
THE WORST DETECTIVE IN YORKSHIRE
BY NEMI

The Worst Detective in Yorkshire

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The Trench Coat of Destiny

Every great detective has something that makes them special.

Sherlock Holmes had his brain. Hercule Poirot had his moustache. Miss Marple had knitting needles and an alarming interest in other people's business.

I had a trench coat.

It was beige, smelled slightly of old biscuits, and had cost me four pounds fifty from the Oakhaven Charity Shop. The woman behind the counter said it had belonged to a gentleman who had unfortunately passed away.

I took this to mean that the coat had a mysterious history.

Barnaby took it to mean that someone had died in it.

"That's disgusting," he said when I told him.

"It's called character, Barnaby."

"It's called dead man's clothing."

"Some of the greatest detectives in history wore trench coats."

"Name one."

I thought about this.

"Detective Columbo."

"He's fictional."

"That doesn't make his coat any less real."

Barnaby sighed. He did that a lot. I suspected he had a medical condition, although he insisted it was something to do with spending too much time around me.

We were standing in my bedroom on a Tuesday afternoon, and I was preparing to launch what would undoubtedly become the most successful private investigation agency in the history of Yorkshire.

Possibly Britain.

Possibly the world, although I didn't want to get ahead of myself.

My name is Margaret Pendelton, but everyone calls me Maggie. I'm thirteen years old, I live in Little Oakhaven, and I possess what experts would probably describe as an extraordinary mind.

Nobody had actually described it that way yet, but that was because I hadn't given them the opportunity.

Little Oakhaven is the sort of village where absolutely nothing happens. We have one shop, one bakery, one church, a primary school, and a village hall that smells permanently of furniture polish. The most exciting event last year was when Mr Fletcher's wheelie bin rolled down the high street and knocked over a bicycle.

Inspector Miller investigated.

It turned out to be windy.

Case closed.

Honestly, I don't know how the man sleeps at night, knowing he's wasting his life solving crimes that aren't even crimes.

I intended to do better.

"Right," I announced, pulling the trench coat around myself. "How do I look?"

Barnaby examined me.

"Like three children standing on each other's shoulders pretending to be an adult."

"Excellent. Intimidating."

"No, Maggie. Ridiculous."

The sleeves covered both my hands, and the bottom of the coat nearly touched my ankles. I had to roll the cuffs up four times before I could see my fingers.

I considered this a minor inconvenience.

"Every detective needs an assistant," I said.

"Good luck finding one."

"I've already found one."

Barnaby looked towards the door.

"Where?"

I pointed at him.

"No."

"Congratulations, Watson."

"My name's Barnaby."

"That's exactly what Watson would say."

"No, Watson would probably say his name was Watson."

I ignored this. A great detective must never allow herself to become distracted by irrelevant details.

I picked up my notebook from the desk. It was black, with a slightly bent corner, and I'd written PENDELTON PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS across the front in silver marker.

Underneath, in smaller letters, I'd added:

No Crime Too Difficult.

Then, after some thought:

Reasonable Rates.

And finally:

Discretion Guaranteed.

I'd had to look up what discretion meant, but it sounded professional.

"Before we begin accepting clients," I said, "I need to demonstrate my powers of deduction."

"Do you?"

"Absolutely. Observe."

I stepped backwards, caught my heel in the coat, and fell against my wardrobe.

A coat hanger landed on my head.

Barnaby watched silently.

"That," I explained, removing the hanger, "was a test of my reflexes."

"Did you pass?"

"With distinction."

I straightened my collar and examined him carefully.

Barnaby was wearing his usual blue jumper, jeans, and trainers. His hair was sticking up at the back, and he had a small packet of crisps in his hand.

I narrowed my eyes.

"Interesting."

"What?"

"Very interesting."

"You're looking at my shoes."

"Precisely."

"Why?"

"Because, Barnaby, your shoes tell me everything."

He looked down.

There was mud on his left trainer.

I began pacing.

"You arrived at my house approximately seven minutes ago."

"Eight."

"Seven and a half. Your left shoe is muddy, but your right shoe is almost completely clean. This suggests you have recently travelled through difficult terrain."

"I walked here."

"Of course you did. That's what you want me to think."

"That's literally what I did."

I held up a hand.

"Please. I'm working."

Barnaby ate a crisp.

"The mud is concentrated around the toe," I continued. "This indicates you were running. Possibly being chased. Your shoelace is loose, suggesting you had no time to stop and tie it."

"My shoelace is always loose."

"And your hair is untidy."

"My hair is always untidy."

I stopped pacing.

Everything was falling into place.

"Barnaby," I said gravely, "I know where you've been."

"Do you?"

"You have escaped from a secret underground prison."

He stared at me.

"A what?"

"A gulag."

"A gulag?"

"Somewhere in northern Russia, most likely. You were held captive by an international criminal organisation, but managed to escape through a drainage tunnel. You ran across muddy fields, stole a fishing boat, crossed the North Sea, and arrived in Yorkshire this afternoon."

Barnaby slowly lowered his crisps.

"Maggie."

"Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me."

"I stepped in a puddle."

I smiled knowingly.

"Of course you did."

"Outside your house. Next to the gate."

"Naturally."

"Your dad was washing his car."

"An excellent cover story."

He looked at me for several seconds.

Then he put another crisp in his mouth.

"You're going to be terrible at this."

I wrote something in my notebook.

"What are you writing?"

"Subject refuses to discuss traumatic imprisonment."

"Maggie!"

"Don't worry, Watson. Healing takes time."

He dropped onto my bed and stared at the ceiling.

I considered my first demonstration a complete success.

Unfortunately, there was one small problem with my new business.

I had no clients.

I had spent most of the previous Sunday making business cards out of Mum's good printer paper. They said:

MAGGIE PENDELTON

Consulting Detective

Private Investigations, Missing Persons, Suspicious Circumstances

Available After School and Most Weekends

I'd left one at the bakery, three at the village shop, and seventeen through people's letterboxes.

Mrs Barker had rung Mum to ask why a thirteen-year-old girl was offering to investigate suspicious circumstances.

Mum had told her it was a hobby.

A hobby!

As though Sherlock Holmes had spent his weekends collecting stamps.

I was about to explain this injustice to Barnaby when a terrible scream came from next door.

"AAAAAAAH!"

Barnaby sat up.

"What was that?"

I froze.

The scream had come from Mrs Higgins's garden.

Mrs Higgins was seventy-something, lived next door, and possessed the sort of personality that made grown men apologise for things they hadn't done.

Last Christmas, she'd shouted at the postman for leaving footprints in the snow on her front path.

She was also the owner of Sir Cheddar.

Sir Cheddar was a cat, although this was a matter of some debate.

He had no fur, enormous ears, wrinkled pink skin, and one eye that seemed permanently disappointed in the other. He looked like a potato that had been left in a warm cupboard for too long.

According to rumours at the school, he had won Ugliest Pet in North Yorkshire three years running.

Mrs Higgins supposedly kept the certificates framed above her fireplace.

"Something terrible has happened," I whispered.

Barnaby went to the window.

"Maybe she's fallen over."

"Or perhaps," I said, "we have our first murder."

"Please don't say that."

I grabbed my notebook.

Another shout came from outside.

"CHEDDAR! CHEDDAR, WHERE ARE YOU?"

I gasped.

"A disappearance!"

"It's her cat."

"A mysterious disappearance!"

"He's probably hiding somewhere."

"Watson, fetch my hat."

"You don't have a hat."

I looked around desperately, spotted a dark woolly hat on my chair, and put it on.

It had a fluffy bobble on top.

"Perfect."

I swept towards the bedroom door.

Unfortunately, my trench coat caught on the handle.

I continued walking.

The coat did not.

There was a loud ripping noise.

Barnaby closed his eyes.

"You're going to die before you solve anything."

"Occupational hazard."

I freed myself and thundered downstairs, with Barnaby following at a considerably more sensible speed.

Mum was in the kitchen, sorting washing into two baskets.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Official police business!"

"You're not the police."

"Private police business!"

"That's not a thing, love."

I ignored her.

Dad came through the back door carrying an armful of towels.

"What's all the shouting?"

"Mrs Higgins has lost Sir Cheddar," Mum said.

"Oh, has she? Poor thing."

"She'll find him," Mum replied. "He's always wandering into places he shouldn't."

Dad put the towels down beside the utility room door.

"Well, I'd better get this lot dried."

I was already halfway outside.

Somewhere behind me, Mum called, "Maggie, don't go upsetting Mrs Higgins!"

Honestly. Parents never understand the demands of serious detective work.

Mrs Higgins was standing in her garden wearing a purple cardigan and an expression that could have curdled milk.

"He's gone!" she cried.

I approached carefully.

"Remain calm, madam. Help has arrived."

She looked me up and down.

"Margaret Pendelton, why are you dressed like a badly wrapped parcel?"

"I'm a consulting detective."

"You're a nuisance."

"Often misunderstood, yes."

Barnaby arrived beside me, slightly out of breath.

"Hello, Mrs Higgins."

"Hello, Barnaby. At least one of you looks normal."

I opened my notebook.

"Now then. When did you last see the victim?"

"Victim?"

"The missing individual."

"My cat?"

"Precisely."

Mrs Higgins pressed a hand to her chest.

"About an hour ago. He was sitting on the garden wall, enjoying the sunshine. I went inside to make myself a cup of tea, and when I came back, he'd vanished."

I nodded slowly.

Classic.

Absolutely classic.

"Was there any sign of a struggle?"

"What?"

"Broken furniture? Disturbed earth? Mysterious footprints?"

"He was sitting on a wall."

"Interesting."

I wrote WALL in my notebook and underlined it twice.

Barnaby leaned towards me.

"Why have you written wall?"

"Because the wall is significant."

"How?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Mrs Higgins folded her arms.

"Look, Margaret, I don't have time for your games. My Cheddar is out there somewhere, probably frightened and hungry."

I glanced at the garden.

There were flowerbeds, a birdbath, a small shed, and a narrow gap in the hedge separating her garden from ours.

A few muddy paw prints crossed the paving stones towards the hedge.

Barnaby pointed.

"Look, Maggie. Those could be -"

"Not now, Watson."

"But -"

"I'm gathering evidence."

Mrs Higgins sighed.

"I've already told Inspector Miller. He said he'd keep an eye out."

My blood ran cold.

"Inspector Miller?"

"Yes."

"He's involved?"

"He's the village policeman."

I narrowed my eyes.

Of course he was involved.

Inspector Miller had been my professional rival ever since last Thursday, when I'd informed him that the suspicious white powder outside the bakery was probably evidence of a major drugs operation.

He'd said it was flour.

Then he'd bought a sausage roll.

The man had no imagination.

"Mrs Higgins," I said, "I assure you that Pendelton Private Investigations will handle this matter with the utmost professionalism."

Barnaby made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a cough.

Mrs Higgins looked unconvinced.

Then she straightened.

"Well, I'm offering fifty pounds to whoever finds him."

Everything went silent.

Even the birds seemed to stop singing.

"Fifty," I repeated.

"Pounds," said Mrs Higgins.

I stared at her.

Fifty pounds.

An enormous sum of money.

With fifty pounds, I could purchase professional equipment. A proper magnifying glass. A fingerprint kit. Possibly one of those tiny microphones that spies hide in people's collars.

I could have an office.

Well, a desk.

Well, the corner of my bedroom where the laundry basket currently lived.

But it would be a beginning.

"Consider the case accepted," I said.

Mrs Higgins looked at Barnaby.

"Does she always talk like this?"

"Pretty much."

I snapped my notebook shut.

"Watson! We have work to do."

"Please stop calling me Watson."

"There's no time for personal preferences. A life hangs in the balance."

"He's probably asleep in someone's shed."

I gave him a disappointed look.

"That's exactly the sort of narrow thinking that allows international crime syndicates to flourish."

Mrs Higgins blinked.

"International what?"

"Nothing to worry about, madam. We'll have Sir Cheddar home before you can say 'criminal conspiracy'."

"I'd rather you just found him."

"Naturally."

I turned dramatically, allowing my trench coat to billow behind me.

Unfortunately, there wasn't any wind.

So it just hung there.

I tried turning again, faster.

One of the sleeves slapped Barnaby in the face.

"Ow!"

"Sorry, Watson."

"Maggie!"

We marched back towards my house.

Well, I marched.

Barnaby followed, complaining.

"You're not actually going to investigate a missing cat, are you?"

"Of course I am."

"He's probably wandered off."

"Or been kidnapped."

"He's a cat."

"An award-winning cat."

"An award-winning ugly cat."

"Exactly. A valuable target."

Barnaby stopped walking.

"Valuable to who?"

I smiled.

"That, my dear Watson, is what we're going to find out."

Back in my bedroom, I opened the notebook to a fresh page.

At the top, in enormous letters, I wrote:

CASE NUMBER ONE: THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF SIR CHEDDAR

Underneath, I added:

Potential suspects: Everyone.

Then:

Possible motives: Unknown.

And finally:

Reward: £50.

Barnaby looked over my shoulder.

"You've spelt disappearance wrong."

"That's irrelevant. Spelling is not a detective skill."

"Neither is falling over your own coat."

I ignored him and drew a thick line beneath the case title.

"Tomorrow morning," I announced, "we shall examine the scene of the crime."

"Why tomorrow?"

"Because all great investigations require careful preparation."

"And?"

"And Mum's making shepherd's pie tonight."

Barnaby considered this.

"Fair enough."

I closed the notebook and gazed thoughtfully out of my bedroom window.

Somewhere in Little Oakhaven, a criminal mastermind was going about their business, completely unaware that Britain's greatest detective was now on the case.

They had made one terrible mistake.

They had underestimated Maggie Pendelton.

I smiled.

This was going to be easy.

And if I happened to earn fifty pounds while bringing a dangerous criminal to justice, well, that was simply the price of genius.

Behind me, Barnaby sighed.

I made a mental note to have him examined by a doctor.

That much sighing couldn't possibly be healthy.

The Scene of the Crime

There are three things every great detective needs.

A sharp mind.

A keen eye.

And a magnifying glass large enough to frighten small children.

I had two of these things.

Fortunately, the sharp mind and keen eye were birth gifts. so I decided to concentrate on the magnifying glass.

It was enormous.

I'd discovered it in Dad's shed, underneath a broken flowerpot and a box labelled CHRISTMAS LIGHTS - DO NOT USE. It had a wooden handle, a thick glass lens, and weighed approximately as much as a small dog.

Dad said it had belonged to Grandad, who'd used it for reading the newspaper.

I suspected Grandad had secretly worked for MI6.

There was no evidence of this, obviously, but that's what made it such a good secret.

By half past nine on Wednesday morning, I was standing in front of my bedroom mirror, preparing for the most important investigation of my career.

My trench coat had been repaired with brown packing tape. The tear from yesterday's unfortunate incident with the door handle was now barely noticeable, provided nobody looked at my left side.

I had also acquired a proper detective hat.

Well, it was Dad's gardening hat.

But if you turned it backwards and squashed the top down, it looked vaguely like something Sherlock Holmes might have worn after a particularly difficult night.

Barnaby arrived at quarter to ten.

He took one look at me and stopped in the doorway.

"No."

"Good morning, Watson."

"No."

"Ready for our first official investigation?"

"Why are you wearing your dad's gardening hat?"

"Disguise."

"From who?"

"The criminal underworld."

"The criminal underworld already knows what you look like, Maggie. You've put your photograph on all your business cards."

I considered this.

"An excellent point. I'll have to change my appearance for future operations."

"Please don't."

He was carrying a small rucksack.

"What's in the bag?" I asked.

"Water. Sandwiches. A packet of biscuits."

"Excellent. Emergency supplies."

"It's because you said we'd be investigating all morning, and last time you said that, we spent four hours looking for your missing bicycle."

"We found it."

"It was in your garage."

"Precisely. Hidden in plain sight."

"You put it there."

"That's what made it such a clever hiding place."

Barnaby sighed and followed me downstairs.

Mum was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea.

"Morning, detectives," she said.

"Good morning, civilian."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry?"

"Just maintaining professional boundaries, Mum."

"Right. Well, your breakfast is on the side."

I glanced at the toast.

"Unfortunately, I have no time. Crime waits for no woman."

"Neither does your stomach. Eat."

I ate.

Great detectives must occasionally make sacrifices.

Dad was standing beside the utility room, examining the tumble dryer.

"Something wrong?" Mum asked.

"Making a funny noise."

"What sort of noise?"

"Sort of a humming sound."

"Isn't that what tumble dryers do?"

"Not usually when they're switched off."

I was about to offer my professional assistance when Barnaby appeared with a piece of toast in his mouth.

"Ready?"

"Absolutely."

I grabbed my magnifying glass.

As we left, Dad called after us.

"Try not to break anything!"

I found this deeply insulting.

I had never broken anything important during an investigation.

Admittedly, I'd never conducted an investigation before, but that was hardly the point.

Mrs Higgins was waiting at her front door when we arrived.

She was wearing a green cardigan today and holding a photograph of Sir Cheddar.

"Good morning, Mrs Higgins," I announced. "Pendelton Private Investigations reporting for duty."

She looked at my magnifying glass.

"Good heavens. What are you planning to do with that?"

"Examine the evidence."

"You could examine the moon with that thing."

"One must be thorough."

Mrs Higgins handed me the photograph.

It showed Sir Cheddar sitting on a velvet cushion, looking as though he'd just been informed that Christmas had been cancelled.

"That's my darling boy," she said sadly.

Barnaby studied the picture.

"He's got a lovely collar."

"Handmade," Mrs Higgins said proudly. "Blue velvet, with a little silver bell. I bought it for his birthday."

I examined the photograph carefully.

"Interesting."

"What is?" Barnaby asked.

"The suspect has clearly been photographed against a neutral background."

"That's her sofa."

"Exactly. An attempt to conceal his true location."

Mrs Higgins stared at me.

"Margaret, that's a photograph I took last Sunday."

I nodded.

"Very clever."

She looked at Barnaby.

"Is she feeling all right?"

"Hard to say."

I tucked the photograph into my notebook.

"Now, Mrs Higgins, I must ask you to remain outside the crime scene while we conduct our forensic examination."

"It's my garden."

"Naturally."

"And I need to water my roses."

"Evidence must take priority over agriculture."

She folded her arms.

"Margaret Pendelton, if you trample my roses, you'll be the next thing that goes missing."

I decided we could work around the roses.

The garden was approximately fifteen metres long and contained four flowerbeds, a small vegetable patch, a birdbath, and a wooden shed.

A stone path ran from the back door to the lawn.

Along the left-hand side was the hedge separating Mrs Higgins's garden from ours.

I took out my notebook.

"Time of arrival: ten oh three."

"It's ten twelve," Barnaby said.

"Time is relative."

"No, it's ten twelve."

"Weather conditions: suspiciously pleasant."

"It's sunny."

"Exactly."

I crouched beside the stone path and raised my magnifying glass.

The world became enormous.

A tiny ant looked like a monster from a science fiction film.

I gasped.

"Watson! Come quickly!"

Barnaby hurried over.

"What?"

"Look at this!"

He bent down.

"An ant."

"An unusually large ant."

"It's normal-sized."

"How can you be certain?"

"Because you're looking at it through a magnifying glass."

I lowered the lens.

The ant became small again.

"Interesting," I murmured.

I wrote POSSIBLE INSECT INVOLVEMENT in my notebook.

Barnaby watched me.

"You're not seriously writing that down."

"Every detail matters."

"Then perhaps you should look at those."

He pointed towards the paving stones.

There, clearly visible in a little patch of soft soil, were several small paw prints.

They crossed the path and continued towards the hedge.

"Cat footprints," Barnaby said.

I examined them.

"Possibly."

"They're exactly the size of cat footprints."

"Which is precisely what someone would want us to think."

Barnaby blinked.

"What?"

"Imagine you're a criminal mastermind. You've just kidnapped an extremely valuable cat. What's the first thing you do?"

"Run away?"

"No. You create a false trail."

"With cat footprints?"

"Exactly."

"How?"

I thought about this.

"Special shoes."

"Special shoes?"

"Tiny shoes shaped like cat paws."

Barnaby stared at me.

"For who?"

"The kidnappers."

"So you're suggesting that someone kidnapped Sir Cheddar, then walked around Mrs Higgins's garden wearing tiny cat shoes?"

"You're beginning to understand detective work."

He rubbed his forehead.

The paw prints continued straight towards the gap in the hedge.

Barnaby pointed again.

"Look. They go into your garden."

I stood up.

"Too obvious."

"But -"

"A classic diversionary tactic."

"Maggie, your house is literally next door."

"Exactly. Nobody would expect a criminal to hide evidence so close to the scene. And in the local detective’s garden nonetheless!"

"So shouldn't we check?"

I considered this.

Then I shook my head.

"No. We mustn't fall into their trap."

"What trap?"

"The trap of following obvious clues."

Barnaby looked at me for a very long time.

Then he sat down on the garden bench.

"I'm going to eat a biscuit."

"Excellent idea. Maintain your strength."

I continued my investigation.

For the next twenty minutes, I examined every corner of Mrs Higgins's garden.

I discovered a rusty bottle cap, three dead leaves, a small stone shaped vaguely like Wales, and something brown that I initially believed to be a rare tropical fungus.

Barnaby informed me that it was cat poo.

I made him remove it from the evidence collection.

At approximately half past ten, I found something extraordinary.

It was lying beneath the birdbath.

Small.

White.

And unmistakably suspicious.

I bent down.

"Watson."

Barnaby was halfway through his second biscuit.

"What?"

"Watson."

"What?"

"Come here."

He sighed and joined me.

I pointed dramatically.

"Behold."

He looked.

"A feather."

"Not just any feather."

"A white feather."

"Precisely."

I carefully picked it up between two fingers.

It was about six centimetres long, slightly bent, and had a little bit of dirt on one end.

Barnaby examined it.

"Probably from a pigeon."

I froze.

"A pigeon?"

"Yes."

I stared at the feather.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

The disappearance.

The lack of witnesses.

The suspiciously peaceful garden.

The complete absence of struggle.

Of course.

"Barnaby," I whispered, "we're dealing with professionals."

"What?"

"An organised criminal network."

He closed his eyes.

"Oh, here we go."

I held the feather up to the sunlight.

"Think about it. Sir Cheddar disappears in broad daylight. Nobody sees anything. Nobody hears anything. Not even Mrs Higgins, who once heard me opening a packet of crisps through two closed windows."

"She does have good hearing."

"Exactly. Therefore, the kidnapping must have been carried out silently."

"Or the cat just walked away."

"Silently," I repeated, "and from above."

Barnaby slowly opened his eyes.

"From above?"

I nodded.

"Attack pigeons."

There was a pause.

"A what?"

"Attack pigeons."

"You're joking."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

He examined my oversized trench coat, gardening hat, and enormous magnifying glass. Obviously admiring his boss.

"That's a difficult question."

I began pacing.

"Imagine it. A squadron of highly trained pigeons swoops down from the sky. They surround Sir Cheddar, confuse him with their wings, and carry him away before anyone can react."

Barnaby stared.

"Pigeons can't carry cats."

"Ordinary pigeons can't."

"No pigeons can."

"Elite pigeons, Watson."

"That's not a thing."

"Military-grade birds."

"Still not a thing."

"Specially trained by an international criminal organisation."

Barnaby looked towards Mrs Higgins's kitchen window.

"Please don't tell her that."

"Why not?"

"Because she's already worried about her cat, and telling her he was kidnapped by military pigeons probably won't help."

I considered this.

He had a point.

Some information was too sensitive for civilians.

"Very well," I said. "We'll keep this between ourselves."

I slipped the feather into an empty sandwich bag.

Barnaby looked at it.

"That's my sandwich bag."

"Evidence preservation."

"My cheese sandwich was in there."

"An unfortunate sacrifice."

"Where's my sandwich?"

I looked at the garden bench.

The sandwich was sitting on the wood, completely unprotected.

A small fly had landed on it.

Barnaby stared at me.

"You took my sandwich out?"

"National security, Watson."

He picked up the sandwich and brushed the fly away.

"I'm going home."

"No, you're not."

"Why?"

"Because I know who's behind this."

He stopped.

"You do?"

I nodded slowly.

"There's only one man in Little Oakhaven with the means, the opportunity, and the specialised knowledge required to organise an aerial kidnapping."

Barnaby frowned.

"Who?"

I leaned closer.

"The vicar."

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then Barnaby laughed.

Not a polite laugh.

Not even a small laugh.

He laughed so hard that he nearly dropped his sandwich.

I folded my arms.

"I fail to see what's amusing."

"The vicar?"

"Yes."

"Vicar Thomas?"

"Correct."

"The man who gives out free biscuits after Sunday service?"

"A clever disguise."

"The man who cried when someone stole the church's hanging baskets?"

"An emotional performance."

"The man who once apologised to a wasp for accidentally shutting it in a window?"

"An extremely clever disguise."

Barnaby wiped his eyes.

"Maggie, he's about as dangerous as a wet sponge."

I raised one finger.

"That's what he wants you to think."

Vicar Thomas was a tall, cheerful man with round glasses and a permanent collection of crumbs on his jumper. He lived in the vicarage behind St Mary's Church and was famous for two things.

His terrible jokes.

And his pigeons.

He kept a flock of homing pigeons in a large wooden loft behind the churchyard.

Every Saturday morning, he let them out to fly around the village.

Sometimes they returned immediately.

Sometimes they took hours.

Once, one of them had flown all the way to Scarborough and refused to come home until someone collected it.

A perfect criminal organisation.

Highly mobile.

Difficult to track.

And capable of travelling considerable distances without purchasing a train ticket.

I opened my notebook.

PRIME SUSPECT #1: VICAR THOMAS

Underneath, I wrote:

Occupation: Vicar.

Known associates: Approximately 30 pigeons.

Possible motive: Cat trafficking.

Threat level: Extremely dangerous.

Barnaby leaned over.

"You've written that he's extremely dangerous."

"Yes."

"He wears slippers to the village shop."

"Exactly. Nobody suspects a man in slippers."

"Because he's harmless."

"Or because he's brilliant."

I snapped the notebook shut.

"We need to investigate him."

Barnaby looked worried.

"How?"

"Undercover."

"No."

"We infiltrate his organisation."

"No."

"We gain his trust."

"No."

"And then, when he least expects it, we expose his entire criminal empire."

"Maggie, he's a vicar!"

I smiled.

"That's what makes him so dangerous."

At that moment, Mrs Higgins appeared at her back door.

"Well?" she demanded. "Have you found anything?"

I turned towards her.

"Mrs Higgins, I can confirm that your cat's disappearance is considerably more complicated than it first appeared."

Her face fell.

"Oh, dear."

"However, we have identified a promising line of inquiry."

"Have you found Cheddar?"

"Not yet."

"Have you found where he went?"

"Not exactly."

"Have you found anything useful?"

I held up the sandwich bag.

"A feather."

She looked at it.

"That's from the pigeons. They come into my garden all the time."

I nodded.

"Precisely."

"They make an awful mess on the birdbath."

"Naturally."

"Vicar Thomas really should keep them under control."

I gasped.

"Then you admit he's involved!"

Mrs Higgins blinked.

"In what?"

"The incident."

"What incident?"

"The disappearance!"

She stared at me.

Then she looked at Barnaby.

"Is she always this exhausting?"

"Usually worse after lunch."

Mrs Higgins rubbed her temples.

"Look, Margaret, I appreciate you trying to help, but perhaps you should leave this to Inspector Miller."

I stiffened.

"Inspector Miller?"

"Yes. He's an actual policeman."

I took a deep breath.

"Mrs Higgins, with all due respect, Inspector Miller is a conventional thinker. He sees a missing cat and assumes it's wandered off. I see a missing cat and recognise the possibility of a sophisticated international conspiracy."

"Well, I'd rather you recognised my cat."

"All in good time."

She closed the door.

Rather firmly.

Barnaby looked at me.

"I think she's had enough."

"Understandable. The truth can be frightening."

"The truth is that her cat's missing."

"And we shall find him."

I marched towards the garden gate.

My coat caught on the rosebush.

I pulled.

The rosebush pulled back.

For several seconds, we engaged in a fierce struggle.

Barnaby eventually freed me.

"You're not very good at being dramatic," he observed.

"That's because the world keeps getting in my way."

We walked towards the village centre, passing the bakery, the postbox, and Mr Fletcher's house.

Mr Fletcher was standing outside washing his car.

He waved.

"Morning, Maggie! Solved any murders yet?"

"Not at liberty to discuss ongoing investigations!"

He chuckled.

"Right you are, love."

Barnaby waited until we were out of earshot.

"You know he was joking?"

"Naturally."

"Because there haven't been any murders."

"That we know of."

He sighed.

I stopped beside the village noticeboard.

There, between an advertisement for piano lessons and a warning about dog fouling, was a bright yellow poster.

ST MARY'S CHURCH BAKE SALE

WEDNESDAY, 2 PM

Homemade Cakes, Tea, Raffle, and Vegetable Competition

All Welcome!

I stared at it.

Then I smiled.

Barnaby noticed immediately.

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

"No, Maggie."

"The perfect opportunity."

"Please don't."

"An undercover operation in enemy territory."

"It's a bake sale."

"Exactly. The vicar will be distracted by cakes and elderly people."

"That's his normal Wednesday afternoon."

"We'll blend in."

Barnaby looked down at my enormous trench coat.

"How?"

I considered this.

We would need disguises.

Something convincing.

Something nobody would question.

Then I remembered the church choir.

Vicar Thomas had been trying to recruit new members for months. He'd even put up a poster saying ALL VOICES WELCOME, which seemed rather optimistic considering some of the voices I'd heard during school assembly.

I grinned.

"Watson, how do you feel about singing?"

Barnaby stopped walking.

"No."

"Excellent."

"No."

"We're joining the choir."

"No, we're not."

"Temporarily."

"Maggie!"

"Undercover, obviously."

He stared at me.

Then he looked up at the sky.

"Why me?"

I patted him on the shoulder.

"Because every great detective needs a loyal assistant."

"I'd rather be a dentist's assistant."

"Too late. You're already employed."

"You don't pay me!"

"Not yet. We're a start-up."

I continued towards home, already planning our afternoon operation.

We would need disguises, equipment, and possibly a secret communication system.

I had two walkie-talkies somewhere in my wardrobe.

One worked perfectly.

The other made a strange crackling noise and occasionally picked up conversations from the local taxi company.

Ideal.

Behind me, Barnaby was still complaining.

I barely heard him.

Because I, Maggie Pendelton, had just uncovered the first major clue in what was rapidly becoming the most

extraordinary criminal investigation Little Oakhaven had ever seen.

The vicar thought he could hide behind his cakes, his church, and his suspicious collection of flying accomplices.

But he had underestimated one very important thing.

Me.

I was going to expose him.

I was going to rescue Sir Cheddar.

And I was going to earn fifty pounds.

Preferably before teatime.

After all, Mum was making chicken pie, and even Britain's greatest detective couldn't be expected to miss that.

Undercover at the Vicarage

There are two important rules when going undercover.

The first is that nobody must recognise you.

The second is that you must behave exactly like the sort of person you're pretending to be.

Unfortunately, Barnaby was making both of these things extremely difficult.

"I'm not wearing that."

"Keep your voice down, Watson."

"I'm not wearing a bedsheet to church."

"It's not a bedsheet. It's a ceremonial robe."

"It's got dinosaurs on it."

I looked down at the material in my hands.

He had a point.

The dinosaurs were rather noticeable.

In my defence, I'd been working with limited resources. Mum kept all the proper white bedsheets in the airing cupboard, and the only one I could find in my bedroom was from when I was six.

It had green dinosaurs all over it, along with the words ROAR MEANS I LOVE YOU.

I considered this a perfectly reasonable disguise for a choirboy.

Barnaby disagreed.

"Nobody in the church choir wears dinosaur bedsheets," he said.

"That's because they lack imagination."

"That's because they're not in kindergarten."

I sighed.

Sometimes it was exhausting working with amateurs.

We were in my bedroom, preparing for Operation Holy Pigeon, which I'd named myself.

The operation had three objectives.

First, infiltrate St Mary's Church bake sale.

Second, gather evidence connecting Vicar Thomas to the disappearance of Sir Cheddar.

Third, locate the secret pigeon headquarters and expose the entire criminal organisation.

Barnaby had suggested a fourth objective, which was to eat cake and go home. Possibly replacing the first three objectives.

I had rejected this as insufficiently ambitious.

"Fine," I said, throwing the dinosaur sheet onto my bed. "We'll use Plan B."

"What's Plan B?"

"Normal clothes."

Barnaby looked relieved.

"Finally."

"With disguises."

His expression changed.

"What sort of disguises?"

I opened my wardrobe and produced two black school ties, a pair of sunglasses, and a woolly scarf.

Barnaby stared at them.

"How is any of that a disguise?"

"We'll wear our shirts buttoned up to the top, tuck them into our trousers, and speak in very polite voices."

"We already speak in polite voices."

"You called me an idiot yesterday."

"You tried to arrest a garden gnome."

"It was behaving suspiciously."

"It was a garden gnome."

"Exactly. It hadn't moved in six years. Nobody stays that still without a reason."

Barnaby sat on my bed.

"I'm beginning to think I should tell your mum about all this."

"Absolutely not. Our operation is classified."

"Your mum knows we're going to the bake sale."

"She doesn't know why."

"She thinks we're going for cake."

"Which is precisely why our cover is so convincing."

I pulled on a white shirt and black trousers, then put on my trench coat.

Barnaby looked at me.

"You're wearing the coat?"

"Obviously."

"But you're supposed to be undercover."

"Every detective has a signature look."

"Then everyone will recognise you."

"Not if I wear sunglasses."

I put them on.

The room became considerably darker.

Barnaby examined me for several seconds.

"You look like a funeral director who's lost his way to the beach."

"Excellent. Mysterious."

"No. Confused."

I ignored him and began assembling our equipment.

One walkie-talkie.

One roll of sticky tape.

A small torch.

My notebook.

The giant magnifying glass.

And a packet of chocolate digestives.

Barnaby pointed at the biscuits.

"What's that for?"

"Emergency rations."

"There's going to be a bake sale."

"Never rely on enemy supplies."

He shook his head.

At twenty minutes to two, we left the house.

Mum was standing in the kitchen when we came downstairs.

She looked at us.

Then she looked again.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

"Choir practice," I said immediately.

Mum frowned.

"You've never shown the slightest interest in singing."

"People change, Mum."

"You told me last Christmas that singing carols was a violation of your human rights."

"I've matured."

She glanced at Barnaby.

"Has she?"

"No," he said.

I elbowed him.

Mum smiled.

"Well, have a nice time. And Maggie?"

"Yes?"

"Please don't cause any trouble."

I gave her my most reassuring smile.

"Mother, I am a professional."

She looked at the packing tape holding my coat together.

"That's what worries me."

St Mary's Church stood at the far end of the village, beside a small graveyard and a row of ancient oak trees.

It was a lovely old building with a square stone tower, stained-glass windows, and a roof that leaked whenever it rained for more than ten minutes.

The vicarage sat next door, surrounded by flowerbeds and a vegetable garden.

Behind it stood the pigeon loft.

I could see several birds sitting on the roof.

Watching.

Waiting.

Possibly communicating with their international headquarters.

"Look at them," I whispered.

Barnaby followed my gaze.

"Pigeons."

"Highly trained operatives."

"Birds, Maggie."

"That's what makes them so dangerous. Nobody suspects a bird."

"People suspect seagulls all the time."

I considered this.

"An excellent point. We should investigate seagulls next."

"Please don't."

The church hall was already busy when we arrived.

Several folding tables had been arranged along the walls, covered with cakes, biscuits, scones, and jars of homemade jam.

A large banner read:

ST MARY'S ANNUAL SUMMER BAKE SALE AND VEGETABLE COMPETITION

At the far end of the room stood a display table containing several enormous vegetables.

There were pumpkins, carrots, cabbages, and one absolutely gigantic marrow.

It was green, shiny, and roughly the size of a small canoe.

A handwritten card beside it said:

FIRST PRIZE: VICAR THOMAS

MARROW, 20 LB

I examined it through my sunglasses.

"Interesting."

Barnaby followed my gaze.

"What is?"

"That vegetable."

"It's a marrow."

"An unusually large marrow."

"It's a vegetable competition."

"Exactly. A perfect place to hide something."

Barnaby closed his eyes.

"Please don't accuse the marrow of anything."

Before I could reply, Vicar Thomas appeared.

He was wearing a blue jumper with a small hole near the elbow and carrying a tray of fairy cakes.

"Well, hello there!" he said cheerfully. "Maggie! Barnaby! How lovely to see you!"

I froze.

Our cover had been blown.

Immediately.

Barnaby looked at me.

I looked at Barnaby.

Then I turned back to the vicar.

"Good afternoon, fellow church person."

Vicar Thomas blinked.

"Sorry?"

"Lovely weather for religious activities."

Barnaby made a strange choking noise.

The vicar smiled uncertainly.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

I nodded.

"We are here to join your choir."

"Oh, wonderful!"

He looked delighted.

"That's excellent news! We've been desperate for younger voices. Most of our choir are over seventy, and Mrs Pritchard keeps falling asleep during the second verse."

"Tragic," I said.

"Not really. She usually wakes up for the collection."

Barnaby smiled.

I remained serious.

"Before we begin our musical duties, might we inspect your premises?"

The vicar frowned.

"My premises?"

"The church. The hall. Your office. Any underground tunnels."

"Underground tunnels?"

"Standard choir procedure."

Barnaby stepped forward.

"What Maggie means is, we'd love to have a look around."

"Oh, of course! Help yourselves. Although do be careful near the vegetable display. That marrow took me four months to grow."

I glanced at the enormous vegetable.

"Four months?"

"Indeed."

"Interesting."

He smiled proudly.

"Twenty pounds exactly. My finest yet."

I made a note.

Suspect possesses unusually large vegetable. Possible storage container.

Vicar Thomas looked at my notebook.

"Are you taking notes for choir practice?"

"Naturally."

"Very dedicated!"

He wandered away to greet Mrs Fletcher, who was carrying a Victoria sponge.

Barnaby leaned towards me.

"He recognised us immediately."

"Of course he did."

"So our disguises didn't work."

"Or perhaps," I whispered, "he's pretending to recognise us because he knows we're undercover."

Barnaby stared.

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Exactly. He's clever."

I began surveying the hall.

We needed access to the vicar's office.

According to my intelligence, which consisted mainly of remembering where I'd once been sent after accidentally knocking over a hymn stand, the office was through a small door behind the kitchen.

It was the perfect place to plant a listening device.

Unfortunately, there was one problem.

Mrs Pritchard was sitting directly beside the kitchen entrance.

She was eighty-four, wore enormous glasses, and had once caught me trying to sneak an extra biscuit after Sunday school.

I considered her an extremely dangerous opponent.

"We need a distraction," I whispered.

Barnaby was examining a plate of chocolate brownies.

"Why?"

"Mrs Pritchard is guarding the entrance."

"She's drinking tea."

"Exactly. Maintaining surveillance."

"Maggie, she's practically asleep."

"Never underestimate an elderly woman with a handbag."

Barnaby looked at her.

Mrs Pritchard was snoring softly.

"Right."

I thought quickly.

Then I smiled.

"Watson, go and ask her about the church choir."

"Why?"

"Because she'll be delighted to explain it to you."

"And?"

"While she's distracted, I'll slip into the office."

Barnaby considered this.

"Actually, that might work."

"Of course it will. I'm a genius."

He approached Mrs Pritchard.

"Excuse me?"

She woke with a start.

"WHAT?"

Barnaby jumped.

"Sorry! I was wondering about the choir."

Her face brightened.

"The choir?"

"Yes."

"Oh, you lovely boy! Come and sit down. Now, I've been singing in this church since 1958, and let me tell you, things were very different back then..."

Perfect.

I slipped past them and into the kitchen.

Nobody noticed.

Well, Mrs Fletcher noticed, but she was busy trying to cut a sponge cake into sixteen equal slices and merely asked me to fetch some napkins.

I nodded professionally.

Then I went through the door at the back.

The vicar's office was small and smelled of old books.

There was a desk, a filing cabinet, two chairs, and a bookshelf containing several thick religious volumes.

A framed photograph of the church choir hung above the desk.

I immediately began searching for evidence.

First, I examined the desk.

Pens.

Paperclips.

A calendar.

A half-eaten packet of custard creams.

Nothing suspicious.

Then I opened the top drawer.

More pens.

A stapler.

Several envelopes.

And a small tin labelled PIGEON FEED.

I gasped.

Evidence!

I opened the tin.

Inside were seeds.

Hundreds of them.

Possibly thousands.

A secret supply network.

I made a note.

Suspect maintains extensive food reserves for aerial operatives.

Then I remembered my equipment.

The listening device.

I'd planned to hide one walkie-talkie in the office and keep the other with me. That way, we could listen to any suspicious conversations the vicar might have.

Unfortunately, I'd left the second walkie-talkie at home.

A minor setback.

Still, I had one perfectly good device, and I was certain I'd work out how to use it later.

I looked around for a hiding place.

The desk was too obvious.

The bookshelf was too high.

Then I spotted it.

A knitted tea cosy sitting on a small side table.

It was shaped like a chicken.

Perfect.

I taped the walkie-talkie underneath it, making sure the microphone pointed towards the desk.

Then I switched it on.

A loud crackling noise filled the room.

"SHHH!" I hissed.

The walkie-talkie crackled again.

Then a man's voice said, "Number four, your taxi's outside the station."

I froze.

The taxi company.

Of course.

The criminal network was larger than I'd imagined.

I turned the volume down and hurried towards the door.

Unfortunately, the roll of sticky tape had fallen out of my pocket.

I bent to pick it up.

My trench coat swung forward.

One sleeve caught the handle of the filing cabinet.

I pulled.

The cabinet rattled.

I pulled harder.

Something crashed inside.

I froze.

Silence.

Then footsteps approached.

"Maggie?"

It was Barnaby.

He appeared in the doorway, looking worried.

"What are you doing?"

"Planting surveillance equipment."

"In the vicar's office?"

"Obviously."

"That's not allowed!"

"Neither is international cat trafficking."

"There's no international cat trafficking!"

I held up a finger.

"Not so loud."

He looked around.

"Did you find anything?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Seeds."

Barnaby stared.

"Seeds?"

"Thousands of them."

"He keeps pigeons!"

"Exactly."

Barnaby rubbed his forehead.

"We need to leave."

"Agreed. Our mission is complete."

I swept past him.

Or attempted to.

My coat caught on the door handle again.

I tugged.

Nothing.

I tugged harder.

The coat suddenly came free.

I stumbled backwards into Barnaby.

Barnaby stumbled into a stack of folding chairs.

The chairs fell over.

One struck a metal serving trolley.

The trolley rolled into the kitchen.

And from there, things became rather unfortunate.

The trolley struck Mrs Fletcher's table.

Mrs Fletcher screamed.

A tray of jam tarts flew into the air.

Someone shouted, "MY SPONGE!"

I stumbled through the kitchen doorway, trying desperately to regain my balance.

My coat wrapped itself around my legs.

I took three enormous steps.

Then fell straight into the vegetable display.

There was a terrible crash.

The table collapsed.

A pumpkin rolled across the floor.

Three cabbages bounced into the crowd.

And Vicar Thomas's magnificent twenty-pound marrow landed directly beneath me.

There was a wet, horrible noise.

SPLOOOOSH.

For a moment, nobody moved.

I lay on the floor, surrounded by broken vegetables.

Something cold and slimy had soaked through the front of my trench coat.

Barnaby stood in the doorway with both hands over his mouth.

Mrs Pritchard was staring at me.

Mrs Fletcher was holding an empty cake plate.

And Vicar Thomas had gone completely white.

I looked down.

The marrow was gone.

Well, not entirely gone.

It had become approximately forty separate pieces of marrow.

Most of them were attached to my coat.

One was halfway inside my shoe.

"Oh," I said.

Vicar Thomas made a small noise.

Then another.

Then he whispered, "My marrow."

I tried to stand.

My foot slipped in the vegetable remains.

I fell again.

SPLOOOSH.

Someone gasped.

Barnaby turned away.

His shoulders were shaking.

I suspected he was crying.

"Four months," Vicar Thomas whispered.

I finally managed to get onto my knees.

"Terribly sorry, Vicar. Occupational hazard."

He stared at me.

"Occupational?"

"Detective work."

The hall went silent.

Barnaby stopped shaking.

Mrs Pritchard leaned forward.

"Detective work?"

I realised my mistake.

Our cover had been compromised.

I stood as straight as possible, despite the marrow dripping from my sleeves.

"Yes," I announced. "I am conducting an official investigation into the disappearance of Sir Cheddar."

Vicar Thomas blinked.

"Mrs Higgins's cat?"

"Precisely."

"And you thought he was in my marrow?"

I hesitated.

"Not exactly."

He looked down at the remains of his prize-winning vegetable.

"Well, he's certainly not in it now."

A few people laughed.

I did not.

This was a serious investigation.

"Vicar Thomas," I said, "I must ask you some questions."

He looked exhausted.

"Must you?"

"Where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"Here."

"Doing what?"

"Preparing for the bake sale."

"Can anyone confirm that?"

He gestured around the hall.

"About twenty people."

I frowned.

A remarkably thorough alibi.

"And your pigeons?"

"What about them?"

"Where were they yesterday afternoon?"

He blinked.

"In their loft, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Well, I let them out for a little exercise."

I gasped.

"At what time?"

"About three o'clock."

Three o'clock.

The approximate time Sir Cheddar had disappeared.

Everything was falling into place.

"Interesting," I whispered.

Barnaby stepped forward.

"Maggie, please."

I ignored him.

"Vicar Thomas, did your pigeons return carrying anything unusual?"

The vicar stared at me.

"Carrying?"

"Yes."

"Such as?"

"A cat."

Silence.

Then someone at the back of the hall began laughing.

Vicar Thomas blinked several times.

"A cat?"

"A hairless one."

He looked at Barnaby.

Barnaby looked at the floor.

"Margaret," the vicar said slowly, "are you suggesting my pigeons stole Mrs Higgins's cat?"

I folded my arms.

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm merely asking questions."

"But that's exactly what you're suggesting."

"A detective never reveals her theories prematurely."

He removed his glasses.

Cleaned them.

Put them back on.

Then said, very gently, "Maggie, my pigeons can barely carry themselves home when it's windy. They certainly can't carry a cat."

I considered this.

"Perhaps they worked together."

Barnaby made a strangled noise.

Vicar Thomas closed his eyes.

For several seconds, he said nothing.

Then he opened them again.

"Right. I think perhaps you've had enough excitement for one afternoon."

I glanced around.

The bake sale was in ruins.

There were jam tarts on the floor.

A cabbage had rolled beneath the piano.

Mrs Fletcher was trying to rescue her sponge.

And the vicar's marrow was now a large green puddle surrounding my shoes.

I nodded.

"Agreed. We shall withdraw and reassess."

Barnaby grabbed my arm.

"Come on."

We hurried towards the exit.

Unfortunately, Mrs Pritchard was blocking the door.

She looked at me sternly.

"Young lady."

I stopped.

"Yes?"

"You're not leaving without helping clean up this mess."

I glanced at Barnaby.

He nodded.

"She's right."

I sighed.

Great detectives must occasionally perform unpleasant duties.

For the next forty minutes, we picked up broken vegetables, wiped tables, rescued cakes, and swept the floor.

Mrs Fletcher made me apologise to everyone whose food I'd knocked over.

Vicar Thomas made me apologise to the marrow.

I thought this was excessive, considering the marrow was no longer in a condition to appreciate it.

Eventually, the hall was reasonably tidy again.

Vicar Thomas stood beside the remains of his vegetable display.

"Well," he said, "at least nobody was hurt."

"Except the marrow," Barnaby muttered.

I elbowed him.

The vicar looked at me.

"Maggie, I know you're trying to help Mrs Higgins, and that's very kind of you. But perhaps next time, you could try asking people questions without destroying their vegetables?"

I considered this.

"A reasonable suggestion."

"And please stay out of my office."

I froze.

"Your office?"

"Yes. Mrs Fletcher saw you going in."

Ah.

So he'd known.

Clever.

Very clever.

"I was merely inspecting the premises," I explained.

"Well, please don't inspect them again without asking."

"Understood."

He smiled tiredly.

"And if you really want to join the choir, practice is on Thursdays."

Barnaby immediately shook his head.

"We're busy Thursdays."

"Are we?" I asked.

"Very."

Vicar Thomas waved us goodbye.

We left the church hall and stepped into the sunshine.

For several moments, neither of us spoke.

Then Barnaby turned towards me.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What did we learn?"

I considered this carefully.

"The vicar has an excellent alibi."

"Yes."

"His pigeons are apparently incapable of carrying cats."

"Obviously."

"And his office contains a large quantity of seeds."

"Because he keeps pigeons."

I nodded.

"Exactly."

Barnaby stared at me.

"So he's innocent?"

I thought about the vicar's expression when his marrow had exploded beneath me.

The man had looked genuinely devastated.

A criminal mastermind would surely have maintained better control over his emotions.

Besides, the alibi was difficult to ignore.

"Yes," I admitted reluctantly. "I believe we can remove him from our list of suspects."

Barnaby exhaled.

"Thank goodness."

I opened my notebook.

Beside VICAR THOMAS, I wrote:

CLEARED OF ALL CHARGES.

Then, underneath:

Marrow deceased during investigation. Unfortunate but unavoidable.

Barnaby looked over my shoulder.

"Unavoidable?"

"Yes."

"You fell on it."

"During the execution of my duties."

"You tripped over your coat."

"An occupational hazard."

He shook his head.

We began walking home.

After a few minutes, Barnaby said, "You know, maybe Sir Cheddar really did just wander off."

I considered this.

Then I remembered something.

Something important.

Something I'd overlooked.

"Barnaby."

"What?"

"Who was the first person Mrs Higgins contacted when her cat disappeared?"

He frowned.

"Inspector Miller."

"Exactly."

"So?"

"And who has shown absolutely no concern about the disappearance?"

"Inspector Miller."

"Precisely."

Barnaby stopped walking.

"Oh, no."

I smiled.

"Oh, yes."

"No, Maggie."

"Think about it. He knew about the disappearance before we did. He has access to police records. He knows everyone's movements. And he's done absolutely nothing to solve the case."

"Because it's a missing cat!"

"Or because he doesn't want it solved."

Barnaby stared at me.

I could practically hear the wheels turning in his head.

Admittedly, they seemed to be turning in the wrong direction.

"You're not seriously suggesting Inspector Miller kidnapped Sir Cheddar?"

I lowered my voice.

"I'm suggesting something far worse."

"What?"

"That the criminal organisation may have infiltrated the police."

Barnaby closed his eyes.

For a moment, he looked as though he might lie down in the road and refuse to move.

Then he opened them again.

"Maggie, please. Just once. Could we investigate something normally?"

I smiled.

"Of course, Watson."

He looked relieved.

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

Then I pulled out my notebook.

"Tomorrow, we interrogate Inspector Miller."

Barnaby groaned.

I considered this a promising response.

After all, every great detective knows that the closer you get to the truth, the more uncomfortable people become.

And Barnaby was looking extremely uncomfortable indeed.

Which meant we were clearly getting somewhere.

The Interrogation of Inspector Miller

By Thursday morning, I had developed a theory so brilliant that I could hardly believe I'd thought of it myself.

Inspector Miller was involved.

Not just involved, either. I suspected he was the leader of a vast criminal organisation stretching from Little Oakhaven to the furthest corners of Europe.

Possibly Asia.

I hadn't decided yet.

The evidence was overwhelming.

First, Inspector Miller had been informed of Sir Cheddar's disappearance almost immediately.

Second, he had made no arrests.

Third, he had once told me to stop investigating a suspicious van parked outside the village shop, which later turned out to belong to a man delivering frozen peas.

At the time, I'd considered this an innocent misunderstanding.

Now I wasn't so sure.

I sat at my bedroom desk, reviewing the evidence in my notebook.

SUSPECT #2: INSPECTOR MILLER

Occupation: Police officer.

Known criminal connections: Unknown, probably extensive.

Possible motive: Money, power, international influence.

Suspicious behaviour: Being suspiciously unsuspicious.

I underlined the final point.

Twice.

Then I added:

Threat level: Extremely extremely dangerous.

There.

That should do it.

Barnaby arrived at ten o'clock carrying a newspaper.

Not because he wanted to read it, but because I'd specifically requested one.

"What's this for?" he asked, handing it over.

"Undercover surveillance."

"It's yesterday's Yorkshire Post."

"Excellent. Nobody will suspect a thing."

He looked at my trench coat.

"You're wearing that again?"

"Naturally."

"It's still got marrow on it."

I glanced down.

He was right.

Despite Mum putting it through the washing machine twice, a faint green stain remained across the front of my coat. There was also a suspicious smell coming from the left pocket.

I'd checked for evidence, but found only a piece of vegetable.

"Battle scars," I explained.

"You fell on a marrow."

"History will remember it differently."

Barnaby sat on my bed.

"Your mum rang my mum yesterday."

I froze.

"Why?"

"To ask what happened at the church."

"Ah."

"Vicar Thomas told her."

I considered this.

"An unfortunate breach of operational security."

"She wasn't happy."

"Neither was the marrow."

Barnaby sighed.

"She said you're supposed to apologise properly."

"I already apologised."

"You told the vicar his vegetable died in the line of duty."

"A respectful tribute."

"Then you saluted it."

"Standard procedure."

Barnaby looked at the ceiling.

"Can we please just find the cat and finish this?"

"That's exactly what I intend to do."

I stood and straightened my coat.

"Today, Watson, we confront our most dangerous opponent yet."

"Inspector Miller?"

"Correct."

"The man who helped your dad change a tyre last winter?"

"Yes."

"The man who gives out stickers to children at the school fair?"

"Yes."

"The man who once got stuck in the village hall toilet because the lock broke?"

I hesitated.

"Even criminal masterminds have moments of weakness."

Barnaby rubbed his face.

"Right. Fine. What's the plan?"

I smiled.

"Psychological warfare."

He stared at me.

"Please tell me that means asking him questions."

"Among other things."

Inspector Miller could usually be found at the village bakery at approximately half past ten.

I knew this because he went there every morning for a cup of tea and a bacon sandwich.

Some might consider this a harmless routine.

I considered it a predictable weakness.

The bakery was called The Rolling Pin and was run by Mrs Cooper, a cheerful woman who had been baking bread in Little Oakhaven since before I was born.

She knew everyone's name, everyone's birthday, and most of everyone's private business.

If you wanted to know who was getting married, who'd bought a new car, or who'd been caught putting the wrong rubbish in the recycling bin, Mrs Cooper was your woman.

I had briefly considered recruiting her as an informant.

Unfortunately, she had refused to accept my business card.

"You're thirteen, Maggie," she'd said.

"Age is irrelevant to genius."

"Well, genius can pay for its own sausage rolls."

A difficult woman.

We arrived at the bakery at twenty-eight minutes past ten.

I checked my watch.

"Perfect."

Barnaby looked through the window.

"He's already inside."

I crouched behind a large flowerpot.

"Excellent. He hasn't spotted us."

Barnaby remained standing.

"Maggie, people are looking at you."

"Act natural."

"You're hiding behind a flowerpot."

"Exactly. A perfectly ordinary thing to do."

Mrs Barker walked past carrying a shopping bag.

"Morning, Maggie."

"Good morning, civilian."

She looked at Barnaby.

"Is she all right?"

"Not really."

Mrs Barker nodded as though this confirmed something she'd suspected for years.

I raised the newspaper in front of my face and approached the bakery window.

Unfortunately, I couldn't see through it.

The newspaper, I mean.

I lowered it slightly.

Inside, Inspector Miller was sitting at his usual table, drinking tea and reading a magazine.

He looked completely relaxed.

Suspiciously relaxed.

A man whose village had recently suffered a high-profile feline abduction should not be enjoying a peaceful breakfast.

He should be pacing.

Sweating.

Possibly staring at a wall covered in photographs and red string.

Instead, he was eating a bacon sandwich.

I shook my head.

"Look at him."

Barnaby peered through the glass.

"He's having breakfast."

"Exactly."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Everything."

I folded the newspaper.

"Come, Watson. It's time."

We entered the bakery.

A little bell rang above the door.

Mrs Cooper looked up from behind the counter.

"Oh, hello, Maggie. Hello, Barnaby."

"Good morning," Barnaby said.

I nodded gravely.

"Mrs Cooper."

She examined my coat.

"Is that vegetable on your sleeve?"

"No comment."

"Your mum told me about the marrow."

"Classified information."

Mrs Cooper rolled her eyes.

"Honestly, you children."

Inspector Miller looked up from his magazine.

"Morning, you two."

I froze.

He knew we were there.

Before we'd even approached him.

A highly trained professional.

"Inspector," I said.

He smiled.

"Maggie. How's the detective business?"

I narrowed my eyes.

"Progressing."

"Good to hear."

He took another bite of his sandwich.

I waited.

He chewed.

Swallowed.

Then looked at me.

"Something I can help you with?"

I stepped closer.

"Perhaps."

Barnaby stood beside me.

"Morning, Inspector."

"Morning, Barnaby. You keeping out of trouble?"

"I'm trying."

Inspector Miller chuckled.

I did not.

This was a serious confrontation.

"Inspector Miller," I began, "I have some questions concerning your whereabouts on Tuesday afternoon."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Do you?"

"Indeed."

"All right."

I opened my notebook.

"Where were you at approximately three o'clock?"

He thought for a moment.

"At the station, I believe."

"Alone?"

"Mostly."

"Interesting."

"Then I went to check on Mr Fletcher's fence. Someone had reported it was leaning over the pavement."

I wrote this down.

Suspect claims to have investigated fence.

"Can anyone confirm your movements?"

"Mr Fletcher, I imagine."

"Convenient."

Inspector Miller smiled.

"Very."

I leaned closer.

"Inspector, are you familiar with the concept of a criminal conspiracy?"

He put down his sandwich.

"I've heard of one or two."

"Have you ever participated in one?"

Barnaby made a small squeaking noise.

Inspector Miller stared at me.

Then he laughed.

"No, Maggie. Can't say I have."

I studied his face.

No sweating.

No trembling.

No obvious signs of guilt.

The man was good.

Very good.

"That's exactly what someone involved in a criminal conspiracy would say," I observed.

Inspector Miller nodded thoughtfully.

"I suppose it is."

I gasped.

An admission!

I wrote quickly.

Suspect agrees with accusation.

Barnaby leaned over.

"Maggie, that's not what he meant."

"Quiet, Watson."

Inspector Miller looked amused.

"What's all this about, then?"

I lowered my voice.

"Sir Cheddar."

"Ah."

His expression softened.

"Poor Mrs Higgins. Still no sign of him?"

"None."

"Well, cats can be funny creatures. He'll probably turn up when he's hungry."

I stared.

There it was again.

That ridiculous explanation.

The same explanation everyone kept offering.

Almost as though the entire village had agreed on a single story.

"Interesting," I whispered.

Inspector Miller picked up his tea.

"Is it?"

"Very."

I closed my notebook.

It was time for the second phase of my interrogation.

Psychological pressure.

I'd read somewhere that criminals often reveal themselves when confronted with prolonged eye contact.

The trick was to stare directly into their eyes without blinking.

Eventually, they would become uncomfortable and confess.

I positioned myself opposite Inspector Miller.

Then I stared.

He looked at me.

I stared harder.

He took a sip of tea.

I continued staring.

Barnaby shifted beside me.

"Maggie?"

I ignored him.

Inspector Miller raised an eyebrow.

"Everything all right?"

I said nothing.

The silence stretched.

My eyes began to feel slightly dry.

I resisted the urge to blink.

Inspector Miller returned to his magazine.

This was unexpected.

Clearly, he was attempting to avoid my psychological assault.

I leaned forward and stared harder.

My eyes started watering.

Barnaby whispered, "Maggie, what are you doing?"

I couldn't answer.

Answering might cause me to blink.

Inspector Miller looked up again.

"Have you got something in your eye?"

I shook my head.

A tear rolled down my cheek.

He frowned.

"You sure?"

I nodded.

Another tear followed.

Barnaby looked worried.

"She's doing some sort of interrogation thing."

"Ah," Inspector Miller said.

He seemed to consider this.

Then he leaned back in his chair.

"Well, good luck with that."

I was beginning to experience considerable discomfort.

My eyes burned.

My nose twitched.

The entire bakery had become slightly blurry.

But I refused to surrender.

Inspector Miller calmly finished his tea.

I couldn't believe it.

The man had nerves of steel.

I leaned even closer.

Unfortunately, my enormous trench coat had other ideas.

The loose sleeve caught the edge of a metal tray sitting on the neighbouring table.

The tray wobbled.

I felt it move.

But I couldn't look away.

A detective must remain focused.

The tray tilted.

Barnaby noticed.

"Maggie."

I continued staring.

"Maggie, your sleeve."

Inspector Miller looked down.

"Oh, careful there."

Too late.

The tray slid off the table.

Six cream cakes launched themselves into the air.

For one beautiful, terrible moment, they seemed to hang there.

Then gravity remembered its job.

The cakes landed directly in Inspector Miller's lap.

SPLOFF.

There was a stunned silence.

A strawberry rolled across the floor.

A blob of whipped cream slid slowly down the inspector's trousers.

Mrs Cooper gasped.

"Oh, for goodness' sake!"

I finally blinked.

Several times.

Inspector Miller looked down at his lap.

Then up at me.

Then back down again.

A large cream cake was resting upside down on his knee.

Barnaby covered his face.

I cleared my throat.

"An unexpected development."

Inspector Miller carefully lifted the cake from his trousers.

"Yes," he said. "You could say that."

Mrs Cooper hurried over with a cloth.

"Maggie Pendelton! What on earth are you playing at?"

"Official interrogation."

"Well, you can officially clean this up!"

I glanced at the cream-covered inspector.

He looked remarkably calm.

Suspiciously calm.

Even now.

Even with whipped cream dripping from his trousers.

"Inspector," I said, "I must commend your composure."

He wiped cream from his sleeve.

"Thank you, Maggie."

"Most men would have panicked."

"Most men probably wouldn't have had six cakes dropped on them."

"Precisely."

Barnaby grabbed my arm.

"Please stop talking."

Mrs Cooper handed me a cloth.

"Clean."

I obeyed.

For the next fifteen minutes, Barnaby and I wiped cream from the floor, collected fallen strawberries, and helped Mrs Cooper tidy the table.

Inspector Miller went to the little washroom at the back of the bakery to clean his trousers.

When he returned, there was still a suspicious white patch on his knee.

I made a note of this.

Suspect now marked with identifying substance.

Barnaby looked at my notebook.

"That's cream, Maggie."

"Exactly. We can track him."

"He's the village policeman. We already know where he works."

I considered this.

"An excellent point."

Mrs Cooper stood behind the counter with her arms folded.

"Right. Those cakes were for Mrs Pritchard's birthday order."

I winced.

Mrs Pritchard.

Again.

"Six cream cakes," Mrs Cooper continued. "Three pounds each."

Barnaby looked horrified.

"Eighteen pounds?"

"That's right."

I stared at her.

Eighteen pounds.

Almost half my future reward.

I hadn't even earned it yet.

"Perhaps," I suggested, "we could arrange a professional discount?"

Mrs Cooper raised an eyebrow.

"For what?"

"Services rendered."

"What services?"

"Crime prevention."

She looked at the floor.

Then at Inspector Miller's trousers.

Then back at me.

"Out."

I decided negotiations had reached an impasse.

We left the bakery under extremely difficult circumstances.

Outside, Barnaby turned towards me.

"Eighteen pounds."

I nodded. "An unfortunate expense."

"Eighteen pounds, Maggie!"

"Yes, Watson. I heard you the first time."

"That's on top of the marrow!"

"The marrow was an unavoidable casualty."

"And now you've attacked a policeman with cakes!"

"Accidentally."

"That's not better!"

I straightened my coat.

"Barnaby, every investigation has setbacks."

"Your investigation has only setbacks!"

I considered this.

He had a point.

But great detectives never allow themselves to become discouraged by temporary difficulties.

Besides, I'd learned something important.

Inspector Miller had remained completely calm throughout the interrogation.

He hadn't confessed.

He hadn't panicked.

He hadn't even become angry when six cream cakes landed in his lap.

Clearly, he was hiding something.

"Watson," I said, "I believe we're dealing with a professional."

Barnaby stared at me.

"He's a professional policeman."

"Exactly."

"No, Maggie. That's not what I meant."

I opened my notebook.

"Consider the evidence. The inspector knew about the disappearance immediately. He has made no arrests. He

has shown no concern. And today, under extreme psychological pressure, he remained completely composed."

"You stared at him until you cried."

"A recognised interrogation technique."

"Recognised by who?"

I hesitated.

"Detectives."

"Which detectives?"

"Important ones."

Barnaby looked exhausted.

We walked towards the village green.

It was a lovely afternoon. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and somewhere nearby a lawnmower was making an unpleasant rattling noise.

Little Oakhaven looked completely peaceful.

Almost too peaceful.

I stopped.

"Barnaby."

He closed his eyes.

"What now?"

"Something's wrong."

"Yes. Your detective agency."

"No. With the village."

He looked around.

"What?"

"Think about it. Sir Cheddar disappears. The vicar has an airtight alibi. Inspector Miller refuses to cooperate. And nobody has seen anything suspicious."

"Because nothing suspicious has happened."

"Or because the criminals are moving their operations at night."

Barnaby opened his eyes.

"What?"

"Night-time deliveries. Secret meetings. Unmarked vehicles."

He stared at me.

"Maggie, this is Little Oakhaven."

"Exactly. Nobody would suspect a tiny village."

"Of what?"

"Being the headquarters of an international cat-trafficking organisation."

He rubbed his forehead.

I began pacing.

"The criminals must be transporting cats somewhere. But how? There's no railway station, no airport, and the nearest motorway is miles away."

Barnaby shrugged.

"Roads?"

I stopped.

Roads.

Of course.

The main road through Little Oakhaven connected the village to several nearby towns. Delivery vans, tractors, and lorries used it every day.

A perfect escape route.

I turned towards him.

"Watson, you're a genius."

He looked startled.

"I am?"

"Yes!"

"What did I do?"

"You've solved the transportation problem!"

"I said roads."

"Precisely!"

I opened my notebook and wrote:

NEW THEORY: CATS TRANSPORTED BY ROAD.

Underneath, I added:

Possible vehicles: Vans, lorries, milk floats, suspicious bicycles.

Barnaby leaned over.

"Suspicious bicycles?"

"Never rule anything out."

He sighed.

"So what now?"

I smiled.

"We watch the road."

"Why?"

"Because sooner or later, the criminals will make a delivery."

"And?"

"And we'll catch them in the act."

Barnaby stared at me.

"You're not suggesting we sit beside the road all night?"

"Of course not."

He looked relieved.

"We'll hide in a bush."

His relief vanished.

"No."

"With night-vision equipment."

"No."

"And emergency supplies."

"Maggie!"

I continued writing.

OPERATION MIDNIGHT FELINE

Objective: Intercept suspicious transport.

Location: Main road.

Time: After dark.

Personnel: Detective Pendelton and Watson.

Risk level: Extreme.

Barnaby looked at the page.

"Why have you written extreme?"

"Because we may encounter dangerous criminals."

"We're going to encounter sheep."

I smiled knowingly.

"Perhaps."

He stared at me.

Then he looked towards the bakery.

"I should have stayed home."

I patted his shoulder.

"Every great adventure requires courage, Watson."

"And apparently eighteen pounds' worth of cream cakes."

I ignored this.

Somewhere out there, Sir Cheddar was waiting to be rescued.

And somewhere in Little Oakhaven, a criminal mastermind was preparing their next move.

Unfortunately for them, I was already one step ahead.

Well, possibly two.

Depending on how you counted.

I closed my notebook.

Tomorrow night, we would begin our stakeout.

And nothing, absolutely nothing, was going to stand in our way.

Not the criminal underworld.

Not Inspector Miller.

Not even a flock of sheep.

Although, looking back, I probably shouldn't have been quite so confident about that last one.

The Stakeout

There is nothing more important to a detective than being prepared.

Except possibly being brave.

And intelligent.

And knowing what you're doing.

But preparation is definitely somewhere near the top.

By Friday afternoon, I had prepared for our first major surveillance operation with the sort of care normally reserved for military invasions.

I had a map.

I had equipment.

I had a detailed operational plan.

And I had a packet of custard creams.

Unfortunately, I also had Barnaby.

"This is ridiculous," he said.

"Which part?"

"All of it."

We were sitting on my bedroom floor, surrounded by what I considered to be essential detective equipment.

There were two torches, a pair of binoculars, my notebook, three packets of biscuits, a flask of orange squash, a bicycle chain, and a pair of night-vision goggles I'd purchased from eBay for six pounds ninety-nine.

The goggles had arrived that morning in a cardboard box covered in Chinese writing.

I'd been extremely excited.

According to the advertisement, they were Professional Tactical Night Vision Goggles for Secret Missions.

They were also bright green and had a picture of a cartoon dinosaur on the side.

Barnaby picked them up.

"These are children's toys."

"Don't be absurd."

"They're plastic."

"Lightweight tactical construction."

"They've got a dinosaur on them."

"Camouflage."

"For what? Jurassic Park?"

I snatched them back.

"Honestly, Watson, you have absolutely no appreciation for advanced technology."

I put the goggles on.

Everything turned green.

"Remarkable," I whispered.

Barnaby waved a hand in front of my face.

"Can you see in the dark?"

"Of course."

He switched off my bedroom light.

Everything went black.

I stood completely still.

Barnaby switched the light back on.

"Well?"

I removed the goggles.

"Battery issue."

"They don't take batteries."

"Then clearly they're solar-powered."

He stared at me.

"At night?"

I considered this.

"An unfortunate design flaw."

Barnaby dropped onto my bed.

"I'm not doing this."

"Of course you are."

"No, Maggie. I mean it. We've spent days looking for a cat that's probably asleep in someone's shed. You've destroyed a marrow, ruined eighteen pounds' worth of cream cakes, and accused the village policeman of running an international crime syndicate."

I nodded.

"An impressive start."

"That's not what I meant!"

I spread my map across the floor.

It was a road map of North Yorkshire from 1998, which Dad had found in the glove compartment of his old car.

Several roads were missing, and one of the nearby towns appeared to have a railway station that had closed years ago.

Still, it looked professional.

I had drawn a large red circle around Little Oakhaven.

Then another circle around the main road.

Then several arrows pointing in different directions.

Barnaby examined it.

"Why have you drawn an arrow into the duck pond?"

"Possible escape route."

"For a car?"

"Amphibious vehicles exist, Barnaby."

"Not in Little Oakhaven."

"That's exactly why nobody would suspect one."

He sighed.

I tapped the map.

"The main road is our only reliable route in or out of the village. Any criminal organisation transporting stolen cats would have to use it."

"Unless they walked. Or flew. Or the cat wasn't stolen."

I ignored this.

"Our surveillance position will be here."

I pointed to a small patch of woodland beside the road.

Barnaby leaned forward.

"That's Farmer Wilkins's field."

"Correct."

"He keeps sheep there."

"Excellent. Natural camouflage."

"Sheep aren't camouflage."

"They're white. We'll blend in."

"We're not white!"

I looked at my beige trench coat.

"Close enough."

Barnaby covered his face with his hands.

Sometimes I wondered whether he truly understood the privilege of working alongside a future legend.

There was, however, one small problem with our plan.

Mum.

Mum had recently become rather unreasonable about my detective work.

Something to do with the marrow, the cakes, and a telephone call from Inspector Miller.

At breakfast that morning, she'd informed me that I was not to conduct any more investigations without asking permission.

Naturally, I had agreed.

A great detective must know when to appear cooperative.

Unfortunately, she had also said that I wasn't allowed out after dark.

This presented a difficulty.

Criminals, as everyone knows, prefer darkness.

Which meant Mum had effectively banned me from doing my job.

I considered this deeply unfair.

"How are we getting out tonight?" Barnaby asked.

I smiled.

"We're not."

He looked relieved.

"Oh, thank goodness."

"We're leaving this evening."

His relief disappeared.

"That's the same thing!"

"Not technically."

"Maggie!"

"We'll tell our parents we're going for a walk before dinner."

"And then?"

"We'll establish our position and remain hidden until the operation is complete."

Barnaby stared at me.

"So we're lying?"

"Withholding operational details."

"That's lying."

"Only if someone asks."

He folded his arms.

"I'm not doing that."

I considered him.

Barnaby could be annoyingly principled about certain things.

He refused to take sweets without paying, always waited for the green man at pedestrian crossings, and once returned a five-pound note he'd found on the pavement because he thought someone might come looking for it.

A good quality in a friend.

A terrible quality in a spy.

"Fine," I said. "We'll ask permission."

Barnaby blinked.

"Really?"

"Of course."

"And if they say no?"

I smiled.

"We'll explain how important the investigation is."

He looked unconvinced.

As it turned out, explaining the importance of our investigation did not go particularly well.

Mum was in the kitchen preparing dinner when I approached her.

"Mother."

She looked up.

"Oh, dear."

"What?"

"Nothing. You only call me Mother when you're about to ask for something ridiculous."

I decided to ignore this.

"Barnaby and I require permission to conduct an overnight surveillance operation."

Mum stopped chopping carrots.

"An overnight what?"

"Surveillance operation."

"No."

"But -"

"No."

"Mother, please understand that -"

"Maggie, you're thirteen."

"Age is irrelevant to genius."

"Age is extremely relevant to being outside all night."

I tried a different approach.

"What if we only stayed until midnight?"

"No."

"Eleven?"

"No."

"Ten?"

"No."

"Nine?"

Mum considered this.

"You're allowed out until half past eight, provided you stay in the village and tell me where you're going."

I gasped.

"Half past eight?"

"Yes."

"But the criminal underworld doesn't even get started until nine!"

Mum gave me a look.

"The criminal underworld can wait until you're older."

I sighed.

Negotiations had failed.

However, a great detective must always have a contingency plan.

At seven o'clock, Barnaby and I set off for the main road.

We had permission to go for a walk.

We had promised to return by half past eight.

And we had absolutely no intention of breaking that promise.

At least, that was what I told Barnaby.

He remained suspicious.

The evening was warm and pleasant. Birds were singing in the hedgerows, and the village smelled faintly of cut grass and somebody's barbecue.

Little Oakhaven looked completely innocent.

Which, in my professional opinion, made it even more suspicious.

We reached Farmer Wilkins's field at twenty minutes past seven.

The main road ran along one side, separated from the field by a low stone wall and a thick hedge.

Several sheep were grazing nearby.

They looked at us.

I looked back.

"Excellent," I whispered.

Barnaby examined the hedge.

"Where exactly are we hiding?"

"There."

I pointed to a large bush beside the wall.

He stared at it.

"That's a bramble bush."

"Natural cover."

"It's full of thorns."

"An unavoidable occupational hazard."

"I'm not getting in there."

I considered the bush.

It was rather thorny.

Still, it offered an excellent view of the road.

"Very well," I said. "I'll go first."

I crouched down and pushed my way into the branches.

Immediately, something sharp stabbed my leg.

"Ow."

Barnaby watched.

Another thorn caught my sleeve.

"Ow!"

I pulled.

My coat became tangled.

I pulled harder.

The bush shook violently.

A small bird flew out and frightened me so badly that I fell backwards into the hedge.

Barnaby sighed.

"Need help?"

"No!"

I struggled.

The branches tightened around me.

"Possibly!"

It took him four minutes to free me.

By the time we finished, my coat had acquired three new holes, one sleeve was hanging loose, and I had a considerable scratch across my forehead.

I considered this a successful reconnaissance exercise.

We eventually settled behind the stone wall, where there were considerably fewer thorns.

I took out my notebook.

OPERATION MIDNIGHT FELINE

Time: 19:34.

Weather: Mild.

Visibility: Excellent.

Enemy activity: None detected.

Barnaby looked at the page.

"Why is it called Midnight Feline if we're going home at half past eight?"

"Branding."

He opened a packet of crisps.

We waited.

A tractor passed.

I wrote it down.

A blue car passed.

I wrote that down too.

A woman walked past with a dog.

I narrowed my eyes.

"Suspicious."

Barnaby looked up.

"What?"

"That woman."

"That's Mrs Barker."

"Exactly."

"She walks her dog every evening."

"An excellent cover."

"She's seventy-six!"

"Age is irrelevant to criminal activity."

Barnaby returned to his crisps.

At eight o'clock, we had observed three cars, two tractors, a cyclist, and a man carrying a ladder.

None appeared to be transporting cats.

Although I did remain suspicious of the ladder.

At ten past eight, Barnaby checked his watch.

"We should go soon."

"Patience, Watson."

"Your mum said half past eight."

"Yes."

"And it's twenty minutes' walk home."

I considered this.

He was right.

Annoyingly.

"Very well," I said. "We'll withdraw and resume tomorrow morning."

Barnaby looked relieved.

We packed our equipment and began walking home.

Then something extraordinary happened.

A white van appeared on the road.

It moved slowly.

Very slowly.

I froze.

"Watson."

"What?"

"Look."

Barnaby glanced towards the road.

"A van."

"An unmarked van."

"It's got MILK written on the side."

I stared.

He was right.

A clever disguise.

“Okay, a slightly marked van.”

The van stopped outside a farmhouse.

A man climbed out, opened the back doors, and removed several plastic crates.

I gasped.

"A delivery."

Barnaby watched.

"Yes. Milk."

"Or something disguised as milk."

The man carried the crates towards the farmhouse.

Then returned to the van.

I narrowed my eyes.

"Interesting."

Barnaby looked at his watch again.

"Maggie, we need to go."

I reluctantly agreed.

But as we walked home, I couldn't stop thinking about that van.

Why was a milkman delivering milk in the evening?

Why was he using an unmarked vehicle?

Well, apart from the enormous word MILK.

And why had he stopped at a farmhouse that already had cows?

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

That night, I lay awake in bed thinking about the mysterious delivery.

At eleven o'clock, I reached a conclusion.

The milkman was involved.

At eleven fifteen, I developed a theory.

The milk crates were being used to transport stolen cats.

At eleven thirty, I decided the entire dairy industry might be implicated.

By midnight, I had filled three pages of my notebook.

I finally fell asleep at approximately half past twelve.

And woke again at five in the morning.

Because great detectives do not require much sleep.

Also, I'd forgotten to close my curtains, and the sun was shining directly into my face.

I sat up.

Today was Saturday.

The perfect day for a major breakthrough.

I grabbed my phone and sent Barnaby a message.

ME: Emergency. Meet me at the main road. 6 AM.

A minute later, he replied.

BARNABY: No.

ME: National security.

BARNABY: Go back to sleep.

ME: The milkman is involved.

BARNABY: Of course he is.

ME: Bring biscuits.

He didn't reply.

I considered this agreement.

At ten minutes to six, I was waiting outside his house.

Barnaby appeared wearing a hoodie and an expression of deep personal suffering.

"I hate you," he said.

"Good morning, Watson."

"It's Saturday."

"Crime doesn't take weekends off."

"Neither do you, apparently."

He yawned.

"Did your mum say you could come out?"

"Yes."

This was technically true.

Mum had said I could go out on Saturday.

She hadn't specified what time.

Barnaby looked unconvinced.

We walked towards Farmer Wilkins's field.

The village was almost completely silent.

A few birds were singing, and somewhere in the distance a tractor engine was starting.

I felt a thrill of excitement.

This was it.

Our moment.

The criminals would be expecting the village to be asleep.

They wouldn't expect two highly trained detectives waiting beside the road.

Admittedly, only one of us was highly trained.

And the training had mostly consisted of watching detective programmes on television.

But that was hardly important.

We reached the stone wall just after six.

I crouched behind it and put on my night-vision goggles.

Everything turned green.

Barnaby stared at me.

"Why are you wearing those?"

"Enhanced visibility."

"It's daylight."

"Exactly. Perfect visibility."

He shook his head.

We waited.

Barnaby ate a biscuit.

I examined the road.

A little while later, a familiar white van appeared around the bend.

I gasped.

"There!"

Barnaby looked up.

"The milkman."

"Precisely."

The van slowed as it approached the first farmhouse.

Then stopped.

The driver climbed out.

Opened the back.

And removed a crate.

I watched through my green goggles.

"Suspicious."

Barnaby sighed.

"He's delivering milk."

"That's what he wants us to think."

The driver carried the crate towards the farmhouse.

I made my decision.

"We have to stop him."

Barnaby froze.

"What?"

"We can't let him escape."

"Maggie, don't."

I reached into my bag.

And produced the bicycle chain.

Barnaby stared at it.

"Why have you brought that?"

"Spike strip."

"That's a bike chain."

"Improvised equipment."

"It doesn't have spikes!"

"Psychological spikes."

"That doesn't mean anything!"

I stood.

Barnaby grabbed my sleeve.

"Maggie, no."

But I was already moving.

I stepped towards the road and swung the chain.

Unfortunately, the chain was heavier than I'd expected.

It flew out of my hand.

Not across the road.

Not even particularly close to the road.

Instead, it sailed over the stone wall and landed directly beside a sleeping sheep.

CLANG.

The sheep woke.

It looked at the chain.

Then at me.

Then it made a noise that sounded remarkably like a complaint.

"BAAAAA!"

Another sheep looked up.

Then another.

Within seconds, half the flock was staring at us.

I froze.

Barnaby whispered, "Maggie."

"Remain calm."

The first sheep took a step backwards. Then another.

Then, for reasons known only to sheep, it panicked.

It ran.

Straight towards the gate.

The other sheep followed.

Dozens of them.

Possibly hundreds.

I had never seen so much wool moving at once.

"Barnaby!"

"What?"

"THE SHEEP!"

"I CAN SEE THE SHEEP!"

The gate had been left slightly open.

The first sheep pushed through.

Then another.

Then another.

And suddenly, the entire flock was pouring onto the main road.

The milkman stopped.

A tractor behind him stopped.

A car behind the tractor stopped.

And then everything became completely ridiculous.

Sheep filled the road.

Sheep filled the pavement.

Sheep wandered into the ditch.

One sheep climbed onto the stone wall and stood there looking extremely pleased with itself.

A farmer appeared from a nearby field.

"WHAT'S GOING ON?"

I considered this.

A difficult question.

Barnaby pointed at me.

"She frightened the sheep!"

"Watson!"

The farmer stared.

"YOU DID WHAT?"

I stepped forward.

"Sir, please remain calm. This is an official police operation."

Barnaby closed his eyes.

"Private detective operation," he corrected.

The farmer looked at my trench coat.

Then at the green goggles.

Then at the bicycle chain lying in the grass.

"ARE YOU TWO OUT OF YOUR MINDS?"

I considered denying it.

But the sheep were making such a racket that I decided silence was the wiser option.

The milkman climbed out of his van.

"What's happened?"

The farmer pointed at me.

"THAT GIRL'S LET THE SHEEP OUT!"

I raised a finger.

"Technically, the sheep let themselves out."

This did not improve matters.

Within ten minutes, the road was completely blocked.

Cars stretched back towards the village.

Tractors queued behind them.

A lorry driver leaned out of his window and shouted something that Mum would definitely have disapproved of.

I had no idea there could be so many vehicles out on this early on the weekend.

And the sheep, having apparently decided that the main road was a wonderful place to spend Saturday morning, refused to move.

Barnaby stood beside me.

Very quietly.

"Maggie."

"Yes?"

"We're going to die."

"Don't be dramatic."

"Your mum is going to kill you."

I considered this.

He had a point.

A familiar voice came from behind us.

"Well, well, well."

I turned.

Inspector Miller was standing beside his police car.

He looked at the sheep.

Then at the traffic.

Then at me.

Then at Barnaby.

Finally, he looked at the bicycle chain.

"Maggie."

"Inspector."

He sighed.

"What have you done?"

I straightened my coat.

"An unfortunate complication during a high-level surveillance operation."

He stared at me.

"A what?"

"Surveillance."

"Of what?"

I glanced towards the milkman.

Then back at the inspector.

"Classified."

Inspector Miller closed his eyes.

For several seconds, he said nothing.

Then he opened them again.

"Right. Let's get these sheep back where they belong."

It took nearly two hours.

Farmer Wilkins arrived with his sheepdog.

Three other farmers helped.

Inspector Miller directed traffic.

Barnaby and I were instructed to stand beside the wall and touch absolutely nothing.

I considered this an unreasonable restriction.

Eventually, the sheep were returned to their field.

The gate was closed and the road reopened.

And Little Oakhaven returned to something resembling normality.

Except for the traffic queue, which had stretched nearly two miles.

And the extremely angry farmers.

And the milkman, who had missed half his deliveries.

Inspector Miller approached us.

He looked exhausted.

"Maggie."

"Yes, Inspector?"

"Go home."

"But -"

"Now."

I opened my mouth.

He raised a finger.

"Not another word."

I closed it again.

Barnaby grabbed my arm.

"Come on."

We walked back towards the village in silence.

For once, even I had to admit that the operation hadn't gone entirely according to plan.

After several minutes, Barnaby spoke.

"Well?"

I sighed.

"Well what?"

"What did we learn?"

I considered this.

"The milkman is extremely suspicious."

Barnaby stopped walking.

"MAGGIE!"

"Keep your voice down, Watson."

"You caused a two-mile traffic jam!"

"An unfortunate consequence."

"You frightened an entire flock of sheep!"

"Unexpected resistance."

"You nearly got us arrested!"

"Occupational hazard."

Barnaby stared at me.

Then he turned and walked away.

I hurried after him.

"Watson!"

"Don't call me that!"

"Barnaby!"

He stopped.

"What?"

I hesitated.

For the first time since beginning the investigation, I wondered whether I might have made a small mistake.

Possibly two.

Perhaps even three.

Then I remembered the milkman.

The strange delivery.

The suspicious crates.

The way Inspector Miller had arrived almost immediately.

Of course.

Everything made sense.

"Barnaby," I whispered, "I think we've uncovered something enormous."

He looked at me.

"No."

"Inspector Miller and the milkman are working together."

He stared.

Then he made a noise that sounded like a broken kettle.

I opened my notebook.

NEW DEVELOPMENT: POLICE-DAIRY CONSPIRACY CONFIRMED.

Underneath, I wrote:

Sheep interference suggests criminal organisation may also control livestock.

Barnaby looked at the page.

Then at me.

Then at the sky.

"Why," he asked quietly, "couldn't you just have taken up football?"

I smiled.

"Because, Watson, football doesn't solve crimes."

He shook his head.

We continued home.

Behind us, Little Oakhaven was slowly recovering from the largest traffic incident in its history.

And somewhere in the village, Sir Cheddar remained missing.

But I was closer than ever to solving the case.

I could feel it.

The criminal organisation was getting desperate.

Their secrets were beginning to unravel.

And soon, very soon, I would discover where they were hiding their stolen cats.

I just needed one final clue.

One last breakthrough.

One decisive piece of evidence.

And then, at last, the truth would be revealed.

Unfortunately, that breakthrough would lead me somewhere I hadn't expected.

Somewhere dark.

Somewhere abandoned.

Somewhere filled with dangerous secrets.

And, as it turned out, rather a lot of broken glass.

The Operation Goes Sideways

By Saturday afternoon, I was officially the most unpopular person in Little Oakhaven.

This was quite an achievement, considering Mr Fletcher had once accidentally reversed his tractor through the village Christmas display.

My name had been mentioned in the bakery, the village shop, and at least three separate conversations outside the post office. Mrs Barker had apparently described me as a menace to society, while Farmer Wilkins had used several words that Barnaby refused to repeat.

Even Mum had stopped finding my detective business amusing.

"Maggie," she'd said when I got home, "you are not going anywhere near that road again."

"Of course not."

"And you're not to interfere with Inspector Miller."

"Naturally."

"And no more investigating people without their permission."

I hesitated.

"Define investigating."

"Maggie."

"Understood."

Mum had then informed me that I would be helping Dad clean the garage for the rest of the afternoon.

An outrageous punishment.

Especially when the real criminals were still at large.

I spent two hours sorting rusty screws into plastic containers, while Dad explained that frightening sheep was not a recognised method of solving crime.

I disagreed privately.

After all, the sheep had revealed something important.

The milkman had been making deliveries near the old parish greenhouse.

And the greenhouse, as everyone knew, had been abandoned for years.

The building stood behind the churchyard, hidden by overgrown hedges. It had once been used to grow vegetables for village events, but the heating system had broken, the roof had started leaking, and nobody wanted to pay for repairs.

A perfect criminal headquarters.

I had drawn a diagram in my notebook.

THE INTERNATIONAL CAT-TRAFFICKING NETWORK

At the top was Inspector Miller.

Below him was the milkman.

Below the milkman was a drawing of a greenhouse.

And underneath that, a question mark surrounded by seventeen tiny cats.

It was my finest piece of detective work yet.

Unfortunately, Barnaby refused to answer my messages.

ME: Major breakthrough.

ME: Suspect headquarters identified.

ME: Greenhouse behind church.

ME: Possible underground cat prison.

ME: Watson?

Eventually, he replied.

BARNABY: I am eating my dinner.

ME: At four in the afternoon?

BARNABY: I started early so I wouldn't have to come out.

I considered this unnecessarily hostile.

At half past four, however, Barnaby appeared at my front door.

He looked tired.

"Your mum rang my mum," he explained.

"About the investigation?"

"About you."

"Ah."

"She asked if I'd keep you company while you finished cleaning the garage."

I smiled.

"Excellent. Reinforcements."

"No, Maggie. Garage cleaning. That's all."

Ten minutes later, we were sitting behind Dad's workbench, examining my greenhouse diagram.

Barnaby stared at it.

"Why have you drawn Inspector Miller wearing a crown?"

"He's the leader."

"Of a cat-trafficking organisation?"

"Precisely."

"And the milkman works for him?"

"Obviously."

"And they keep the cats in an abandoned greenhouse?"

I nodded.

Barnaby looked at me for a moment.

"Do you know what I think?"

"That I'm a genius?"

"I think you should look in your own house."

I frowned.

"Why?"

"Because those footprints in Mrs Higgins's garden went straight through your hedge."

I waved a hand.

"Old evidence."

"But we never checked."

"Watson, you must learn to think beyond the obvious."

He looked towards the utility room, where Dad had just switched on the tumble dryer.

"Sometimes the obvious is obvious for a reason."

I ignored this philosophical nonsense and returned to my diagram.

"We need to inspect the greenhouse."

"No."

"Just a quick look."

"No."

"From outside."

Barnaby considered this.

"From outside?"

"Absolutely."

"And we don't go in?"

"Certainly not."

"And you don't touch anything?"

I hesitated.

"Maggie."

"Fine."

He sighed.

"All right. We can walk past it tomorrow."

I shook my head.

"Too late. The criminals may move their operation."

"Then tonight I guess."

Barnaby stared at me.

Then, very slowly, he said, "You're going to get us both arrested."

I smiled.

"Not if we catch the criminals first."

At six o'clock, we approached the abandoned greenhouse.

I had told Mum we were going for a short walk to the churchyard, which was true.

I had not mentioned the criminal headquarters, which was also true, although in a different way.

The greenhouse stood behind a tangle of bushes and nettles. Its glass panes were green with dirt, several were cracked, and one corner of the roof sagged noticeably.

A wooden sign hung from the gate.

DANGER: UNSAFE STRUCTURE

KEEP OUT

I examined it.

"Interesting."

Barnaby folded his arms.

"Yes. It says keep out."

"An obvious attempt to discourage visitors."

"Because the building's falling apart."

"Or because something valuable is hidden inside."

He looked through the dirty glass.

There were empty plant pots, broken shelves, and a large pile of gardening rubbish.

No cats.

No criminals.

Not even a suspicious milk crate.

"Well," Barnaby said, "we've looked. Can we go?"

I wasn't convinced.

A criminal organisation wouldn't leave its stolen cats sitting where anyone could see them.

They'd hide them.

Possibly underground.

I crouched beside the fence.

"Watson, look."

He came closer.

"What?"

"Footprints."

There were muddy marks beside the gate.

Barnaby examined them.

"Those are probably from the gardeners."

"People disguised as gardeners."

He sighed.

Then I noticed something else.

A small white object caught in the wire fence.

I carefully pulled it free.

A feather.

Another feather!

I held it up triumphantly.

"The pigeons!"

Barnaby looked at the church tower, where several pigeons were sitting.

"Maggie, there are pigeons everywhere."

"Exactly. They're monitoring the headquarters."

I was about to explain this further when a voice came from behind us.

"What are you two doing?"

We spun around.

Vicar Thomas stood on the path carrying a watering can.

He looked at me.

Then at Barnaby.

Then at the greenhouse.

His expression changed.

"Oh, no."

"Good evening, Vicar," I said.

"Margaret Pendelton, please tell me you're not planning to go inside that building."

"Certainly not."

"Good."

"We're merely conducting external surveillance."

He closed his eyes briefly.

"Maggie, that greenhouse is dangerous. The roof supports are rotten, and we're waiting for the council to arrange repairs."

I nodded.

"A convincing explanation."

"It's the truth."

"Naturally."

He looked at Barnaby.

"Please make sure she stays away from it."

"I've been trying for days," Barnaby replied.

The vicar sighed.

"Well, I'd better get these plants watered. And Maggie?"

"Yes?"

"Please leave my vegetables alone."

I nodded respectfully.

"Your marrow will not have died in vain."

He stared at me with disbelief. Undoubtedly amazed by my situational awareness of his grief.

Then he walked away.

Barnaby watched him disappear around the corner.

"Right. We're going home."

I looked at the greenhouse.

Then at my notebook.

Then at the small white feather.

Something didn't add up.

Why would a building with nothing inside need such a large warning sign?

Why was the vicar so desperate to keep us away?

And why had the milkman been driving along the road nearby?

Clearly, the criminals were preparing to move their operation.

We needed to act.

Immediately.

"Watson," I said, "we require a diversion."

Barnaby froze.

"No."

"A harmless diversion."

"No."

"Something to force the criminals into the open."

He stared at me.

"There are no criminals!"

"That's what makes them so difficult to catch."

I opened my rucksack.

Inside was a plastic sandwich box containing my latest invention.

THE PENDELTON SMOKE GENERATOR 3000

It was a mixture of flour, baking soda, and a generous quantity of Mum's cheapest perfume.

I'd spent most of the afternoon experimenting with it.

Unfortunately, it hadn't produced any actual smoke.

Mostly it produced a rather unpleasant smell and a cloud of white powder whenever I shook the box.

Still, the principle was sound.

Barnaby stared at it.

"What is that?"

"Advanced tactical equipment."

"It looks like flour."

"That's because it's disguised."

"Why does it smell like your mum?"

"Chemical warfare."

He took a step backwards.

"Maggie, put it away."

"Relax. It's completely harmless."

I shook the container.

A little white cloud puffed out around the lid.

Barnaby coughed.

"That's disgusting!"

"Excellent. Effective already."

I approached the fence.

Barnaby grabbed my sleeve.

"You promised we wouldn't go inside."

"And we won't."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Introducing a little smoke through the broken window."

"That's not smoke!"

"Smoke simulation."

"Maggie!"

I found a gap in the fence where the wire had come loose.

Beyond it, a cracked window stood slightly open.

Perfect.

I crouched, stretched my arm through the gap, and attempted to toss the sandwich box through the window.

Unfortunately, the sleeve of my trench coat caught on the wire.

Again.

I pulled.

The box slipped.

Its lid flew off.

And the entire contents exploded into a magnificent white cloud.

Directly into my face.

"AAAAAH!"

I staggered backwards.

Flour filled my eyes.

Perfume filled my nose.

Baking soda went down the front of my shirt.

I sneezed.

Then sneezed again.

Then sneezed so violently that my hat flew off and a bit of wee came out.

Barnaby grabbed my arm.

"MAGGIE!"

"I CAN'T SEE!"

"YOU'VE GOT FLOUR ON YOUR FACE!"

"THE SMOKE SCREEN IS WORKING!"

"It's not a smoke screen!"

I stumbled sideways into the greenhouse gate.

The rusty latch gave way.

The gate swung open.

And I fell through it.

Straight into a pile of empty plant pots.

CRASH!

For one terrible moment, everything went quiet.

Then I heard a sharp metallic click.

Followed by a hiss.

Water sprayed from a pipe above my head.

I looked up.

The greenhouse's ancient sprinkler system had somehow switched itself on.

Possibly when I'd fallen against the control box beside the gate.

Within seconds, water was pouring across the building.

The flour on my coat turned into paste.

The perfume smell became even worse.

And the greenhouse roof began making a noise that I did not particularly like.

Creeeeeeak.

Barnaby stood outside the gate.

"Maggie."

"Yes?"

"Get out."

I looked up.

The roof sagged.

A thin stream of water ran down one of the rotten wooden supports.

"Creeeeeeak."

"Maggie!"

I scrambled to my feet.

My shoes slipped on the wet floor.

I grabbed a shelf.

The shelf collapsed.

Three plant pots smashed.

Something large moved above me.

I looked up again.

The roof was coming down.

"OH, BISCUITS!"

I ran.

Well, I attempted to run.

My coat wrapped itself around my knees.

I stumbled through the gate, grabbed Barnaby, and threw myself towards the path.

Behind us came the most extraordinary noise I had ever heard.

A tremendous cracking sound.

Followed by smashing glass.

Followed by a wet, muddy crash.

CRRRRAAASH!

We landed in the grass.

For several seconds, neither of us moved.

Then Barnaby slowly lifted his head.

The greenhouse roof had collapsed.

Not completely.

But enough.

Several large sections of glass had fallen inward, bringing rotten wooden supports with them. Water sprayed across the wreckage, turning years of old soil into a thick brown soup.

A broken plant pot floated past the doorway.

I stared. And Barnaby stared.

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.

Then Barnaby turned towards me.

Very slowly.

"Maggie."

"Yes?"

"You've destroyed the greenhouse."

I considered this.

"Technically, the greenhouse destroyed itself."

He looked at me.

"YOU BROKE THE GREENHOUSE!"

"Structural weakness, Watson."

"YOU SET OFF THE SPRINKLERS!"

"Unexpected environmental conditions."

"YOU NEARLY GOT YOURSELF KILLED!"

I hesitated.

He had a point.

A small one.

But still.

Before I could reply, footsteps approached.

Vicar Thomas appeared around the corner.

He stopped.

Looked at the greenhouse. Then looked at the water. Then at the broken glass. And then he looked at me.

Covered in flour, perfume, mud, and what appeared to be half a flowerpot.

For a moment, he said absolutely nothing.

Then he whispered, "My greenhouse."

I stood up.

"Vicar, I can explain."

He looked at me.

"No."

"But -"

"No, Margaret."

"Technically -"

"Not another word."

I closed my mouth.

Barnaby looked at the ground.

The vicar took out his phone.

"I'm calling Inspector Miller."

I felt a sudden chill.

Of course.

Inspector Miller.

The criminal mastermind.

He'd arrive, examine the wreckage, and pretend to be shocked.

A perfect opportunity to destroy evidence.

I opened my notebook.

Unfortunately, it was soaking wet.

The pages stuck together.

My pen wouldn't write.

I sighed.

Even genius had its limits.

Inspector Miller arrived fifteen minutes later.

He took one look at the greenhouse and stopped walking.

Then he looked at me.

"Maggie."

"Inspector."

He looked at Barnaby.

"Barnaby."

"Sorry," Barnaby said immediately.

Inspector Miller sighed.

A long, exhausted sigh.

The sort of sigh that suggested he'd been looking forward to a peaceful Saturday evening and had instead been handed a greenhouse full of broken glass.

"Right," he said. "Someone explain."

I stepped forward.

"Inspector, I believe we've uncovered the headquarters of an international cat-trafficking organisation."

He closed his eyes. Then opened them again.

“Someone else explain.”

Barnaby made a small noise.

Vicar Thomas looked as though he might faint.

Inspector Miller looked directly at me.

"Margaret Pendelton."

"Yes?"

"Did you enter this greenhouse?"

"Briefly."

"Despite the warning sign?"

"Under exceptional circumstances."

"Did you interfere with the equipment?"

"Not intentionally."

"And did you bring some sort of powder into the building?"

I hesitated.

"Possibly."

He rubbed his forehead.

"Right. That's enough."

He turned towards Vicar Thomas.

"Nobody goes near this building until it's been made safe. I'll speak to the parish council."

Then he looked back at me.

"And you, Maggie, are going straight home."

I nodded.

"Naturally."

"Your parents will be hearing about this."

"Understood."

"And tomorrow morning, you're coming to the village hall to explain exactly what you've been doing."

I froze.

"Tomorrow?"

"Ten o'clock."

I considered this.

A public hearing.

The entire village.

Inspector Miller.

The milkman.

Possibly the vicar.

All gathered in one place.

My heart began to race.

Of course.

This was it.

The perfect opportunity.

I could finally expose the conspiracy.

In front of everyone.

"Inspector," I said solemnly, "I accept your invitation."

He stared at me.

"It's not an invitation."

"Naturally."

"It's a very serious matter."

"Absolutely."

"And I expect a proper explanation."

I smiled.

"Oh, you'll get one."

Barnaby looked at me.

Then at Inspector Miller.

Then back at me.

His face went pale.

"Maggie," he whispered, "please don't."

But it was too late.

The pieces were falling into place.

The vicar's pigeons.

The milkman's deliveries.

Inspector Miller's suspicious calmness.

The abandoned greenhouse.

The sheep.

Even the marrow.

All part of one enormous puzzle.

And tomorrow morning, in front of the entire village, I would reveal the truth.

I would name the criminals.

I would expose their organisation.

And I would rescue Sir Cheddar.

Possibly before lunch.

After all, I had a reputation to maintain.

And nothing says Britain's Greatest Detective quite like bringing down an international criminal empire in front of a room full of angry Yorkshire pensioners.

The Grand Reveal

By Sunday morning, I had prepared the greatest speech in the history of criminal investigation.

It was seven pages long, contained fourteen accusations, and included a dramatic pause after the words international feline empire.

I had practised it in front of my bedroom mirror.

Twice.

The first time, I accidentally knocked over my bedside lamp.

The second time, Mum came upstairs and told me to stop shouting about organised crime before the neighbours complained.

I considered both performances highly successful.

At nine o'clock, I stood in front of the mirror wearing my trench coat, my gardening hat, and a serious expression.

The coat was in a terrible state.

There were holes in both sleeves, a long tear down the back, and a large brown stain where the greenhouse mud had dried. The packing tape had begun peeling away, and the left pocket smelled strongly of cheap perfume.

It looked magnificent.

A coat that had seen battle.

A coat that had survived danger.

A coat that would one day hang in a museum.

Possibly beside Sherlock Holmes's hat.

"Maggie!" Dad called from downstairs. "Are you ready?"

"Almost!"

I gathered my notes, tucked my notebook into my pocket, and took one final look in the mirror.

"Today," I whispered to my reflection, "we make history."

Then I turned dramatically.

My coat caught on the wardrobe handle.

I decided not to include that part in my memoirs.

Mum was in the kitchen when I came downstairs, sorting a large pile of washing into separate baskets.

"Morning, love," she said. "There's toast if you want some."

"I shall require a substantial breakfast."

"There's toast."

"Excellent."

Dad was sitting at the table, finishing his tea. He looked at my trench coat and sighed.

"Are you wearing that?"

"Of course."

"Even after what happened yesterday?"

"Especially after what happened yesterday. A detective's clothing tells the story of their adventures."

"Yours tells the story of someone who fell into a greenhouse."

"I am glad we agree."

I sat down and helped myself to two slices of toast.

Mum looked at the coat.

"Honestly, Maggie, I don't think that thing will survive another wash."

"It doesn't need washing."

"It smells like a garden centre that's been sprayed with perfume."

I considered this.

"An improvement on biscuits, surely."

Mum shook her head and returned to the laundry.

"Now, listen. Your dad's taking you to the meeting, and I want you to be sensible."

"Naturally."

"And I want you to apologise properly."

"Of course."

"Not one of your detective speeches."

I stopped chewing.

"Ah."

Mum turned around.

"Maggie."

"Yes?"

"You're not planning to make a speech, are you?"

I considered my seven carefully prepared pages.

"Define speech."

Dad put down his cup.

"Maggie, this meeting is about the trouble you've caused. The vicar's greenhouse is badly damaged, Farmer Wilkins is furious, and Inspector Miller has had quite enough of your investigations."

I nodded.

"Understandable."

"Good. So just tell everyone what happened, apologise, and let us sort it out."

"Certainly."

Mum looked relieved.

Unfortunately, she didn't know that what had happened was far more complicated than anybody realised.

The greenhouse wasn't simply a greenhouse.

The sheep weren't simply sheep.

And the milkman certainly wasn't simply a milkman.

I finished my toast.

Then I stood.

"Father, we should leave. Justice awaits."

Dad looked at Mum.

Mum looked at Dad.

"Good luck," she said.

I smiled.

"Thank you, Mother."

"I was talking to your dad."

The village hall was already crowded when we arrived at quarter to ten.

I had never seen so many people gathered there outside the Christmas raffle.

Mrs Higgins sat in the front row, clutching a photograph of Sir Cheddar.

Vicar Thomas sat beside her, looking tired.

Mrs Cooper stood near the back with her arms folded.

Farmer Wilkins was talking angrily to another farmer.

And the milkman was standing beside the tea table.

I froze.

The milkman.

Here.

At the same meeting as Inspector Miller.

An astonishing coincidence.

Unless, of course, it wasn't a coincidence at all.

I narrowed my eyes.

The conspiracy was practically announcing itself.

Barnaby appeared beside me.

He was wearing a clean jumper and looked as though he hadn't slept properly.

"Morning," he muttered.

"Good morning, Watson."

"Please don't call me that today."

"Understandable. Nerves."

"No, Maggie. Embarrassment."

I patted his shoulder.

"Fear not. By lunchtime, we'll be heroes."

He looked around the crowded hall.

"By lunchtime, I might have moved to Scotland."

Inspector Miller stood at the front beside a folding table.

He had several sheets of paper, a pen, and a large mug of tea.

Behind him was the village noticeboard.

I immediately noticed something important.

A podium.

Well, technically it was a wooden lectern used for parish meetings.

But it would serve perfectly.

A detective's final revelation required a proper stage.

Dad guided me towards a seat beside Barnaby.

"Remember what we talked about," he whispered.

"Of course."

"Just explain what happened."

"Precisely."

"And apologise."

"Naturally."

He looked at me for a moment.

"Why do I get the feeling you're not listening?"

I smiled.

He closed his eyes.

I sat down and arranged my notes.

Seven pages.

Fourteen accusations.

One enormous criminal conspiracy.

Everything was ready.

At ten o'clock precisely, Inspector Miller cleared his throat.

"Right, everyone. Thank you for coming."

The room quietened.

"As most of you know, we've had a few unfortunate incidents over the last several days."

Several people turned to look at me.

I nodded politely.

Public interest was clearly growing.

"The damage to the parish greenhouse is serious," Inspector Miller continued. "Fortunately, nobody was injured, but repairs will need to be arranged. We've also had complaints about the road disruption yesterday morning and the damage at the church bake sale."

Vicar Thomas sighed.

Mrs Cooper shook her head.

Farmer Wilkins muttered something.

Inspector Miller looked towards me.

"Maggie, would you come up here, please?"

I stood.

Barnaby grabbed my sleeve.

"Just apologise," he whispered.

I smiled reassuringly.

"Trust me."

I walked towards the front.

My trench coat swept behind me.

One of the loose strips of packing tape stuck to a chair.

I pulled it free without stopping.

A professional must never allow minor wardrobe difficulties to spoil a dramatic entrance.

Inspector Miller gestured towards the lectern.

"Now, Maggie, I'd like you to explain what happened yesterday."

I nodded.

"Certainly, Inspector."

"And please stick to the facts."

"Of course."

I placed my notebook on the lectern.

Then arranged my seven pages of notes.

Then took a deep breath.

The room waited.

I looked slowly from one side to the other.

Mrs Higgins.

The vicar.

The milkman.

Inspector Miller.

All the pieces of the puzzle.

All the suspects.

All the witnesses.

This was my moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began, "for the past several days, our peaceful village has been living under the shadow of a terrible criminal conspiracy."

A murmur spread through the room.

Inspector Miller frowned.

"Maggie..."

"Please, Inspector. All will become clear."

I raised one hand.

"On Tuesday afternoon, an innocent citizen vanished without a trace."

Mrs Higgins sat up.

"My Cheddar!"

"Precisely."

I nodded gravely.

"A beloved member of our community. A three-time award-winning champion. A creature whose appearance has been described by some as deeply unfortunate."

Mrs Higgins looked offended.

"He's beautiful!"

"Naturally." I nodded forthcomingly and continued.

"At first, the disappearance appeared simple. A missing cat. A worried owner. A fifty-pound reward."

Several people nodded.

"But I soon discovered that the truth was far more sinister."

Barnaby lowered his head into his hands.

I turned a page.

"During my investigation, I uncovered evidence of a highly organised criminal network operating from within Little Oakhaven itself."

The milkman stopped drinking his tea.

Farmer Wilkins frowned.

Vicar Thomas whispered something to Mrs Higgins.

I raised my voice.

"A network with connections to the church, the dairy industry, and possibly the police."

Inspector Miller closed his eyes.

"Maggie."

"Not yet, Inspector."

I turned another page.

"First, the pigeons."

Vicar Thomas looked up.

"Oh, good heavens."

"Highly trained aerial operatives," I continued, "capable of conducting surveillance and possibly transporting small animals."

Someone at the back laughed.

I ignored them.

"Second, the milk deliveries. An umarked white van. Suspicious crates. Unusual stopping patterns."

The milkman stared at me.

"I deliver milk. And the van is marked."

"A slightly marked van." I corrected myself.

"It's my job!"

"Precisely."

Barnaby made a noise that sounded like he was suffering from a severe stomachache.

I continued.

"Third, the sheep."

Farmer Wilkins stood up.

"WHAT ABOUT MY SHEEP?"

I raised a calming hand.

"Please, sir. Your sheep were unfortunate victims of an elaborate criminal diversion."

"They were victims of YOU!"

"An understandable misunderstanding."

Inspector Miller stepped forward.

"Maggie, that's enough."

I turned towards him.

"Not quite, Inspector."

The room fell silent.

I had reached the most important part of my speech.

The final accusation.

The dramatic unmasking.

The moment when the criminal mastermind realised that the game was over.

I slowly removed my gardening hat.

Then placed it on the lectern.

"Because, ladies and gentlemen, there is one person who has been present throughout this entire investigation."

Inspector Miller stared at me.

"One person who knew about the disappearance from the very beginning."

Barnaby sat completely still. He looked awfully pale.

"One person who has repeatedly attempted to discourage my inquiries."

Dad rubbed his forehead.

I pointed dramatically.

"INSPECTOR MILLER!"

The room went silent.

Inspector Miller looked at me.

Then at my finger.

Then back at me.

"Maggie."

"Yes?"

"What exactly are you accusing me of?"

I took a deep breath.

This was it.

The moment of truth.

I opened my mouth.

And the door at the back of the village hall swung open.

"Sorry to interrupt!"

Everyone turned.

Mum stood in the doorway.

She was wearing her gardening cardigan and a pair of slippers, as though she'd left the house in rather a hurry.

And in her arms was something pink.

Something wrinkled.

Something with enormous ears, a blue velvet collar, and an expression of complete disappointment.

Mum looked around the crowded hall.

Then she smiled.

"Has anybody lost a cat?"

The Case Unravels

For the first time in my entire detective career, I had absolutely nothing to say.

This was unusual.

Barnaby once claimed I could talk for twenty minutes about a pencil sharpener if somebody gave me the opportunity.

But there I was, standing behind the lectern in the village hall, pointing accusingly at Inspector Miller, while my mother stood in the doorway holding Sir Cheddar.

The missing cat.

The kidnapped victim.

The reason I'd spent days investigating an international criminal organisation.

He was sitting in Mum's arms with his enormous ears sticking out sideways and his wrinkled face looking thoroughly unimpressed.

Nobody moved.

Nobody spoke.

Then Sir Cheddar yawned.

It was an enormous yawn.

His mouth opened so wide that, for a moment, he looked like a tiny pink hippopotamus.

Mrs Higgins screamed.

"CHEDDAR!"

She leapt out of her chair with surprising speed for a woman in her seventies of her build and hurried towards Mum.

"My baby! My precious little boy!"

Mum smiled and carefully handed him over.

"Found him about ten minutes ago. I thought you'd want him back."

Mrs Higgins hugged Sir Cheddar against her chest.

"Oh, you naughty little sausage! Where have you been?"

Sir Cheddar made a noise like somebody dragging a chair across a wooden floor.

"Mrrrrow."

Mrs Higgins burst into tears.

The room erupted into excited chatter.

People stood up.

Chairs scraped.

Vicar Thomas hurried over to examine the cat, while Mrs Cooper announced that she'd known he would turn up eventually.

I remained at the lectern.

My arm was still pointing at Inspector Miller.

I slowly lowered it.

This was an unexpected development.

A very unexpected development indeed.

Barnaby turned towards me.

His mouth was hanging open.

Then he looked at Sir Cheddar.

Then back at me.

And very slowly, a smile began spreading across his face.

I didn't like that smile.

Not one bit.

"Maggie," he said.

"Yes, Watson?"

"That's the cat."

"I can see that."

"Sir Cheddar."

"Yes."

"The missing cat."

"Thank you, Barnaby. I'm familiar with his identity."

Barnaby pressed his lips together.

His shoulders began shaking.

I narrowed my eyes.

"Are you laughing?"

"No."

He made a strange squeaking noise.

"You're laughing."

"I'm not."

He turned away.

Then made another squeaking noise.

I decided to ignore him.

A great detective must remain calm when confronted with unexpected evidence.

Inspector Miller cleared his throat.

"Well," he said, looking towards Mum, "I think we'd all be interested to hear where you found him."

Mum looked slightly embarrassed to have interrupted the meeting.

"Oh, sorry. I was sorting the washing and heard this strange noise from behind the tumble dryer. At first, I thought something was wrong with the machine."

Dad sat up.

"The tumble dryer?"

"Yes. You know that odd humming noise you've been mentioning?"

Dad stared at her.

"Oh, for goodness' sake."

Mum nodded.

"Well, I moved the laundry basket and had a look behind it. And there he was, curled up in the warm space at the back."

Mrs Higgins gasped.

"Behind your tumble dryer?"

"Apparently. Fast asleep."

She looked down at Sir Cheddar.

"You silly boy!"

Sir Cheddar blinked.

He didn't appear particularly sorry.

I gripped the edge of the lectern.

Behind our tumble dryer.

In our utility room.

In our house.

The entire time.

I considered this.

It was, admittedly, not where I'd expected the headquarters of an international cat-trafficking organisation to be located.

Inspector Miller looked towards Dad.

"Any idea how he got inside?"

Dad thought for a moment.

"Actually, yes. Tuesday afternoon. I was bringing the washing in from the garden. Had the back door open while I carried the baskets through."

Mum nodded.

"That's probably when he slipped in."

Dad scratched his head.

"He's been there ever since, I suppose."

"Well, not necessarily the whole time," Mum said. "He could have come out for food when nobody was looking. I found some crumbs from the cat biscuits we keep for Mrs Higgins."

Mrs Higgins looked astonished.

"You've been feeding him?"

"Not deliberately!"

Barnaby suddenly made a noise.

A rather unpleasant noise.

Somewhere between a cough and a strangled laugh.

I looked at him.

"Are you quite well?"

He nodded.

Then shook his head.

Then bent forward with his hands on his knees.

"Oh, Maggie."

"What?"

"Oh, Maggie!"

He was definitely laughing now.

I frowned.

"Would you care to explain what's so amusing?"

He straightened up and wiped his eyes.

"The footprints."

I stared.

"What footprints?"

"The ones in Mrs Higgins's garden. On Wednesday morning."

I remembered them.

Small muddy marks.

Leading through the gap in the hedge.

Towards our house.

I'd identified them as false evidence planted by criminals wearing tiny cat-shaped shoes.

A perfectly reasonable theory at the time.

Barnaby looked at me.

"I told you they went towards your house."

"Yes."

"And I said we should follow them."

"Yes."

"And you said they were fake."

I hesitated.

"Possibly."

"You said someone had made them with little cat shoes!"

A few people nearby turned towards us.

Barnaby was laughing so hard now that he could barely speak.

"Little cat shoes, Maggie!"

I felt my cheeks getting warm.

Very warm.

Possibly the warmest they'd ever been.

Inspector Miller looked interested.

"Little cat shoes?"

I cleared my throat.

"A working theory."

"Ah."

"One of several."

"Of course."

He was smiling.

I didn't like that either.

Then Dad spoke.

"Hang on. That explains why the dryer kept making a noise when it was switched off."

Barnaby turned towards him.

"Exactly!"

He looked back at me.

"And you heard that too!"

I frowned.

"I heard lots of things."

"Your dad mentioned it on Wednesday!"

"Yes, well..."

"And the cat was right there!"

He pointed towards Mrs Higgins, who was now kissing Sir Cheddar's forehead approximately fourteen times.

I looked at the cat.

The cat looked at me.

Then he sneezed.

Directly into Mrs Higgins's face.

She laughed delightedly.

"Oh, my horrible little darling!"

I looked down at my notes.

Seven pages.

Fourteen accusations.

Three separate diagrams.

And not one mention of a tumble dryer.

This was becoming rather awkward.

I glanced towards the back of the hall.

Perhaps I could slip away quietly.

Unfortunately, I was standing at the front of the room, wearing an enormous beige trench coat, behind a wooden lectern.

There was nowhere to go.

Inspector Miller turned back towards me.

"Well, Maggie."

I swallowed.

"Inspector."

"It seems we've solved the mystery."

"Indeed."

"And Sir Cheddar wasn't kidnapped."

"Apparently not."

"He wasn't transported by pigeons."

"No."

"Or hidden in milk crates."

"Unlikely."

"And there wasn't an international cat-trafficking organisation operating from the parish greenhouse."

I considered this.

"Not that we've discovered."

Inspector Miller stared at me.

Barnaby made another strangled noise.

I quickly added, "Although I believe we can safely close that line of inquiry."

"Very wise."

There was a small laugh from somewhere near the tea table.

Then another.

Even Farmer Wilkins chuckled.

Mrs Cooper covered her mouth.

And suddenly, people all around the hall were laughing.

Not everyone.

Mrs Higgins was far too busy cuddling her cat.

But enough people.

Far too many people.

I stood there with my face burning, wishing for the first time in my life that my trench coat came with a hood large enough to cover my entire head.

I'd imagined this moment so differently.

There should have been applause.

Possibly cheering.

Perhaps Inspector Miller shaking my hand and admitting he'd underestimated me.

Instead, half the village was laughing because the cat I'd been searching for had been sleeping behind our tumble dryer.

I stared at my shoes.

They were still muddy from the greenhouse.

One lace had come undone.

A small piece of dried flour fell from my coat onto the floor.

For approximately ten seconds, I considered giving up detective work altogether.

Then Mrs Higgins spoke.

"Well, I don't care how he was found. I've got my Cheddar back, and that's what matters."

I looked up.

She was smiling at me.

A proper smile.

Not a laughing-at-Maggie smile.

A grateful one.

"And you did work very hard looking for him, Margaret."

I straightened slightly.

"Thank you, Mrs Higgins."

"Even if you did go about it in a rather peculiar way."

Barnaby coughed.

I ignored him.

Mrs Higgins reached into her handbag.

"I promised a reward, and I intend to keep my word."

She took out a crisp fifty-pound note.

My heart leapt.

Fifty pounds.

The reward.

My first professional earnings.

She walked towards the front of the hall and held it out.

"There you are, dear."

I accepted it with both hands. In the background I heard someone, possibly Inspector Miller say something about “not encouraging her”.

I looked at the money.

"Mrs Higgins, your generosity will not be forgotten."

She smiled.

"Just try not to destroy anything else."

I nodded solemnly.

"Naturally."

Perhaps the morning hadn't been a complete disaster after all.

Inspector Miller cleared his throat.

"Now, Maggie, before we finish, there are still a few matters we need to discuss."

I looked up.

"Such as?"

"The greenhouse."

"Ah."

"The sheep."

"Yes."

"The vicar's marrow."

I sighed.

"Must we keep bringing up the marrow?"

Vicar Thomas raised his hand.

"I would rather like to bring up the marrow, actually."

Several people laughed again.

Inspector Miller folded his arms.

"And Mrs Cooper's cream cakes."

I looked at the fifty-pound note.

Then at Inspector Miller.

Then at the note again.

A terrible suspicion began forming in my mind.

"Inspector," I said carefully, "are you suggesting that my professional earnings might be affected?"

He smiled.

"I think that's something you and your parents will need to discuss."

Dad nodded. "Oh, we certainly will."

I looked at Barnaby.

He looked at the money.

Then at me.

And began smiling again.

I was starting to dislike that smile enormously.

The meeting eventually came to an end.

Inspector Miller thanked everyone for attending, Vicar Thomas reminded the villagers to stay away from the damaged greenhouse, and Farmer Wilkins informed me that I was never to go anywhere near his sheep again.

I agreed.

Reluctantly.

Mrs Higgins left carrying Sir Cheddar like a royal baby, promising to buy him a special dinner to celebrate his return.

The cat looked thoroughly satisfied with himself.

Mum came over to me.

"Well, love. Quite a morning."

I nodded.

"Indeed."

She looked at my notes.

"Did you really think Inspector Miller was running a criminal organisation?"

I hesitated.

"At one point, yes."

Mum shook her head.

"Oh, Maggie."

Dad appeared beside us.

"Come on. Let's get home."

I gathered my papers.

Barnaby helped me pick up my gardening hat, which had fallen behind the lectern.

He handed it over.

"Here you go, Sherlock."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Very funny."

He smiled.

"Thanks."

We walked towards the door.

Outside, the village was bright and sunny. Birds were singing in the trees, and somewhere nearby somebody was mowing their lawn.

Little Oakhaven had returned to normal.

Sir Cheddar was home.

The mystery was solved.

And the criminal conspiracy had turned out to be a cat sleeping behind a household appliance.

Barnaby walked beside me.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

Then he said, "You know, I did tell you to check your house."

I nodded.

"Yes, Watson."

"Several times."

"Indeed."

"And you didn't listen."

I considered this.

Then smiled.

"Yes, but eventually we did check the house."

He stopped walking.

I continued.

"Which proves that my investigation reached the correct conclusion."

Barnaby stared at me.

"Maggie."

"Yes?"

"Your mum found the cat."

"An invaluable contribution from a civilian assistant."

He closed his eyes.

I patted his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Watson. You played an important role too."

He opened one eye.

"Did I?"

"Absolutely. You provided biscuits, moral support, and several interesting theories."

He stared at me.

"Several interesting theories?"

"Not all of them were correct, naturally."

For a moment, he looked as though he might say something.

Something loud.

Possibly involving the words tumble dryer.

Instead, he took a deep breath.

Then let it out very slowly.

A long, exhausted sigh.

I nodded sympathetically.

His breathing condition was clearly getting worse.

We continued walking.

I slipped the fifty-pound note into the safest pocket of my trench coat.

The one without the hole.

My first case was complete.

Admittedly, the public revelation hadn't gone quite as I'd imagined.

And there had been a brief period of unnecessary laughter.

But the important thing was that Sir Cheddar had been found, Mrs Higgins was happy, and Pendelton Private Investigations had earned its first reward.

I smiled to myself.

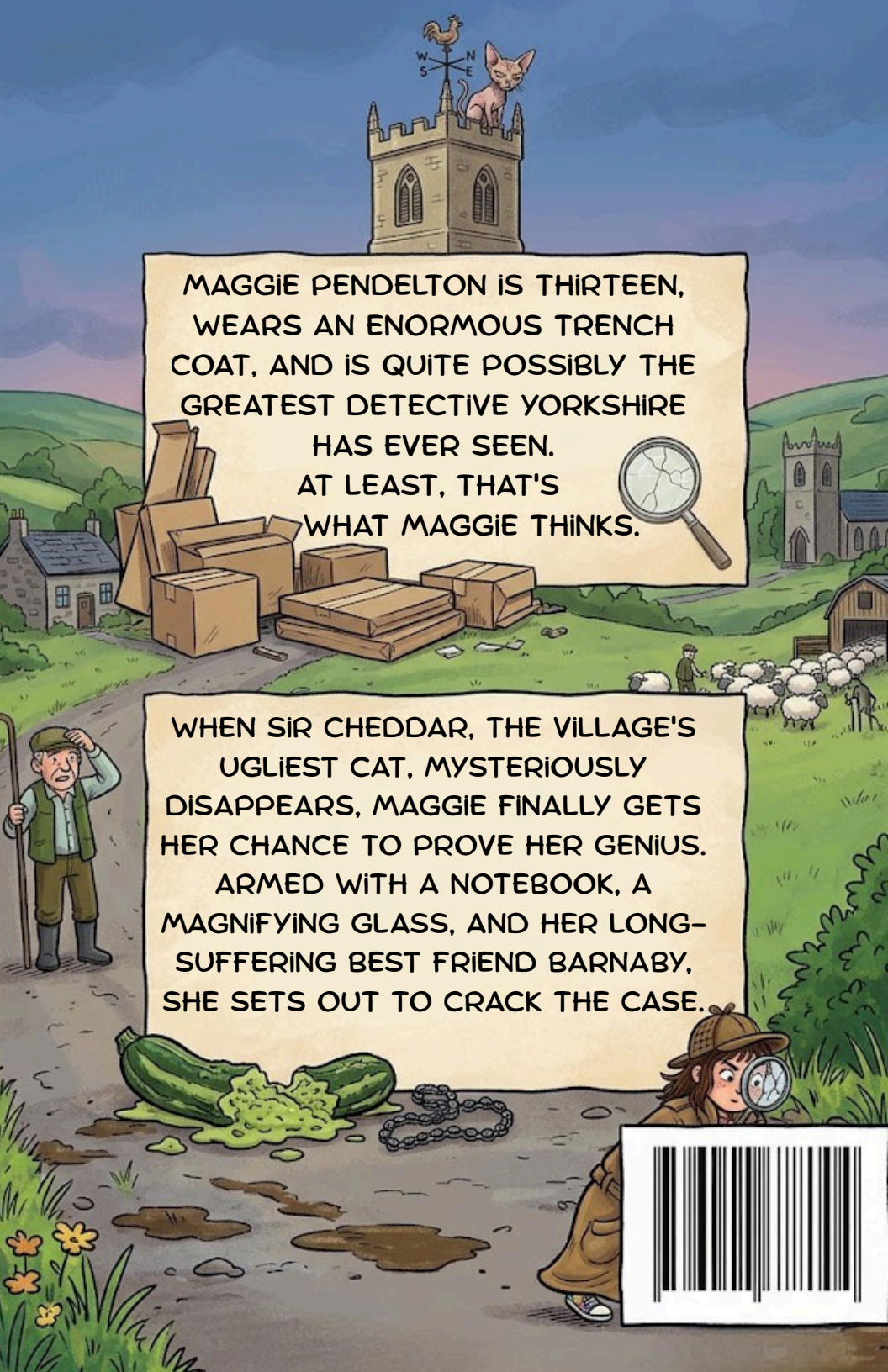
A successful conclusion.

A triumph of determination.

A victory for justice.

And, most importantly, proof that I had a promising future in the detective business.

Although I had a feeling Mum and Dad were about to have some rather unreasonable opinions about how I should spend my fifty pounds.


MAGGIE PENDELTON IS THIRTEEN, WEARS AN ENORMOUS TRENCH COAT, AND IS QUITE POSSIBLY THE GREATEST DETECTIVE YORKSHIRE HAS EVER SEEN.
AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT MAGGIE THINKS.
WHEN SIR CHEDDAR, THE VILLAGE'S UGLIEST CAT, MYSTERIOUSLY DISAPPEARS, MAGGIE FINALLY GETS HER CHANCE TO PROVE HER GENIUS. ARMED WITH A NOTEBOOK, A MAGNIFYING GLASS, AND HER LONG-SUFFERING BEST FRIEND BARNABY, SHE SETS OUT TO CRACK THE CASE.