

LORI & MAX
AND THE
BOOK THIEVES

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Chapter One

It's a typical Thursday afternoon at New Heath Primary School. Rain streams down the outside of the windows, the radiators are on full blast and I'm carrying out routine surveillance on my classmates. I sneak my top-secret notebook out of my pocket and look around discreetly. Class 6B is supposed to be doing silent reading, but even someone without my advanced level observation skills could see that pretty much nobody in the room is either silent or reading.

Jessica Pemberton and Maryam Begum are playing Rock Paper Scissors. Mustafa P. is writing AVFC on his knuckles with a Sharpie. Rosy Hannah is drawing a picture of a guinea pig (unless I tell you otherwise assume Rosy Hannah is always drawing a picture of a guinea pig because ... well ... she always is) and Kelly Keogh has nodded off.

I pick up my pencil and write the day's date in my notebook. I take another long look around the room, sigh and write in small letters:

Nothing to report

Everyone in 6B knows that ‘silent reading’ is just code. Not the kind of exciting top-secret code used by undercover detectives, but the kind of really quite boring and sometimes confusing code used by teachers. When Mr Probert says, ‘Take out your books and get on with some silent reading’, what he really means is, ‘Give me five minutes to get the interactive whiteboard working again.’ Everyone knows this.

Everyone that is except Max Ellington who sits next to me and is actually silent and is actually reading. Max is the tallest person in the class and seems even taller as, no matter how hard she tries (and to be honest I’m not sure she tries that hard), her hair always sticks straight up. Her hair also manages to trap lots of airborne objects – like small leaves and flying ants and occasionally pencil sharpenings. It’s quite distracting sitting next to Max’s hair. Sometimes when I’m supposed to be converting fractions into decimals, I find myself trying to identify stray items trapped on her head instead.

Max is currently buried in a book called

Marsupial Factfile and nothing will distract her. I reckon that Max already knows more facts about marsupials and probably every other species and sub-species of animal on earth than most people would think normal. Max isn't what most people would think normal though, she'd be the first to say that.

As I've mentioned, I spend my 'silent reading' time scanning the room for clues, suspects or any hint of criminal intent. Some people would say that keeping a constant eye on my classmates and noting down details about them in a secret notebook isn't what most people would think normal either. That's probably why Max and I stick together.

I'm Lori Mason and I'm a private detective. Or at least I would be if I had anything to detect. I had a big break earlier in the year when I cracked a major case. Max went missing, cash was stolen and the class hamster was involved in money laundering. Since then though things have been quiet. Too quiet. There was the short-lived mystery of Elijah Stephen's missing bike last month, but it turned out Mr Cheetham the caretaker had just moved it because it was a trip

hazard. (If Mr Cheetham was a superhero, Trip Hazard would be the name of his arch-enemy. His life is an endless, one-man battle against things left lying on the ground.) I mean, I was glad for Elijah that the bike turned up, but if I'm completely honest I was also a bit disappointed. I wanted mystery, intrigue, deception and cover-up, not another one of Mr Cheetham's really quite long PowerPoint presentations on health and safety. It's not that I long for bad things to happen but crime-fighting is tough when there's just no crime.

The only remotely interesting recent developments are that a new boy has joined the class this term and so has a new teacher. The new boy is called Taylor Barclay and he's quite small and very skinny. The new teacher is called Mr Probert and he's quite tall and very shiny. Miss Casey used to be our teacher. She was extremely forgetful, especially with names and she lost things almost as often as my nan does (about 80% – or four fifths – of my nan's time is spent looking for either her glasses, her purse or her keys). But even though Miss Casey spent two terms calling me Lisa rather than Lori and calling everyone

else, including the girls, Colin (note: there isn't a single Colin in the school), I thought she was a good teacher. Now she's off having a baby and I have dedicated a page in my secret notebook to my concerns regarding this.

Pros and Cons of Miss Casey becoming a parent:

Pro:

- 1. Miss Casey seemed really happy when she made the announcement. (Not entirely sure if happiness was due to impending baby or impending long break from Class 6B).*

Cons:

- 1. Miss Casey just cannot remember names. Will this be any better with her own child? Or will Baby Casey grow up unsure if it is actually called Colin or not?*

Proposed solution: Miss Casey should probably call the baby – boy or girl – Colin just to be on safe side.

- 2. Miss Casey can't remember where she's put things. Will this be any better with her own child? Or will little Colin be left in a toilet/on the photocopier/ in the boot of her car/ in any of the other places Miss Casey regularly loses things?*

Proposed solution: attach little Colin to Magic-Find-That-Key keyring, like the one I got Nan last Christmas. When you lose your keys/baby/similar, you just whistle and the Magic-Find-That-Key keyring emits electronic bleeps. (This hasn't been so useful for Nan as it turns out she can't whistle and neither can I. In fact, both the Magic-Find-That-Key keyring and attached keys to our house were lost by Boxing Day. Note to self: check if Miss Casey can whistle.)

- 3. While Miss Casey is on maternity leave, we're left with Mr Probert.*

Mr Probert is nothing like Miss Casey. He never forgets our names or loses anything. He wears smart suits, drives a big shiny car and uses an LED pointer. If we get a question right Mr Probert has an alarming habit of shouting 'Boom!' loudly. I've

actually stopped putting my hand up to answer questions as a direct result. Mr Probert is an NQT which means Newly Qualified Teacher but before he became a teacher he worked in 'business' for fifteen years. He talks about *business* a lot but he never actually says what business he was in. I find this quite mysterious. He's told us (several times) about the fateful day he realised he needed to share all he'd learnt from *business* with the next generation and decided to become a teacher. Mr Probert is always talking about the 'real world'. When Harry Besley copied Yasmin Oldershaw's work, Mr Probert said, 'you wouldn't get away with that in the real world'; if we are slow lining up for lunch he says 'this won't cut the mustard in the real world!' I don't know if I'm the only person who finds this confusing and worrying. What is this if it's not the real world?

The other big change this term is that we no longer have school on Friday afternoons. Mr Wilson the headteacher has been saying for years that the school hasn't got any money. That's why the trim trail in the playground was never replaced after the wood rotted and it fell apart. And why part of the hall has been taped off for

ages due to water damage. And why Mr Cheetham handed out cards not presents when he dressed up as Father Christmas last year. ‘We’ve tightened our belts as much as we can,’ said Mr Wilson in a special assembly, ‘but I’m sad to say it hasn’t been enough. The terrible truth is that we can no longer afford to open on Friday afternoons.’ He said that by closing early the school will save a bit of money on staffing and can start to repay its debts. I don’t understand how the school owes money or to who or for what. I thought about asking Mr Probert but I was sure the answer would involve the ‘real world’, so I decided not to.

Everyone is shocked and outraged. There have been lots of protests about the government cuts, our school has even been on the *News at Ten*! Max and I walked home together a few days after the announcement. ‘It’s not fair,’ said Max. ‘It means we get less education than other kids.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘Nan says it’s a scandal. She says it will be very harmful for us in the long term.’

‘I mean three hours a week, that’s 30 hours less a term, that’s ... 90 hours less a school year.’ Max

added it all up in her head. She's very good at maths. 'That's like us having an extra three weeks of holiday compared to everyone else!'

'I know,' I said, though I hadn't actually realised that until she said it. 'It's just really, really...'

We looked at each other,

'Good!' said Max.

'Amazing!' I agreed and we laughed and laughed all the way home.

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