter stared the man straight in the eyes; "I wish I did because Mrs. Anderson always tips fifty cents when someone brings Victor home."

"You made seven bucks today finding golf balls.

What about that?"

Peter forced himself to grin. "All you have to do is watch where Mr. Roche slices his balls and then go bring 'em in when he isn't looking. Half the ones I brought in today were in the pond anyway."

Doubt flickered across Ken Fargo's face.

"Honest, Mr. Fargo, you're wrong about me."

A big Olds came piling down the road toward town. Cursing under his breath, Fargo pushed himself out of the Mustang and naggged the big car down.

"Yeah? What's the trouble, fella? No gas?" asked the driver, sticking his head out the window. Peter saw, with sinking heart, that it was Mr. Roche. He tried to squinch down in the seat. "Hi there, Peter. Find any more of my balls for me?" He flicked his cigarette to the roadside and gave Fargo his attention. "Kid's a genius finding m'balls in the grass. Like he could home in on them or something. Caddy for me, Saturday, Peter? Ten sharp?"

Limp with defeat, Peter nodded and sank down in the bucket seat, swallowing fiercely against the lump in his throat.

"Seen anything of a kid, too young to be off on his own?" Fargo asked.

"Kid? No. Nothing on the road from here to Hibernia."

Mr. Roche drove off in the Olds, leaving Peter at Fargo's mercy.

"Kid homes in on them or something, huh?" No, Mr. Fargo, you're wrong about me." Fargo's voice was savage as he slid into the driver's seat. "All right, Peter me lad. Now, unless you want some trouble, real trouble, with the cops in Colorado Springs, because they're looking for you, you'd better tell me where those furs are!"

"Furs?"

Fargo grabbed Peter by the wrist. He was as strong as he'd boasted, and the bones in Peter's arm rubbed together painfully in his grip. Blunt fingers gouged into the tendons until Peter had all he could do not to cry out.

"You know, don't you?"

The pain had caught Peter off guard and his face must have given away his secret knowledge, for Fargo swore.

"How long have you known?" Each word was punctuated by a flexing of those implacable fingers on his wrist. "D'you realize you done me out of fifteen thousand dollars?" Just as Peter was certain Fargo would break his arm, the man's attitude altered. "Okay, kid. I understand. You and your mother got scared after that Cadillac caper. Well, you don't have to be scared anymore. I said we'd be a team and we will. No one will think it funny if I find things. I'm a first-rate investigator to begin with. But with you . . . okay, where're the furs?"

"In the old lead mine." Peter pointed toward the hills. And Victor.

"We searched there already." Fargo's expression was suspicious and menacing. "You lead me on, kid . . ." and he raised his hand warningly.

"The furs are hidden under the rubble in the old ore carts."

"How do you know? You seen 'em?"

"No, but that's where they are."

"You mean, we walked up and down past that loot?"

If they were mice, they would've bit you, Peter re-cited one of his mother's off-quoted phrases to him-self. Thinking of his mother gave him a second hold on his courage. Fargo knew, but if his knowledge went no further than an old mineshaft ...

"The road to that mine's around here, isn't it?"

Peter told Fargo the way.

"Now you're using the old noggin, Petey boy." Co-operation made Fargo good-natured. "Say, kid, how do you do it?"

"What?"

"No more of the innocent act." Fargo's voice took on its dangerous edge. "How do you find things you've never seen?"

"I can't always," Peter replied, trying to sound dubious. "It's just when things are on people's minds a lot, like that Cadillac or the furs, I sort of get a picture where they are. Sometimes the picture is clearer than other times, and I know the location."

"What's with the golf balls? You must've found hundreds of stupid golf balls these past couple months. Penny-ante stuff-when I think of the lists of lost, or strayed, items on the company's records ... I can make a fortune!"

Peter swallowed. "I", not the more diplomatic "we."

The Mustang swerved up the last bend to the mine. "It's getting dark, Mr. Fargo," Peter said. "We should get Victor. He's up there. We can come back tomorrow for the..."

"Forget that stupid brat! I want those furs . . . now !" Fargo pulled a huge handlight from under his seat and gestured with it for Peter to lead the way.

"The mine's dangerous, Mr. Fargo. And the ore carts are pretty far down..."

There was no reprieve in Fargo's eyes. Peter turned toward the shaft and started walking.

The walls were dripping with the recent spring thaws, and the tunnel had a clammy chill as they penetrated slowly down, turning the gentle bend that led into the bowels of the mine.

"That's a new fall," Peter said nervously as they scrambled over a soggy pile of mud.

Fargo shined the spotlight at the sagging supports. "Yeah, so let's get this business over with. Fifteen thousand will do a lot for us, Petey boy. For you, your mother, and me."

"Why don't you just take the furs and leave us alone, Mr. Fargo? It's not right for me to find things for money."

"Who says?" Fargo snorted at his altruism. "Like the old saying, Petey, 'Finders keepers, losers weepers.' And, Petey boy, I'm the finder's keeper from now on."

The smile on Fargo's face chilled Peter worse than the tunnel's cold. But the smile disappeared when they both heard the groaning of wood and the dribbling sound of dirt falling from a height. "How much further?" Fargo asked. "This place isn't safe." The ore carts were right up against the old fall which had closed the mine. Fargo hoisted Peter into the first cart. The boy dug into the loose earth layering the cart, and Fargo swore as Peter unearthed the first of the plastic sacks. "They all that big? Christ, we can't pack those up that tunnel. Take all night." He heaved the plastic bags to the ground and the air puffed them up. He glanced up the tunnel, measuring its width. "I bet I can just get the Mustang down here." And he started off.

"Mr. Fargo, would you leave me the light?"

With the torch pointed forward, Fargo's smile was malevolent in the dim tunnel. "What? A big kid like you afraid of the dark? What could find you here?" He laughed. "Just think of all the things fifteen thousand will buy!"

Peter watched with a rapidly increasing anxiety as the gleam of the spot disappeared around the bend, leaving him in a total blackout.

"Afraid of the dark?" The taunt frightened him not half as much as the life looming with grim certainty before him. Not all the warmth of the pelts on which he crouched could have thawed the fear in Peter's heart.

An ominous creak, almost overhead, startled him further. "The finder's keeper," Fargo had said. There were darker death traps than an old mine shaft, and bleaker lightless vistas.

Nonetheless Peter cried aloud when he saw the re-turn of light and heard the sound of the Mustang bumping along the cart tracks.

"Okay, move your butt and haul these furs into the car, Petey. On the double."

Another warning rumbled overhead and a gout of water spewed from the support directly above the ore carts. Peter grabbed the plastic bags, tripping over the trailing length of them.

"Keep 'em off the wet ground, you stupid jerk.

They're worth a fortune."

Peter mumbled an apology as he crammed the bags into the car trunk. The plastic refused to give up its supply of air, and Fargo was cursing as he helped.

Then he stormed down the tunnel for more furs, dragging Peter with him. The light from the Mustang's headlights helped relieve the gloom, although its exhaust was a blue plume in the cul-de-sac of the rockfall. Two loads and the trunk was full. Peter stood with an armful of plastic sacks wondering how they could possibly get them all in the sports car.

"Don't stand there, stupid. Dump 'em on the back seat."

That, too, was full shortly, so Peter heaved his next load onto the passenger seat, falling over it as he lost his balance. Accidentally he hit the wheel, and the horn. The noise startled Fargo into dropping his load, but his curses were covered by a long low rumble. Mud and ooze rained down.

Peter screamed, gesturing frantically to the bulging overhead beam. Then, suddenly he found himself stumbling over plastic bags, desperately pulling at Fargo's arm to get the man to move. Peter remembered scrambling and clawing through wet heavy mud. Then something struck him across the head.

His skull was on fire, his body rigid. Certain he was buried in the tunnel, he tried to move but his arms were held to his side. His fingers clawed but met fluffy soft warm blanketing. There was noise and confusion around him. He was aware of breathing fresh air, and yet. . . there was thudding and rumbling underneath him which echoed through his pain-filled head.

The mine had collapsed! But he was wrapped in a blanket. He was safe.

"Yeah, you wouldn't believe how fast that Mustang went into reverse. The surprising thing is I made it out in one piece at all. 'Course the company will see to the body work. All in the line of duty, Scottius! And I got what I went after. I found the furs."

"I found the furs? Peter cringed at Fargo's arrogance.

"Considering you were out looking for the Anderson kid, you got double luck," the officer was saying enviously.

Fargo chuckled. "Two finds in one day. Not bad, huh? Say, Doc, how long does it take that ambulance to get here? I want Petey boy given the best of care.

"I'll foot the bill myself. And, of course, we should get the little feller back to Mrs. Anderson, too."

"The ambulance's coming," Dr. Wingard said, and there was something in his voice that made Peter think that the doctor didn't much like Ken Fargo. "I'm just as anxious as you are about Peter's condition. I want an x-ray of that skull. . ."

"I thought you said he had just a flesh wound?"

"There's a possibility of concussion"

"Concussion?" Fargo was startled.

"Yes, it was a wound caused by a falling object. Sufficient force to crack the skull. And I want to run an EKG on Peter. I don't like the sound of that heart."

"Heart?"

A fierce pounding in Peter's chest echoed the panic in Fargo's voice.

"Yes. Molly Kieman's got enough on her mind, but I spotted an irregularity in Peter's heartbeat when I gave him a physical in school. Might be nothing at all. No mention of rheumatic fever on his school record."

"Rheumatic fever?"

"I'm the cautious type. I'd just like to check."

"Oh."

Peter was somewhat encouraged by the dubious sound of Fargo's rejoinder. Then he remembered Jorie Grant. She'd had a rheumatic heart and couldn't take gym; stayed out of school in hard weather, in general was a real twerp. Be like her? Peter groaned.

"Hey, he's coming to," Fargo cried.

The air about Peter seemed to press in on him and he had a sense of suffocation. A hand grabbed his chin and shook him.

"Hey, Petey. Speak to me!"

There was a scuffle and an exclamation of surprise from Fargo.

"H you don't mind, Mr. Fargo," Dr. Wingate said in a hard icy voice. "I'm the doctor here." A firm hand turned back the blanket and found Peter's wrist. "And for your information, you don't shake concussion cases." Boy, was Dr. Wingard angry! "Peter? Peter? Can you hear me?" His voice was gentle again.

"Concussion." That word again. It triggered a series of associations in Peter's mind and eventually made him think of TV shows he'd seen. Maybe ... as his mother used to say, there were more ways to kill a cat than choking him with butter.

"Where am I?" He fluttered his eyelids like patients did on "Dr. Kildare." The act became real for the searchlights of the police cars were trained in his direction, bright enough to stun his eyes.

"Peter, it's Dr. Wingard. How're you feeling?"

"My head hurts."

"I know, boy. We'll soon fix that. Can you open your eyes again? And tell me how many fingers I'm holding up?"

Peter blinked. He could see that the doctor was hold-ingup three fingers. He blinked again, made his eyes stay wide with fear.

"Who are you?" he asked, looking directly at the doctor as if he'd never seen him. Then he looked unseeingly at Fargo . "Where am I?"

"How many fingers, Peter?"

"Fingers?Fingers?"Peter couldn't think how many he ought to see if he didn't see the right number. But he could see the dawning of disappointed frustration and the fury of loss in Ken Fargo's face.

Losersweepers. Peter essayed a sob. After all, his head hurt-and he wasn't supposed to be as brave as PeterKieman .

"Who are you? Where am I? My head hurts." But the first sob was abruptly followed by deep hurtful ones which Peter hadn't ordered.

"There, there, boy.Take it easy. You'll be all right," the doctor said. He stood up, pulling Fargo aside. Peter strained his ears. "That head injury seems to be causing a little amnesia."

"Amnesia?"

"Oh, I don't think it's anything to worry about. A few weeks' rest in the hospital, a careful regime for a few months, and he'll be right as rain."

"Amnesia?And a bum heart?"Fargo glanced sourly at Peter, who gave a weak groaning sob. "Look, Doc, I've got to report to my company about finding those

furs. You just send the bills for the kid to Midwestern. Least we can do for him!"

"You'll be looking in on Peter?"

Peter kept his eyes tightly shut, but he was thinking with all his strength: Go away. Ken Fargo!

Fargo cleared his throat and began to move away.

"Well, now, I'll certainly try to. You let me know when he's completely recovered.If he gets his memory back. And check out that bad heart, too."

Well now, Peter thought,Petey boy just wouldn't ever recover from his amnesia. Not completely. And not that part of his mind that made him valuable to Fargo. Finder's keeper indeed!

Weariness settled in along with pain and Peter closed his eyes tightly. It was reassuring to hear little Victor Anderson blubbering somewhere. But what did he have to cry about? He was found, wasn't he?

Peter would have to stop "finding" anything for a while.Even Mr. Roche's golf balls. But he could blame that on the crack on the head, too. He could still caddy.

Then, when he grew up, and without Mr. Ken Fargo interfering with him and his mother, why he'd become the toppest-fight insurance investigator. And nobody would consider it odd that he could find anything he needed to.

As his mother often said, it was an ill wind that blew nobody any good.