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**WHO  
STOLE  
HALLOWEEN?**

**MARTHA FREEMAN**



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For my neighbors

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in State College, Pennsylvania.

You are always an inspiration.

# Chapter One

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Cats make excellent friends—except for one thing. They are bad explainers. Yasmeen says this because a cat’s whole vocabulary is only meow, purr, and hiss. She says meow, purr, and hiss are inadequate for good explanations.

Yasmeen is my best friend who happens to be a girl. She is smarter than me, but this time she’s wrong. When he feels like it, my cat can tell me a lot with only a lazy blink or a quick swish of his tail. The trouble is that most of the time he doesn’t feel like it.

The real reason cats are bad explainers is simple: They are too impatient. The way a cat figures out he understands something, you should understand it, too. And if you don’t, then you are not worth his trouble.

I was thinking these thoughts on a gray and spooky October afternoon, the kind when the trees look sort of like skeletons and the shadows look like ghosts. Yasmeen and I were running side by side, chasing my cat, Luau.

So far, Luau had not bothered to explain where he was going or why, or whether we were supposed to follow him or what.

“What’s your theory?” Yasmeen asked me. “What’s he up to?”

Yasmeen is tall, skinny, and fast, while I am none of the above. I was struggling to keep up, gasping for breath. “I only hope . . . it’s not over . . . to St. Bernard’s,” I said. “That place . . . gives me the creeps.”

St. Bernard’s is an old church near my street. Behind it is a just-as-old cemetery. I had hardly finished saying “the creeps” when Luau made a right turn and loped through the cemetery gate.

I swear, sometimes my cat has a nasty sense of humor.

Yasmeen laughed. “He’s going to St. Bernard’s all right.” Then she ran ahead of me through the gate, warbling like some soprano werewolf, waving her arms over her head.

Being cool the way I am, I ignored her behavior. Unfortunately, I was so busy ignoring her behavior that I didn’t see a broken headstone and I tripped.

“*Oh!* Oh, shoot—Alex, are you okay? Oh my gosh, you’re bleeding!” Yasmeen had run back and knelt next to me. “I have Band-Aids,” she said.

My hands hurt, but surprise stifled my tears. “You have Band-Aids?”

“I started keeping them in my pocket for emergencies,” she said. “It’s a crazy world, Alex. Anything might happen.”

Yasmeen dabbed my scratches with antiseptic wipes—she had those, too—and smoothed on three Band-Aids. I expected Luau to be gone by the time she was done, but when I stood up, I spotted his

sitting by a statue of a grumpy-looking angel, washing his face.

“I don’t get your feline,” Yasmeen said.

“You don’t think maybe he’s doing his ace-detective thing again?” I asked.

Yasmeen grinned. “I hope so.”

Luau seemed to be totally focused on personal hygiene, so, all sneaky, we crept toward him. We were about ten feet away when he looked up at us, which meant, *Oh, come on, guys—as if I didn’t see you stalking me! I’m a cat! We invented stalking!*

Then he took one more swipe at his ear and bounded away.

Where was he going? It wasn’t so long ago that my ace-detective cat had helped Yasmeen and me solve a mystery. Now he was so stuck-up he expected us to follow him anywhere, even into a deep, dark cemetery.

The wind made the dry leaves dance and rearranged the clouds. It also gave me goose bumps. Could it be being in a cemetery a week before Halloween that did that? Sometimes my imagination gets carried away. Everywhere Yasmeen and I ran, we were stomping on dead people, weren’t we? And where there are dead people, there are ghosts and ghouls and zombies.

“*There!*” Yasmeen said. She stopped under an oak tree and pointed at Luau. By now, he had doubled back and was sitting next to a big, elaborate headstone beside the grumpy angel. It wasn’t the headstone that caught my attention, though. What I noticed was what was stuck to the back of it—some kind of flyer with a picture. Why would somebody attach a flyer to a headstone, anyway?

Luau stretched and swished his tail and looked at us, which meant, *Why don’t you read me what it says?*

If I had been by myself, I would have called Luau to come, then turned around and gone home. But Yasmeen was never going to let me get away with that. She just loves a mystery, the stranger the better. And guess what? The flyer on the gravestone was the start of another big mystery, one that would get me, and Yasmeen, and especially Luau into grave, grave trouble.

# Chapter Two

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Yasmeen was disappointed.

“A flyer posted on a gravestone—*that* would have been mysterious,” she said. “But I guess it was only the wind holding it there. It must’ve blown through the fence or something.”

She held the paper up. Under a photocopied picture of a sleek black cat were the words:

**Please bring back Halloween!**  
**Beloved pet, last seen October 22.**  
**Call Kyle Richmond.**  
**No questions asked!**

Then there was a phone number and an address on Groundhog Drive.

“Isn’t that near Ari’s house?” Yasmeen asked me.

“Yeah,” I said, “and I think I know Kyle from school—who he is anyway. Uh, can we go now?” The sun had sunk behind Mt. Lyon, and the light was fading fast. You can imagine how eager I was to be in a graveyard in the dark. “Come on, Luau. You ready?”

Luau side-rubbed my leg and looked up at me, which meant, *Can I have a ride, please? All the running has left me exhausted.* I picked him up and heaved him over my shoulder, which isn’t as easy as it sounds. Luau is one of those big-shouldered, muscley cats. He’s not fat, but he weighs a ton.

We started walking. Luau purred. Yasmeen lectured: “There’s no such thing as ghosts, you know. They are merely figments of a vivid imagination.”

Yasmeen talks like that a lot. Her mom is a librarian, and her dad is an English professor. Her family lives next door to mine, so we’ve been friends since we were babies. It’s only because I’ve had so much practice that I, a regular kid, can even understand her.

“That’s your opinion,” I said. “But plenty of people have seen ghosts. Plus there’s that house on Main Street; everyone knows it’s haunted.”

By now we were walking back through the cemetery gate. The moon had come out, and three bats flitted overhead.

“The Harvey house?” Yasmeen shook her head. “Mr. and Mrs. Blanco bought that, did you know? I bet they never have seen any ghosts there—and neither have I.”

Mr. and Mrs. Blanco live on the same street as Yasmeen and me, Chickadee Court. “Are the Blancos moving?” I asked.

“Uh-uh,” Yasmeen said. “They didn’t buy the house to live in. They’re opening some kind of fancy

store. My dad calls it a health boutique.”

I laughed. “Makes perfect sense. A boo-tique!”

Yasmeen didn’t laugh.

“It’s a joke,” I explained. “Ghosts? Boo?”

“I get it,” Yasmeen said.

“Then you should have laughed,” I said, “to be polite.”

“Ha-ha,” Yasmeen said.

“Thank you,” I said.

Luau shifted his weight, and his whiskers tickled my ear. Only two blocks and we’d be home. My arms looked forward to putting him down. But Yasmeen had another idea. “Let’s do some detecting,” she said.

“No.”

“Oh, come on,” she said. “Just a teensy-weensy bit of detecting. *Harmless* detecting. I promise.”

This was not a promise I could trust. And I definitely did *not* want to get involved in another mystery.

Still, I couldn’t help but wonder what Yasmeen was thinking. So I asked her, and she answered with a question: “Didn’t you notice something unusual about the flyer? Aside from its being on the gravestone, I mean. Here, look.”

I studied the paper for a few seconds. “Well, the wording is kind of weird,” I said. “What kind of kid says ‘beloved’? Oh—and it doesn’t say ‘LOST.’ Most flyers like this say ‘LOST’ at the top in big letters.”

Yasmeen nodded. “Let’s stop off at the address on the flyer—at Kyle’s house,” she said. “It’s not that far. Let’s ask him if there was something strange about the cat’s disappearance. I don’t know what exactly, but I have this funny feeling.”

“What did you have for lunch?” I asked her.

“Ha-ha,” she said.



# Chapter Three

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At Kyle's front door I shifted Luau on my shoulder and used my elbow to ring the bell. After a minute we heard footsteps inside, and then a boy older than Yasmeen and me answered. I recognized him from school, but Yasmeen asked, "Are you Kyle? From the flyer about the cat?"

The boy nodded. He was as tall and thin as Yasmeen, and he had brown eyes like hers, but his skin was as paper-pale as hers is cocoa-dark. He looked sad, and I wondered if he was sad about his cat or just sad in general.

"Halloween is a black cat," he said, "not an orange tiger like this guy. But thanks for trying."

It took a second before I realized Kyle thought we had found Luau and mistaken him for his own missing cat, Halloween. "We know this one's not yours," I said, "because he's mine. But my friend here—her name's Yasmeen—wants to ask you a couple of questions."

"We're detecting," Yasmeen said.

"*She* is detecting," I corrected. "I am holding the cat."

"Don't you go to my school?" Kyle asked.

"I'm Alex," I said, "in Mrs. Timmons' class. We live over on Chickadee."

"What do you want to know?" Kyle asked.

Yasmeen got right to the point. "You didn't put 'LOST' on the flyer. Was there a reason?"

Kyle nodded. "Halloween isn't lost. Someone stole her."

"That's terrible!" Yasmeen said.

Without thinking, I clutched Luau tighter. Then I forgot I wasn't detecting, and I asked, "How do you know?"

Before Kyle could answer, a little girl came running down the stairs behind him, only stopping when she crashed into his knees. "*Pow! Got you!*" she said to Kyle, then she looked up at us. "Who are . . . ? Hey, wait! I've seen you before. At school!"

"Not me," I said, but Yasmeen was nodding.

"Yup, I know you, too," she said. "You're Cammie. You go to preschool with my little brother."

Cammie smiled. "His name is Jeremiah. He is really weird."

Yasmeen nodded again. "Got that right."

"Why are you here?" Cammie asked.

"About Kyle's cat," Yasmeen said, "Halloween."

Cammie scowled. "Kyle is an old foo-foo head. He was *so mean*—"

"*Mom!*" Kyle hollered before Cammie could finish. When nobody answered, he said, "Excuse me."

a sec.” Then he scooped up Cammie, who was wiggling and yelling, and carried her away.

“I’m sorry,” he said when he came back. “She’s, well . . . you know. Little kids.”

Yasmeen said, “I know,” but I didn’t say anything because, actually, I don’t know. Except for Luau, I’m an only child, and cats never act crazy the way kids do. “Anyway,” Yasmeen returned to being a detective, “are you sure somebody stole Halloween?”

“I’m sure,” Kyle said, “because I saw it happen. It was late at night. Something woke me, and I looked out the window. I saw Halloween out here on the porch. There was a moon, but no other light. I couldn’t see very well, but I definitely saw someone stroke Halloween and then grab her.”

“Did you run after him?” I asked.

Kyle shook his head. “I wish I had, but I was so surprised and—I guess—scared.”

“Was it a grown-up?” Yasmeen asked.

“I think so,” Kyle said. “But I don’t know for sure if it was a man or a woman or . . .”

Like I said, Kyle was pale in the first place. But now—was it my imagination? Or did he get even paler?

“Or what?” I asked.

Kyle smiled, but it was a sick, embarrassed smile. “You’ll think I’m crazy,” he said.

“Try us,” Yasmeen said.

Kyle took a breath. “Or a ghost,” he said.

Yasmeen and I looked at each other because, of course, we *did* think he was crazy. Kyle laughed a nervous laugh, then he shrugged and said, “It was dark.”

“Whatever it was,” Yasmeen said, “which way did, uh . . . *it* run with your cat?”

“Toward the cemetery, but I don’t know after that. He was fast. Even if I had tried, I couldn’t have caught him.”

“Did you tell your parents?” Yasmeen asked.

Kyle nodded. “I woke them up, but they thought I was dreaming. They said, ‘You just wait, she’ll be home in the morning.’”

“Sounds like parents,” I said. “Did you call the police?”

“My parents did,” Kyle said. “A guy came. I don’t remember his name exactly. Pickles or something.”

“Officer Krichels,” I said. I know all the police officers because my mom’s one, too, a detective.

“That’s it,” said Kyle. “He wrote everything down, but it’s not like he expected it to do any good. You could tell.”

“That was Friday—yesterday?” Yasmeen said.

Kyle nodded. “Halloween’s been missing since Thursday night.”

“Has anyone phoned you?” I asked. “Anyone who saw the flyer, I mean?”

“No.” Kyle looked sadder than ever. “Poor cat. She’s a good one, too. She never hunts birds, only mice, and she always comes when I call. Plus she’s funny. Her meow is all gruff and squeaky—like a rusty old hinge.”

Kyle sighed, and for a second we stood there feeling sad together. Then out of nowhere Yasmeen said, “Don’t worry, Kyle. We’ll find your cat.”

Kyle looked at us. “You *will*?”

I looked at Yasmeen. “We *will*?”

“*Why did you tell him that?*” I asked Yasmeen as soon as we were on the sidewalk.

“I couldn’t help it, Alex,” she said. “He looked so miserable.”

~~“Not as miserable as he’s gonna look when we don’t find his cat!” I said.~~

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“So we’ll find his cat,” Yasmeen said. “How hard can it be? We have a witness.”

“Some witness,” I said. “He thinks he saw a ghost! Besides, by now, how do we know the po  
cat’s even”—I put a hand over Luau’s ears so he couldn’t hear—“*alive?*”

# Chapter Four

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My shoulder was half-numb by the time I set Luau down at home. But did Luau even *mrrrf* his chauffeur a thank-you? He did not. Instead, tail in the air, he went to the kitchen to check out the action in his food dish.

Meanwhile, I could hear my parents upstairs. What were they laughing at, anyway?

“Hello?” I called.

More laughter. Then my dad answered, “Come on up, Alex. Get a load of your mom.”

Luau followed me up the stairs to their bedroom. When I saw them, I thought they both had gone crazy. Mom was wearing what looked like black-and-white striped pajamas with a matching hat. Dad had on a police uniform that was too big for him. But the totally weirdest part was they were attached to each other with handcuffs.

“For once I’m the cop in the family,” Dad said. “And she’s my prisoner. Get it?”

“It was his idea,” Mom said.

There is something freaky about seeing your parents in costume—like you want to ask, what happened to my *real* parents?

“You better go get ready, too,” Dad said.

“Ready for . . . ? Oh!” Then I remembered the party. It made me feel better to realize *why* they were dressed up.

“The world’s first-ever costume baby shower.” Mom shook her head. “Leave it to Marjie Lee to come up with a harebrained idea—”

“Was it Marjie’s idea?” Dad said. “I thought the hostess was that goofy friend of hers, the one that lives around the corner—what’s her name?”

“You’re probably right,” Mom said. “Everybody calls her ‘Miss’ Deirdre because she teaches preschool. She’s eccentric, but she’s supposed to be a wonderful teacher. Anita Popp told me there’s a waiting list to get into that school.”

“I’ve never been to a baby shower,” I said.

“They used to be women-only,” Dad said. “But here in the new millennium, men and children have to go, too.”

“*Have to?*” Mom repeated.

“*Get to,*” Dad said quickly. “I meant *get to.*”

“You mean just like here in the new millennium, women *get to* have careers?” Mom said.

Dad looked surprised. “You love your career,” he said, “don’t you?”

“Some days more than others,” Mom said, “same as you love being home some days more than others.”

“I had a good day,” Dad said. “I did the grocery shopping, made the ears for Alex’s costume, and fixed the leaky toilet in the downstairs bathroom. I guess your day wasn’t so hot, though?”

“No, it sure wasn’t,” Mom said.

“What happened?” I asked her.

“Two missing cats,” she said.

“You’re kidding,” I said, “because—”

Dad interrupted. “Is that all that went wrong?” he asked. “You seem pretty upset.”

Luau bumped Dad’s leg, which meant, *What could be more upsetting than missing cats?*

“It’s not only the cats that got to me. It’s where they were missing from.” Mom paused, remembering something unpleasant. “I’ll spare you the details, but it was a real strange coincidence. Two houses, opposite sides of town, but in both cases the cat owners seemed to me to be . . . how do you put it delicately? Negligent?”

“What’s *negligent*?” I asked.

“Irresponsible. Like they didn’t take such good care of their cats, didn’t feed them well. I guess the bottom line is that they didn’t seem like very nice people. And, I don’t know, seeing animals treated badly? It’s upsetting.”

“How do you know they were bad cat owners?” I asked.

“There were other pets, too,” Mom said. “A dog at one of the houses was chained to a tree—you could see its ribs, poor guy. At the other house there were some guinea pigs. . . .” Mom wrinkled up her nose. “Like I said, I’ll spare you the details.”

Dad said it seemed odd that people would call the police about cats they didn’t even bother to care for properly. Mom was nodding. “I thought so, too,” she said. “And if the cats had simply disappeared, neither owner would’ve bothered, I don’t think. But the cats didn’t just disappear. Both owners claim somebody sneaked onto their property at night, grabbed their cats, and ran.”

“That’s just what happened to Kyle who lives over on Groundhog!” I said, and then I explained about the flyer and visiting Kyle’s house.

“You say Fred Krichels was already out there to talk to them?” Mom said. “Then I’d better sit down with him and compare notes. I hope it’s not that Halloween business starting up again. I thought that old ghost story was forgotten by now.”

“What old ghost story?” I asked, remembering what Kyle had said.

“*Hey.*” Dad looked at his watch. “We don’t have time for ghost stories—not if there’s going to be any food left at the party. Alex, run along and get dressed. *Scoot!*”

All this time we’d been talking, Mom and Dad were still attached with the handcuffs. Now when Dad said “scoot,” he made a sweeping motion that yanked Mom’s arm along for the ride.

“*Ow!*” Mom said.

“*Ow!*” Dad rubbed his shoulder. “Uh, sorry.”

“Give me the key,” Mom said. “I still have to do my makeup.”

“*You* have the key,” Dad said.

“Since when does the prisoner keep the key?” Mom asked.

“Oh, come on,” Dad jangled the handcuffs. “Stop clowning, honey, and unlock them.”

Mom looked at him. “Me?” she said. “Clowning?”

Dad made a face. “Uh-oh.”

# Chapter Five

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Our neighborhood is big on celebrations. We have a Christmas party and a Fourth of July picnic. We have an Easter egg hunt and a Passover dinner. We celebrate St. Patrick's Day and Chinese New Year.

And when there's something special like a new baby coming, there's a party for that, too.

The Lees live right next door—the other side from Yasmeen's family—but even so, we were late getting to their house. My parents hadn't found the handcuff key, and it took my mom a long time to do her makeup left-handed and attached to Dad. As we walked in the door they were both crabby and blaming each other.

Mrs. Ryan spotted them first and laughed. She was dressed like a little girl going to a party: short skirt, ankle socks, and a big bow in her hair. This made sense because Mrs. Ryan teaches first grade.

"Well, aren't you two *cute*?" she said. "Whose idea was it—don't tell me. Dan's? Am I right?"

Mom took a deep breath; Dad smiled an uncomfortable smile.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Ryan said.

"Nothing," Mom said. "Everything is ducky."

"Noreen," Mrs. Ryan said to my mom, "I have known you for ten years, and something is much less than ducky. Wait a second—don't tell me—you've lost the key!"

I had to hand it to Mrs. Ryan. Not much gets past a first-grade teacher. Unfortunately, it did not improve my parents' mood when the next thing she did was crumple up in a laughing fit.

"Bill!" she called to her husband between cackles. "Come over here. You won't believe it!"

This was a bad time to hang out with my parents, so I aimed for the living room. The lights were dim there, and the whole place felt haunted. In the corners were gauzy spider-webs loaded with black plastic spiders. Fake bats dangled from the ceiling on elastic threads, so when you bumped them, they bounced. The food was creepy-looking, too: eyeball appetizers, hot dogs that looked like blood fingers, Jell-O in the shape of a brain, a cake with a cardboard dagger stuck in it.

There were a lot of people around the food table, but Yasmeen was easy to spot. Her costume was bright yellow and black stripes; she was a bumblebee.

Before I could tell her about the two new catnappings, she frowned and said, "Okay, I give up. What are you supposed to be?"

"What do I look like?" I answered.

"A boy in orange sweat pants and an orange sweatshirt that doesn't exactly match, and you have two construction paper triangles on your head," she said.

I turned around and showed her my tail. "I'm Luau!" I said. "*Duh!*"

“Where are the claws?” Yasmeen said. “The sharp teeth? The intelligent expression?”

“Ha-ha,” I said, and bit down on a taco chip.

Besides Yasmeen and Jeremiah and me, five other kids live on our street. There’s Toby Lee, who is not quite three and about to be bugged by a new baby. There’s Michael Jensen, who is rich and smart and, Yasmeen tells me, “really cute.” There’s Michael’s little brother, Billy, who is always listening to his new iPod, so it’s like he doesn’t live here among us but in some other dimension. And there are the Sikora kids, Sophie and Byron. Sophie is the bad kid in the neighborhood, a year younger than Yasmeen and me, big for her age and spoiled. She can’t walk into a room without breaking something, and she talks all the time. Her brother, Byron, is as quiet as wallpaper—I guess because Sophie has never let him talk.

All us kids were hanging out by the food, of course. Michael was dressed as Superman, and I wouldn’t you know, Billy was a CD sandwich. His mom had covered two giant cardboard disks with foil, then suspended them on straps over his shoulders. I tried to tell him, “Good costume!” but he had his headphones on and couldn’t hear me. Sophie was dressed as an angel, which had to be somebody’s idea of a joke.

“You ought to see Mrs. Lee.” Michael blew up his cheeks and stretched out his arms. “Her costume’s a pumpkin, and she didn’t have to use padding.”

“Let’s go,” said Yasmeen.

The family room was crowded. Mrs. Lee sat in a big chair in the corner. Michael was right—she made a very convincing pumpkin. Next to her was her friend, Deirdre, the preschool teacher. Only she didn’t look like her usual ditzy, cheerful self. She was wearing some kind of spooky gray costume with a gray wig and ghoulish black-and-gray face makeup. She was knitting with rainbow yarn.

“What do you think she’s making?” I asked. “It sure is teeny.”

“A sweater for the baby, I guess,” Yasmeen said.

Somebody came up behind me and tapped my head with a big fist. I knew without turning around it was Bub.

“Hey,” I said, and elbowed him in the belly. It was the easiest place because so much of Bub is belly.

“What’s this in your hair?” he asked. “Oh, now I see, orange cat ears. You’re supposed to be Luau. Is that it?”

“I’m glad somebody understands,” I said. Then I took a good look at him and laughed. Bub is an old guy who lives by himself at the end of our street. Some of the neighbors say he’s original, and some of them say he’s a slob. For the party he had dressed in red long johns, which are like old-fashioned one-piece pajamas that button up the front. He had a mask on, too, but he had pulled it up over his head, so I couldn’t see what it was.

“What are *you* supposed to be?” I said.

He pulled the mask down over his face.

“You’re a *fish*?” I said.

“I’m a red herring!” he said. Then he laughed and laughed.

In mystery stories a red herring is a clue that points to the wrong person. Bub loves mysteries. When he’s not watching old mystery movies, he’s reading old mystery books.

“What’s he laughing at?” Yasmeen asked.

“Himself, as usual,” I said.

“What’ve you been up to lately?” Bub asked me.

I told him about Kyle’s missing cat, Halloween, and then I told him and Yasmeen what my mom

had said—that two more cats were missing, too.

“Two more?” Yasmeen said. “Now we’ve got an even better mystery to solve!”

“Can’t we leave it to the police?” I said. “My mom’s a really good detective.”

“And so are you,” Yasmeen said. “It must be genetic.”

I knew Yasmeen was buttering me up so I’d help her. Even so, it was nice, not to mention totally rare, to get a compliment from her. Mean-while, Bub thought it would be great if Yasmeen and I were to work on another mystery, and he offered to help.

“Maybe you can,” I said. “Mom said something about the missing cats being connected to the Halloween story. Do you know anything about that?”

Bub nodded. “I think I know what she’s talking about. It has to do with the old Harvey house downtown, the one the Blancos put all that work into.”

“The one that’s *haunted*,” I said, looking at Yasmeen.

“That’s how the story goes,” Bub said. “Supposed to be that the ghost has it in for cats—black cats in particular. It’s been years now, but I can remember cats disappearing around Halloween time and the Harvey ghost taking the blame.”

“There’s no such thing as ghosts,” Yasmeen said.

Bub shrugged. “I don’t know if there is or there isn’t. But if you want to know more about the story, we have an authority nearby—Jonathan Stone. He was born here in town—knows where all the bodies are buried, so to speak.”

Mr. Stone also lives on our street. He’s an older guy. His wife is dead, and his kids are grown-up.

“Have you seen him tonight?” Yasmeen looked around.

Bub shook his head no. “He’s not much for parties.”

This was true. In fact, Yasmeen and I used to be afraid of him. But then last year when he caught us trespassing in his yard, he didn’t yell, he invited us in, served us hot chocolate, and even gave us a really important clue to the mystery we were working on. That was the first one Luau, Yasmeen, and I solved, and it turned out to be pretty scary, as well as confusing. Somebody had been stealing pieces of our neighborhood’s annual Twelve-Days-of-Christmas display.

“You know who else is missing tonight?” Bub asked. “The father.”

It was my turn to look around. “Mr. Lee?”

“Ah-yup,” said Bub. “I hear a business deal came up, and he’s out of town.”

This was no surprise. Mr. Lee works all the time, same as my dad did before he quit to be a househusband.

Now Miss Deirdre stood up and clacked her knitting needles to attract everyone’s attention.

“Boys and girls?” she said. Then she looked all embarrassed and shook her head. “Sorry,” she said. “It’s force of habit. What I *meant* to say was welcome!”

She said a few more smiley words about the wonders of new babies and moms and all that. Then it was time for presents.

The first one was a baby monitor, one of those walkie-talkie things. You put the microphone by the crib so you can hear on the receiver if the baby fusses or burps or tries to escape. Bub had never seen one, so I explained.

Bub shook his head. “I never knew a baby that had trouble making itself heard.”

Next, Mrs. Lee opened a tiny outfit with bears on it, and all the moms in the room said, “Awww.” After that came a blanket with pictures of sailboats. Then another baby monitor. This one was what my dad would call high-tech, everything really small and shiny.

After a while, I learned something about baby showers: The presents are boring. About the one



interesting one was a teddy bear that played music by Mozart. It came from Mr. and Mrs. Sikora, who explained that classical music makes babies smart.

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“If that’s true, they must have forgotten to plug in Sophie’s bear,” Yasmeen whispered.

I laughed, but Bub shook his head. “You kids are wrong about her. She’s rambunctious, but she’s smart as a whip. When my doorbell busted, who do you think rewired it?”

Yasmeen and I looked at each other. Was it possible Sophie was some kind of genius with electronic stuff?

Or maybe this was another one of Bub’s famous jokes.

Anyway, after that, Mrs. Lee opened a battery-powered wastebasket for smelly diapers, and Yasmeen and I decided we couldn’t take any more. Back in the living room, I dared her to eat one of the hot-dog fingers, but she couldn’t, and it turned out neither could I. We took the dagger out of the cake instead, and shared a big piece.

“After church tomorrow,” Yasmeen said, “we’ll look for clues.”

“I don’t have time for detecting tomorrow,” I protested. “I have homework.”

Yasmeen ignored my argument. “The thief was in a hurry. People in a hurry drop things. I bet anything there’s a clue. Don’t worry,” she said. “This case will be easy to solve. I swear.”

# Chapter Six

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“So what are you proposing?” my mom asked my dad. We were home after Mrs. Lee’s shower. The door was closed, but I could hear them from the hallway. “Are we supposed to sleep like this?”

“Look at it this way,” Dad said. “It’s going to make a very funny story one day.”

“Who would we tell?” Mom said. “Thanks to Beth Ryan, we’re the laughingstocks of the neighborhood now!”

I knocked on their door.

“Come in,” Dad said. When I did, I saw they were standing as far apart as two people handcuffed together can stand.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“No,” Mom said.

“*Honey*,” Daddy said.

“Sorry,” Mom said. “That wasn’t fair. I’m not mad at you, Alex. I’m mad at *him*.”

“Go ahead and look around,” Dad told me. “It seems like we’ve eyeballed every cranny, but metal keys don’t vaporize. It has to be somewhere.”

Luau was right behind me, nose in the air like maybe he was trying to smell the key. I shook my parents’ bedspread, opened bureau drawers, crawled around on the rug.

Luau, meanwhile, leaped onto my dad’s bedside table, sat down, and watched me. Then he pulled one of his favorite tricks, one he usually uses for waking me in the middle of the night. He batted things onto the floor. The alarm clock. Two books. A magazine. A seashell from our vacation last summer.

A key.

I reached down for it. “Does this look familiar?” I asked.

“The key!” Dad said.

Mom smiled. “Where was it?”

I took a deep breath and tried to speak in my best let’s-all-remain-calm voice. “On your bedside table, Dad.”

“I looked there!” Dad said.

“Well, you didn’t look very hard,” Mom said.

“Well, possibly if you hadn’t been dragging me toward the bathroom so you could do your *makeup*. . . .”

I unlocked the handcuffs for them. They shook out their arms and rubbed their shoulders but nev

stopped arguing.

~~“You really must have your eyesight checked, Dan,” Mom said. “You know, at your age—”~~

~~“My age?” my dad said. “You’ve got six months on me, Noreen.”~~

Luau gave me a look that meant, *Cats have excellent eyesight, in case you didn’t know*. Then I jumped to the floor and padded out the door toward my room. I followed.

“Good night, honey, and thanks!” my mom called.

“Yeah, Alex, thanks!” Dad called.

Don’t thank me, I thought. Thank Luau.

The next day was Sunday. I slept late, ate my bagel and cream cheese, then played Lousy Lumberjacks on the PlayCube. It was looking like pretty much a perfect day—the kind when you never get out of your pajamas—until Dad said, “Don’t I remember something about math homework?”

And Mom said, “The day’s half gone and you’re not even dressed, Alex? You’re squandering daylight!”

When Mom makes one of her “squandering daylight” speeches, resistance is futile. So I pulled on my sweatpants and a T-shirt that didn’t smell too bad.

The math homework turned out to be easy. When that was done and Yasmeen still hadn’t called, I hoped that maybe she had forgotten all about detecting.

Yeah, right.

At three o’clock she knocked on the door.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said.

“That’s totally okay,” I said.

“Mom and Dad were hosting the fellowship hour after church, so we had to clean up. It took forever. The people at our church can really put it away, that’s what my dad says.”

“It’s probably too late to do any detecting now, right?” I said.

“What do you mean?” Yasmeen said. “There’s plenty of light left. Come on. We’ll go over to the cemetery and walk from there back to Kyle’s house. Bring the ace detective, too. Since we’re on the trail of a catnapper, he’s going to want to help.”

# Chapter Seven

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Yasmeen, Luau, and I have solved one whole mystery together. So I guess I can't claim to be an expert. But here is something I think I know. A lot of the time, solving mysteries is unexciting.

I mean, in the movies there are explosions and car chases and women wearing bathing suits. In real life it's more like you look around, you ask questions, and you think hard.

Anyway, unexciting is definitely how it was that Sunday afternoon. Yasmeen and I walked at the speed of snails from the cemetery gate to Kyle's house and back again. By the fence we found an empty beer can. On the sidewalk we found a gum wrapper. Next to an old green car we found a grocery receipt. Yasmeen, who was wearing yellow rubber gloves, carefully saved each in a plastic bag.

"What's with the gloves?" I asked her.

"So we can preserve the catnapper's fingerprints," she said.

"But we don't have a way to analyze fingerprints," I said.

"Your mom does."

"Right, Yasmeen," I said. "She's gonna get the whole FBI crime lab involved to find a missing cat."

"*Three* missing cats."

"We don't even know if the others are connected to this one!"

"Oh, come on, Alex. Do you think there's more than one thief grabbing cats in the middle of the night?"

"How do I know? Maybe it's a coincidence. Anyway, the circumstances in the other cases were different. My mom said those owners were negligent, didn't care that much about their cats. Does Kyle seem negligent to you?"

"No," Yasmeen admitted. "But that just makes it more mysterious, right?"

Luau did not turn out to be keen on detecting, even though the case was catnapping. What Luau wanted instead was regular napping, and the cemetery didn't disturb his dreams either. While Yasmeen and I collected our useless clues, he slept in a cozy spot by a headstone. We were about ready to give up when he strolled toward us, tail swishing, nose in the air.

"He smells something," I told Yasmeen.

"Does it have anything to do with Kyle's cat?" Yasmeen asked.

"More likely with some tasty rodent."

Luau sniffed for a few seconds, then he walked down the sidewalk and stopped next to the o

green car. I could see he wanted to get under it from the curb, but the car was parked too close, so there wasn't space. He did a quick ear swipe and looked back at me, which meant, *Take a look under there, why don't you? Something smells very interesting.*

I crouched and peered into the darkness.

"What do you see?" Yasmeen asked.

"Nothing," I said, then, "Oh . . . wait. There is something. It's round." I reached and brushed it with my fingertips. "I need a stick—do you see one?"

What Yasmeen found was more like a branch. It was awkward, but I managed to bump it against the thing till I had moved it over to the side.

"Gloves!" Yasmeen said, but by then I had already grabbed the thing. Any catnapper prints were now mixed up with mine.

In daylight our mysterious object seemed to be a handkerchief wrapped around a ball of crinkly stuff. I held it up for Yasmeen to see. "It's a sachet," she said. "You know, you put them in drawers to make your clothes smell good."

Okay. But then why was Luau acting crazy—mewing pathetically and trying to climb me like a tree?

"Can he have it?" I asked.

Yasmeen said why not, so I tossed it on the ground. Luau pounced, then looked around like I thought for sure someone must want to steal such a marvelous prize.

"No, really, Luau. It's all yours," I said. "Enjoy."

Luau is ordinarily a very dignified pet. But whatever this stuff was, it brought out his inner kitten. Clutching the ball between his paws, he rolled onto his back and thumped at it with his hind feet, finally tossing it into the air. Then—and I never knew he was this coordinated—he caught it in his mouth and rolled over and over with it till you'd swear he had to be dizzy.

And that's when—*duh*, Alex—I realized what the white ball was made of. I opened my mouth to say the word, but Yasmeen beat me to it: "Catnip!"

# Chapter Eight

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Was the catnip a clue?

Or a coincidence?

Yasmeen and I had a lot to discuss that night, so I got permission to eat over at her house. The only trouble with having dinner there is that her parents are so strict. Grace before dinner. Cloth napkins. And no matter what kind of mushy, mysterious green stuff a kid finds on his plate, he is expected to eat it.

“Alex?” Mrs. Popp, Yasmeen’s mom, looked up at me after we’d all said amen. “Would you like to start the conversation?”

When I was little, Yasmeen’s parents scared me. By now, though, I’ve figured out that they’re okay, they even like me—as long as I remember to speak in complete sentences.

“Sure, Mrs. Popp,” I said. “Yasmeen and I have had an interesting afternoon.”

“Tell us about it, Alex,” Yasmeen’s dad said.

So—between small bites of some mysterious meat—I told them. In a way, it was nice to be telling the story now because for once Yasmeen didn’t interrupt. At Yasmeen’s house you don’t dare interrupt.

“. . . a sachet Yasmeen called it.” I was almost done. “But then we both realized, because of how crazy Luau was acting, that it had to be catnip. After that, we brought it home. We’re still trying to figure out what it means.”

For about a minute Jeremiah, Yasmeen’s little brother, had been shaking his head and looking gloomy. Actually, he looks gloomy most of the time.

“Do you have something to contribute, Jeremiah?” Yasmeen’s mom asked.

“Uh-oh,” said Jeremiah.

“Why do you say that?” asked Mrs. Popp.

“Because somebody’s a litterbug,” said Jeremiah. “Miss Deirdre tells us *never* be a litterbug. And *never* will.”

“Admirable, Jeremiah,” said Professor Popp. “What else does Miss Deirdre tell you?”

“Put the play dough back in the bag or it will dry out,” he said. “Drink your milk, unless you’re allergic. Oh—and always be kind to animals. She says that a lot.”

Professor Popp said, “Excellent advice,” and he sounded serious, but he might have been kidding. Professor Popp has an English accent because he grew up on some island I can never remember; to me he always sounds serious.

Jeremiah nodded. “Miss Deirdre knows everything,” he said.

“Everything?” asked Mrs. Popp.

Jeremiah nodded again.

“There’s one thing I bet she doesn’t know,” Yasmeen said. “She doesn’t know who stole Halloween.”

“So you two children are at it again, eh?” said Professor Popp. “Playing detective? I must say I think the catnip is a clue. Could the thief have dropped it?”

“That’s what I think,” said Yasmeen. “The thief carried it so Halloween would like him—so she’ll go with him and not complain.”

“That’s reasonable,” said Mrs. Popp, “if we can associate the word *reasonable* with someone who steals cats. What kind of person would do such a thing?”

“A wacko!” said Jeremiah.

Professor Popp arched his eyebrows. “Jeremiah?”

“Sorry,” Jeremiah said. “A nut case?”

Mrs. Popp pursed her lips and shook her head.

This time Jeremiah thought for a few seconds. Then he said, “A lunatic.”

His parents looked at one another. “Better,” they agreed.

“Did you know the word *lunatic* comes from *luna*—the Latin word for moon?” Mrs. Popp asked. “A lunatic was thought to be somebody influenced by the moon.”

“You mean like werewolves?” I asked.

Yasmeen laughed. “So now you think it was a werewolf who stole Halloween?”

Jeremiah shook his head again. “Uh-oh.”

“You don’t even believe in werewolves,” I reminded Yasmeen, “or ghosts either.”

“But ghosts are real,” said Jeremiah, “aren’t they?”

“No,” said his mom.

“Possibly,” said his dad. “You know, I’ve done a bit of research on ghost stories. Every culture has them. Is that coincidence?”

“Oh, Derek, for goodness sake,” said Mrs. Popp. “When people don’t understand something, they invent a supernatural explanation. There are many mysteries in the world, but one thing is certain: Ghosts exist *only* in the imagination.”

# Chapter Nine

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There is something strange when you look into a mystery: It sort of takes over your brain and even your sleep. That night I dreamed we found a whole bunch of clues, but most of them turned into fish and swam away. The only one that didn't was a little slip of white paper with writing on it.

The dream woke me at six, and I couldn't fall back to sleep. Luau was awake, too, lying on my feet, blinking at me and purring, which meant, *I love you, Alex, I love you so—especially when you give me catnip.*

Down the hall I could hear my mom in the shower. It was Monday. She worked an early shift. That would be my best chance to talk to her.

I went down to the kitchen and poured myself a bowl of Pirate Berry Crunch. Mom came down a couple of minutes later. When she saw me, she jumped.

"What on earth are you doing up?" she asked.

"Sorry," I said. "I couldn't sleep."

The coffeemaker was burbling. Dad measures out the grounds and water the night before, then sets a timer so it's ready when Mom gets up. I used to think this was nice of him, but Mom says he only does it so he can sleep in without feeling guilty. Now she poured herself a mug and sat down across from me at the table.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Just the missing cats," I said. "I can't stop thinking about them—Kyle's especially." Then I told her about my dream and about finding the catnip under the car. I told her what Bub said about a ghost story, too.

Mom nodded. "We've been lucky the last few years. No cats stolen at all. But before that, I remember several incidents. People with a sick sense of humor stole them and blamed the ghost. Once there was a ransom note. Another time somebody deposited two in the cellar at the Harvey house. The house was vacant then. Luckily, the cats made plenty of noise, and a neighbor heard them. The cats were pretty hungry by the time we found them."

"Kyle said the thief might have been a ghost," I told her.

Mom laughed and shook her head. "Right, honey. And the tooth fairy robs banks in her off-hours."

I laughed, too. Then I told her Mr. Stone was supposed to be the expert on the old ghost story.

Mom said that didn't surprise her, then she looked at her watch and stood up. "I've got a seven o'clock meeting. We're planning our patrols for Halloween night."

"But you haven't eaten breakfast," I protested.

"There'll be doughnuts at the meeting."



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