

THE CASE OF THE GREEN BICYCLE



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About This Book

At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2 (CEFR)
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 12 chapters · ±16,000 words

The Series

Above the second-hand bookshop on Ivy Lane, in the market town of Foxton, four children run a detective club: Leo, who sees everything; Ada, who writes every case in the casebook; Sam, who knows everyone; and Bea, who believes nothing without proof. Their cases are the friendly kind — lost things, strange sounds, puzzles nobody can explain — and their golden rule never changes: look properly, because a mystery is rarely what it seems.

This Book

Nothing ever happens in Foxton. Or so the Ivy Lane Detectives think — until Sam runs up to the attic, red in the face, shouting that his green bicycle has vanished from the market square.

Ada opens a brand-new casebook. Who took it? And why? Then PC Hobbs tells them the strangest part of all: Sam's is the third bicycle to disappear this month — and the other two came back. Cleaned. Mended. Better than before.

Four friends, five questions, and one golden rule: look properly, because a mystery is rarely what it seems. From a smear of green paint to a bench under the lime tree, the trail leads somewhere nobody expected. What sort of thief takes a bicycle... and gives it back better than they found it?

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Chapter 1: The Bicycle Is Gone

The attic above our bookshop is the best room in Foxton. Nobody says so but me, because nobody else is allowed up there. It is our room — the room of the Ivy Lane Detectives.

You reach it by a narrow stair behind the shop, past shelves that smell of old paper and my dad's tea. Mum keeps the key on a red ribbon, and she only gives it to us if the casebook stays honest. That is the rule. The casebook is a fat brown book with my name inside the cover: *Ada Quill, keeper of the book*. I write down everything the club does.

That Saturday morning, the casebook was empty. Not one word in it. We had a club, a room, a cat and a rule — but no case.

A case is a puzzle you have to solve. And we didn't have one.

Leo Frost sat by the window with his magnifying glass. Leo notices everything: mud on your shoes, a clock ten minutes slow, a ladder moved one window along. Bea Khan drew straight lines on a fresh sheet of paper, because Bea likes lines. And Dusty, our grey cat, slept on my knee, which meant I could not move at all.

"Nothing ever happens in Foxton," said Leo.

He was wrong. He just did not know it yet.

Down in the square the market was busy. Saturday is market day in Foxton. The square fills up with stalls — cheese and cabbages, boots and buttons, jam and old books my dad hopes to buy cheap. You can hear it all the way up in the attic: the calls, the cart wheels, the church clock counting the hours.

Then feet came up the stair. Fast feet, two steps at a time.

The door flew open and Sam Potts fell into the room.



“It’s gone!” he said. He could hardly breathe. “My bicycle. It’s *gone!*”

Sam hears everything in Foxton half a day before anyone else. He knows every stall and every dog by name. But now he just stood there, red in the face, pointing at the window as if the whole town had done something wrong.

“Sit down,” I said. “Breathe. Tell it from the start.”

Sam sat. Dusty opened one eye, then shut it again.

“I rode down to the market,” Sam said. “Same as every Saturday. I left my bicycle by the drinking fountain, like always. Then I helped Uncle Ted lift his boxes. Ten minutes, maybe. When I came back — nothing. Just the fountain. My green bicycle was gone.”

The drinking fountain stands in the middle of the square. It is old, made of grey stone, with a little iron cup on a chain so people can fill it and drink. Everybody leaves a bicycle there. Everybody always has.

I looked at Leo. Leo looked at me. Bea had already turned her paper over.

I opened the casebook to the first clean page, and my hand shook a little, because I knew what this was.

“Sam,” I said, “this is a case.”

Our first case.

We had made a plan for cases, back in the winter, when the club was only an idea and a tin of biscuits. Before you guess anything, you ask five questions. Bea had written them on the attic wall in chalk, big and clear:

WHO. WHAT. WHERE. WHEN. WHY.

And under them, bigger still, the thing we always say — Rule One:

Look properly. A mystery is rarely what it seems.

This was the first real case we had ever used them on. I wrote the five questions down the side of the page, one under the other, and we began.

“WHAT is gone?” I said.

“My bicycle,” said Sam. “Green. A bit of rust on the chain. And a wobbly mudguard at the back.”

I wrote it down: *green bicycle, wobbly mudguard.*

“WHERE?”

“By the fountain. In the square.”

“WHEN?”

Sam thought hard. “I left it at half past nine. I came back at — quarter to ten? The church clock had only just gone ten minutes before.”

Bea wrote the times in a neat row on her sheet. “Fifteen minutes,” she said. “That’s quick. Prove it took longer and I’ll believe it took longer.”

“WHO,” I said, “saw it happen?”

Sam’s face fell. “Nobody. I didn’t see. I was round the back with the boxes.”

“Then we need a witness,” I said. A witness is a person who saw the thing happen. Without one, we only had an empty space by a fountain.

“And WHY?” said Leo, from the window.

Nobody answered that. Why would anyone take Sam’s old green bicycle, rust and wobbly mudguard and all? It was not a grand bicycle. It was not worth much money.

“That one,” I said, “we can’t answer yet.”

I wrote WHY, and left the line after it empty. An empty line in a casebook looks like a small, patient question, waiting to be filled.

“Come on,” said Leo. He was already on his feet. “The square. Now — before the market packs up and everyone goes home. Look properly. That’s the rule.”

We went. Dusty stayed behind. Dusty is a detective who works from a cushion.

Down the narrow stair, through the shop, past Dad, who said, “Where are you four off to?” and did not really wait for the answer. Out into Ivy Lane, round the corner, straight into the noise and the good smell of the market.

The square was full. We pushed through to the fountain and stood where the bicycle should have been.

There was nothing there. Just wet grey stone, and a small wet ring on the cobbles where a tyre had rested.

Leo went down on his knees at once. He did not care who watched. He looked at the ring, at the cobbles, at the foot of the fountain, close, the way he looks at everything.

“No marks of a fight,” he said. “No long scratch. Whoever took it didn’t drag it away.” He frowned. “They wheeled it, slow and careful. That’s a strange way to steal a bicycle.”

“Trouble?”

We all jumped. PC Hobbs stood right behind us, tall and calm, holding his own black bicycle by the handlebars. PC Hobbs is the town constable. He knows the club, and — this is the important part — he takes us seriously. He

does not laugh and pat our heads. He waits, and he listens, and he misses far less than he lets on.

“Sam’s bicycle is gone,” I said. “From the fountain. Between half past nine and quarter to ten.”

I held up the casebook so he could read the page. Hobbs read it slowly: the five questions, the empty line after WHY. He did not smile at it. He nodded, the way a builder nods at a wall that has been built straight.

“You wrote down the times,” he said. “Good. Times matter.” He looked at Sam. “Green, you said? A wobbly mudguard at the back?”

Sam stared. “How did you know about the mudguard?”

Hobbs did not answer that. He took a small notebook of his own from his top pocket and turned back through the pages — one, then another, then another.

“Because yours,” he said quietly, “is the third.”

The market went on all around us — the calls, the wheels, the clock. But inside our little ring by the fountain, everything had gone very still.

“The third?” said Bea.

“The third bicycle to vanish from this square this month,” said Hobbs. “Different bicycles. Different owners. Every one of them from near this fountain.”

I turned to a clean line and wrote it down, pressing my pencil hard: *not the first — THE THIRD*.

Leo’s eyes were bright now. Leo is never so happy as when Foxton stops being boring.

“Three bicycles,” he said. “Then where are the other two? Who has got them?”

PC Hobbs put his little notebook away. He looked at the four of us, one by one. And for the first time he smiled — but it was a puzzled smile, the smile of a man who has not worked something out either.

“That,” he said, “is the strange part. The other two — they came back.”

Chapter 2: The Bikes That Came Back

"They came back," PC Hobbs had said. Then he climbed onto his tall black bicycle and rode off to his work, because a constable cannot stand by a fountain all morning, even for us.

The four of us stayed where we were and looked at each other.

"A stolen bicycle does not come back," said Bea. "That is what stolen means. It is gone. Prove it can come back, and I will believe you."

"Hobbs just proved it," said Leo. "Two of them came back. So they did not stay stolen. They *returned*." He said the word slowly, the way you taste something new. To return is to come back. A lost dog returns. A borrowed book returns. But a stolen bicycle?

"Then that is our next question," I said, and I opened the casebook to a clean page. "Not only who took them. Where did the other two go — and who brought them back?"

I wrote at the top of the page: THE BIKES THAT CAME BACK.

"We need the owners," said Sam. And Sam, of course, knew exactly who they were. Sam knows everyone in Foxton. "Ned, at the bakery. And Miss Petherton, at the library. Both of them lost a bicycle. Both got it back. I heard it days ago. I just never thought it was a *case*."

We started with Ned.

We found him behind the bakery, loading warm loaves into the basket on the front of his bicycle. Ned is older than us and always in a hurry, but he stopped when Sam called his name.

"My bicycle?" he said. "Oh, that went, all right. Off the square, by the fountain, one Tuesday. I was cross, I can tell you. How is a boy meant to carry bread with no bicycle?"

"WHEN did it come back?" I asked. I had the casebook open and my pencil ready.

"Two days later. Thursday morning. It was just... there. Leaning on the bakery wall, as if it had never gone."

“And was it the same?” said Bea. “Exactly the same?”

Ned laughed. “No. That’s the funny part. It was *better*.” He wheeled it out so we could see. “Look. It was filthy before — mud all up the back. Now it’s clean. Somebody washed it.” He squeezed the lever on the handlebar, and the bicycle stopped dead under his hand. “And this. The brake. The brake is the part that stops you — you squeeze the lever, and it grips the wheel. Mine had been broken for a month. I had to stop with my feet, like a baby. And now?” He squeezed it again. “Mended. Somebody mended my brake.”



To mend is to fix something that is broken, to make it work again. I wrote it down: *Ned’s bicycle — returned Thursday — cleaned — brake mended*.

“Did you see who brought it back?” asked Leo.

“Not a soul,” said Ned. “I opened up, and there it was.” He shrugged and climbed on. “A thief who washes your bicycle and mends your brake. Funny sort of thief.” And he rode off down the lane, ringing nothing, because now he had no need to warn people with his feet.

The library was our next stop.

It was quiet inside, and it smelled of dust and glue, a little like our shop. Miss Petherton knows everything that was ever printed in Foxton. She listened to our question over the top of her glasses.

“My bicycle? Gone a whole week ago, from the square. Two days later, back at my gate. And yes—” she smiled before we could ask, “—cleaned. And mended too, in a way.”

“In a way?” said Bea. Bea does not like *in a way*. Bea likes exact.

Miss Petherton went to the side door, where an old black bicycle leaned against the wall. She put her thumb to a little metal dome on the handlebar and flicked it.

Dring-dring.

“The bell,” she said. “It had not rung in five years. Five years! I always meant to fix it, and never did.” A bell is the small round thing on the handlebar that you ring to say *mind out, I am coming*. Hers rang bright and clear across the silent library, and Miss Petherton looked as pleased as a girl. “Then one morning, it rings like new.”

“So somebody took it,” I said, writing fast, “kept it two days, cleaned it, mended the bell, and gave it back.”

“That is what somebody did,” said Miss Petherton. “Now what sort of thief is that?”

We did not know. But we were beginning to see a shape.

Then, as we left, Miss Petherton said one more thing. “My neighbour, old Mrs Finch, lost her bicycle a good while before mine — and hers has never come home at all.” It did not match the rest, so I wrote it at the very top of the page and thought no more of it. I should have.

Out on the library steps, in the sun, we put it together.

“Three bicycles,” I said, reading from the casebook. “Sam’s — still gone. Ned’s — returned Thursday, brake mended. Miss Petherton’s — returned, bell mended. Both cleaned. Both fixed. And both came back exactly two days later.”

“Not just any bicycles,” said Leo. He had gone very quiet, which with Leo means he is thinking hard. “Bicycles with something wrong. Ned’s brake was broken. Miss Petherton’s bell had not worked in years. Sam—” he turned. “Your mudguard.”

“Wobbles like anything,” said Sam.

“Nobody takes a good bicycle,” said Leo slowly. “Whoever this is, they take the ones that need mending.”

Bea had already sat down on the step with a fresh sheet of paper.

“Then I want a map,” she said.

So we went back to the square. Bea drew a map — the fountain in the middle, the stalls, the church, the lime tree in its corner. A map is a picture of a place seen from high above, so you can see where each thing sits and how far one is from another. On it she made a small cross for every bicycle we knew of.

“Where did Ned leave his?” she asked.

“By the fountain,” said Sam. “The north side.”

“And Miss Petherton?”

“By the fountain too. She leans it on the same side. Everyone does.”

Bea drew two crosses close together, both beside the fountain, and a third for Sam’s.

While she drew, Leo did a stranger thing. He took a ball of string from his pocket — Leo always has string — and lay down flat on the cobbles beside the fountain. People stepped round him. He did not care. To measure is to find out how far, or how long, or how big, with a string or a ruler. Leo was measuring.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Looking properly,” he said. “Rule One.” He held one end of the string on the wet ring where Sam’s bicycle had stood, and stretched it out across the square. “If I know exactly where each bicycle stood, maybe I can see what the thief could see from there. What all three had in common.”

He measured to the first cross. He measured to the second. Then he lay with his cheek flat on the cold stone and looked along his string, low, the way you look along a shelf to see if it is straight.

He went very still.

“Ada,” he said quietly. “Come down here. Look along the string.”

I got down on the cobbles beside him. I put my cheek to the stone and looked where he looked — low across the square, past the fountain, past the feet and the baskets and all the market noise.

Every string, from every spot where a bicycle had stood, pointed the same way. Every one of them pointed to a single thing, on the far side of the square, in the shade at the edge of it.

The old wooden bench under the lime tree.

“Every bicycle,” said Leo, “stood where you could see that bench.” He did not lift his cheek from the stone. “And where the bench could see *them*.”

Chapter 3: The Bench Under the Lime Tree

The bench had been watching the bicycles. So now we would watch the bench.

That was Leo's idea, and it sounded simple. It was not simple at all.

"You cannot watch a bench on a Tuesday," said Sam. "Nobody sits there on a Tuesday. Nobody sits anywhere. The square is empty." And he was right. Whoever we were looking for, he only came out when the market came out. So we had to wait for the next market Saturday, and waiting is the hardest part of any case. I know, because I write the cases down, and there is never much to write while you wait.

The worst of the waiting was Sam's bicycle. Ned's had come back in two days. Miss Petherton's had come back in two days. Sam's had now been gone eight. Every morning he went to the fountain to look, and every morning it was not there.

"It will come back," I told him. "The others did."

"The others were quicker," said Sam, and for once he did not smile.

At last Saturday came. Up in the attic, Mum filled a big bottle with lemonade for us and cut four slices of bread and jam. Dusty was asleep on Bea's map of the square, exactly on the cross that marked the fountain, and would not move for anyone.

"He is guarding the evidence," said Bea, and lifted him off by his middle, map and all.

"We cannot just stand and stare at a bench," she said, as we went down the narrow stair. "People notice a child who stares. But nobody notices a child with a drink." So we carried the lemonade out into the square and found a good place on the low wall by the church, where we could see it all: the stalls, the fountain, and across the cobbles, in the shady corner, the bench under the lime tree.

A lime tree is a tall tree with soft, pale green leaves. In summer it drops a sticky sweetness that the bees love. Ours had stood in that corner longer

than anyone could remember, and under it sat the bench — a long wooden seat, old and grey, long enough for four grown-ups side by side.

“Right,” said Leo. He opened his notebook and licked his pencil. “We watch. To watch a thing is to keep your eyes on it and see what it does, for as long as it takes. Everyone who sits on that bench, we write down. Sam names them. I draw the faces. Ada keeps the time.”

So we watched, and we drank our lemonade, and we looked, for anyone passing, like four children with nothing to do.



The bench was never empty for long.

First came old Mr Dabney, who sat down heavily with his stick and read his newspaper for half an hour, folding it, unfolding it, tutting at it.

“Mr Dabney,” said Sam. “He used to drive the school bus. He knows every road for twenty miles.”

Leo drew a round face with a big moustache. I wrote the time.

Then two mothers came, with a pram between them, and rocked it while they talked, and did not stop talking once.

“Mrs Cole and Mrs Ahmed,” said Sam. “The baby is Mrs Ahmed’s. His name is Yusuf and he cries at night, my mum says.”

Then the postman, Mr Bright, sat down for exactly five minutes to rest his feet, with his heavy bag beside him, and then got up and went on.

“Mr Bright,” said Sam, before I could even ask. “He walks eleven miles a day. He told me.”

And so it went, all morning. A gardener. Two girls with ice creams. A lady who fed the pigeons until a stall-holder shooed her off. Sam knew every single one. He knew their names, and their dogs’ names, and where they lived, and what they did. That is Sam’s gift. Leo sees things; Sam knows people.

By noon my page was full of names and times, and Leo’s page was full of little faces, and we had learned exactly nothing.

“This is no good,” said Bea. “Everybody in Foxton sits on that bench. Everybody. It proves nothing.”

“Wait,” said Leo.

He was looking across the square, very still, the way he goes still when something has caught him.

A man had sat down on the bench.

He was a neat old man, small and tidy, in a grey coat with every button done up, though the day was warm. On his head he wore a cap – a soft hat with a little stiff brim at the front, flat and grey, the kind of cap that old men have worn for a hundred years. He sat down without a sound, folded his hands on his knees, and looked out over the square.

“Sam,” I said quietly. “Who is that?”

Sam looked. Sam looked for a long time.

“I don’t know,” he said at last, and he sounded almost hurt. “I don’t know him.”

That had never happened before, not once all morning. Sam knew everyone. But not this man.

We watched him. He did not read a paper. He did not feed the pigeons. He did not talk to anybody, and nobody talked to him. He simply sat, with his hands folded, and looked — not at the church, not at the sky, not at the market.

“He is watching the fountain,” said Leo, in a low voice. “No. Look properly. He is watching the *bicycles* by the fountain. Watch his eyes.”

I watched his eyes. Leo was right. Every time somebody wheeled a bicycle up and leaned it by the grey stone, the old man’s head turned, just a little, and followed it. When a bicycle rang its bell or squeaked its brake, his head turned again. He was reading them, the way Leo reads a room, the way I read a page.

He stayed one hour. I know, because I kept the time: he sat down at eleven, and at twelve exactly he stood up, straightened his coat, touched the brim of his cap to nobody at all, and walked off down the far lane and out of the square.

“After him?” whispered Sam, half up off the wall.

“No,” said Leo. “Not yet. We don’t chase what we don’t understand. We watch, and we write it down, and we think.” He closed his notebook. “One man. Every market day. One hour. Watching the bicycles. That is not nothing. That is our first real —”

“Leo,” said Bea.

She was not listening to him. She was staring past his shoulder, at the fountain, and her mouth was open, which for Bea is a very great deal.

We all turned.

By the fountain, in the middle of the busy square, in the very spot where Sam had left it eight days before, stood a bicycle.

A green bicycle.

It had not been there a moment ago. I would take an oath on it — the space had been empty when the old man sat down. But now the bicycle was there, all at once, as if the cobbles had grown it. That is what it is to appear: to be suddenly there, when a moment before there was nothing.

“That’s mine,” said Sam. He did not shout. He said it very small. “That’s my bicycle.”

We ran.

It was his, all right, but it was not the bicycle he had lost. That one had been dull and dirty, with rust up the chain and a rear mudguard that wobbled like a loose tooth. A mudguard is the curved cover that sits over the wheel and keeps the mud from flying up your back — and Sam’s had hung by one screw for a year.

Not now. Now the whole bicycle shone. Somebody had washed it, and oiled the chain until it ran like silk, and — Sam touched the mudguard with one finger — mended it. It was firm. It did not wobble. It sat over the wheel as straight and true as the day it was made.

And there, along the edge of the mended mudguard, where a careful hand had held it, was a small smear of paint, still not quite dry.

It was green. Not the green of the bicycle.

A darker green. A green I knew, though I could not think, just then, where I had seen it.

Chapter 4: The Green Paint

For two days I could not stop thinking about that smear of green.

It was such a small thing. A little line of paint on the edge of Sam's mended mudguard, no longer than my thumb. But it would not leave me alone. I had seen that green before. I knew it the way you know a face you cannot name. And a clue you cannot name, Leo says, is a clue you have not looked at properly yet.

On Monday we met in the attic. Sam had wheeled his bicycle up Ivy Lane and leaned it by the shop door, and Dusty had already climbed onto the saddle and gone to sleep, as if the whole case were his.

I opened the casebook and read out what I had written.

"Green paint," I said. "Darker than the bicycle. Not quite dry. Ada knows it but cannot think where from."

"That is not a clue," said Bea. "That is you forgetting something."

"It is a clue," said Leo. "We just have to make it talk." He tapped the wall, under the five questions, where Bea had chalked our rule the day the club began. *Look properly. A mystery is rarely what it seems.* "Rule One," he said. "We do not guess the green. We find it. Somewhere in Foxton there is a thing painted that exact green. When we find the thing, we are close to the man."

Bea liked that. It was the kind of plan you could prove. She rubbed a little of the dry paint from the mudguard onto a scrap of white card, so we had the green to carry with us.

"Now we can compare," she said. To compare is to hold two things side by side and see if they match. "We hold this card against every green in town. When it is the same green — really the same — we stop."

So that is what we did. We spent the whole afternoon hunting a colour.

We started on Ivy Lane. The bookshop door is green, but a soft, tired green, like an old apple. Not it. The postbox two doors down — no, that is red. A garden gate down the lane was green, but a blue-green, the green of the sea in a picture. We held the card against it. Not the same.

“Greens are like names,” said Sam, enjoying himself. “You think there are only a few. Then you look, and there are a hundred.”

We went on. We compared the card against the green shutters of the bank, which were too dark. We compared it against a watering can outside the flower stall, which was too bright. In the market square the grocer had rolled out his awning against the sun — the big striped cloth that hangs over the front of his shop — and one of the stripes was green. We stood under it and held up the card.

“Close,” said Leo.

“Close is not the same,” said Bea, and she was right. The awning green was newer somehow, and a little too yellow. We moved on.

By four o’clock my legs ached, and the card was grubby from all the walls I had pressed it to, and still we had not found it. We walked down past the library, tired, and came to the little park by the river, where the paths run under the trees and the old folk sit in the afternoon.

And I stopped.

Because there, along both sides of the path, stood a row of benches — and every one of them was painted green.

Not apple green. Not sea green. Not too bright and not too dark. A calm, deep, proper green, the green of a summer that has only just begun. They shone. The paint was new.

“That’s it,” I said. My voice came out small, the way Sam’s had at the fountain. “That is the green. I have walked past these benches all my life. That is where I knew it from.”

Bea was already down on her knees, holding the card against the nearest bench. She looked up.

“Same,” she said. “The very same. Prove it — done.”



Sam ran his finger along the slats. “The council painted them this spring,” he said. “Every bench in the park, all fresh. My mum said they had found the money for it at last.”

The council is the group of people who look after the town — who mend the roads, and sweep the square, and, it seemed, paint the benches. I wrote it in the casebook in careful letters. *The green is bench-green. Council paint.*

And then the case turned, the way a key turns in a lock.

“Wait,” said Leo, and his eyes went far away. “If it is council paint, then the man has council paint. On his hands. On Sam’s mudguard. But you cannot buy this green in a shop. So where did he get it? He must work where the paint is kept — or where the benches are.”

Sam knew where the council kept its things. He always seemed to have an uncle who had worked there once. He led us round behind the market to a high wooden gate with COUNCIL YARD painted on it in white. We stood on tiptoe and looked through the gap.

Inside were barrows, and a heap of sand, and stacked road signs, and along one wall a shelf of paint pots — greens and blacks and whites. But a chain ran through the door handles, and on the chain hung a heavy padlock, shut fast.

“Locked,” said Bea. “All of it. Nobody is taking paint out of there on a market morning.”

We stepped back. It had felt so close.

“Then not the yard,” said Leo, slowly. “Somewhere else. The new benches are in the park. But a bench does not last for ever. When one breaks, where does it go? Where does it wait to be mended?”

Sam thought hard. Sam’s face when he is trying to remember something is the best thing to watch in all of Foxton.

“The shed,” he said. “Behind the museum. There’s an old shed where the council puts the broken benches, and the fence posts, and all the bits waiting to be fixed. My Uncle Ted took a broken table there once. Nobody goes near it. It just sits at the far end of the yard, half hidden by bushes.”

A shed is a small building of wood, made for keeping tools and other things out of the rain.

We looked at one another. Then we went — quickly, and without much talking, the way you do when a case is walking ahead of you and you are hurrying to catch it up.

The museum stands at the top of the square, an old stone house with a green door of its own. Behind it, sure enough, past the bins and the bushes, stood the shed. It was grey and low, with a felt roof and one small window, so dusty you could hardly see through the glass.

Sam got there first. He rubbed the window with his sleeve, cupped his hands round his face, and looked in. He went very still. Then he stepped back and let me look.

I put my face to the cold glass.

Inside, in the grey light, there was a long, strong table — a workbench, the kind you stand at to mend things, its top worn smooth by years of hands.

Above it, fixed to the wall, was a board, and on the board hung rows of tools — hammers and spanners and files, each one resting in its own painted shape, so that a single missing tool would show at a glance.

And from the beam of the roof, on a hook, turning very slowly in the still air, hung a bicycle wheel.

Chapter 5: The Museum Shed

We stood at that dusty window for a long time, the four of us, taking turns to look at the wheel turning slowly on its hook.

Then Bea did something I did not expect. She stepped back, wiped her hands on her coat, and said, “Stop.”

“Stop what?” said Sam. “We’ve found it. That’s his workbench. That’s where he mends them.”

“That is not the point,” said Bea. “Whose window is this?”

Nobody answered.

“It is not ours,” she said. “We are standing in somebody’s garden, rubbing at somebody’s window, looking at somebody’s things. If a stranger did that to my house, I would call it spying. It does not turn nice just because we are the ones doing it.”

My face went hot, because she was right, and because I had not thought of it first, and I am supposed to be the one who thinks.

Leo opened his mouth to argue — I could see him wanting to, the clue so close — and then he shut it again. “Rule One,” he said slowly. “Look properly. And looking properly does not mean looking secretly.”

“So we ask,” I said. “That is what a detective does. We do not creep about at a window like thieves. We walk round to the front door, and we knock, and we ask.”

Sam looked at the shed, and the wheel, and back at us, and let out a long breath. “I hate that you are right,” he said. “But you are right.”

So we left the shed and its turning wheel, and walked back round to the front of the museum.

The museum stands at the top of the square in its old stone house, with a green door of its own. It is open on weekday afternoons, and this was one. A little bell rang above the door as we went in. Inside it smelled of polish and old paper. Glass cases held the things Foxton keeps to remember itself

by: a Roman coin, a yellow map, the brass lamp from the town's first fire engine.

A woman was dusting the cases with a soft cloth. This was Mrs Ashby, the curator. A curator is the person who looks after a museum — who cleans the cases, and writes the little cards, and knows the story behind every dusty thing on the shelf.

"The Detectives of Ivy Lane," she said, smiling, for the whole town seemed to know us now. "Have you come to solve me a mystery? I have a spoon here that nobody can explain."

"Not today," I said. "We wanted to ask about your shed. The old one at the back, behind the bushes."

"The shed?" She lowered her cloth. "What about the shed?"

I told her the truth, more or less. That we were following a case, and the case had led us to the shed, and that — I said this part carefully — we had looked through the window, and then felt bad about it, and had come to ask instead.

Mrs Ashby laughed, a warm laugh that filled the quiet room.

"You looked through the window," she said, "and saw a workbench and some tools, and you thought you had caught a thief."

"A bit," admitted Sam.

"Well, you can put your minds at rest. That shed is rented." To rent a thing is to pay a little money to use it when it belongs to somebody else. "The museum does not need it, so we let a man use it. He pays us each month, and in return he mends things for us. The clock in the hall. The hinges on the big doors, when they squeak so badly you cannot hear yourself think." A hinge is the metal part that holds a door to its frame and lets it swing open and shut. "And the weathervane on the roof, last winter, when the wind bent it right over. He is a quiet gentleman. We hardly ever see him."

A gentleman is a polite, old-fashioned word for a man — the kind of word Mrs Ashby would use.

“For how long?” said Leo.

“Oh, a year now. Nearly a year.”

A year. My mind went straight to the bicycles, and the mending that took exactly two days, and the man on the bench in his grey cap who watched every wheel go by.

“What is his name?” I asked.

Mrs Ashby went to a desk by the wall and opened a big book with a green cloth cover — the kind of book grown-ups keep for money and other dull, important things. She ran her finger down the page.

“Here we are,” she said. “The rent book. He signs it every month.” She turned it round so that I could see. There, month after month, in dark ink, was the same small, neat handwriting.

Mr F. Mott.



I wrote it in the casebook. *Mr F. Mott*. It was the first time our man had a name, and it felt like the moment when a grey shape in the fog turns into a person.

And then, from a door at the back — the museum stores, where the things that are not on show are kept — came Miss Petherton.

I had forgotten she helped here. She keeps the town's old newspapers, and half of them live at the museum, so she comes to sort them. She had a smudge of dust on her nose and something large and flat in her arms, wrapped in a cloth.

"Did somebody say Mott?" she said. "I have been meaning to bring this up for weeks. Look what I found behind the shelves."

She set it on the counter and pulled the cloth away.

It was a sign. Not a paper sign, but a proper old shop sign, made of enamel — that is metal baked with a hard, shiny coat of colour, so that it never fades, the kind that used to hang outside shops in the old days. This one was cream and dark blue, chipped at one corner, but every word on it was still clear.

F. MOTT — BICYCLES IVY LANE est. 1948

Nobody spoke. Sam's mouth hung open. Bea reached out and touched the cold enamel, as if to prove to herself that it was really there.

"There was a bicycle shop on Ivy Lane once," said Miss Petherton. "Long before your time. Almost before mine. It closed years and years ago."

Ivy Lane. Our lane. The lane with the bookshop, and the red postbox, and the garden gate the colour of the sea.

And three doors down from us — I saw it now, as plain as the sign on the counter — there was a shop that was not a shop. A narrow front with a door that never opened. Windows painted white on the inside, whitewashed, so that you could not see in. Empty. It had stood empty my whole life, with nothing behind the glass and nobody going in or out, and I had walked past it a thousand times without a single thought, the way you never think about one stone in a wall.

An empty shop. White windows. Three doors from my own front door.

“I know where it was,” I said. My voice had gone small again. “Mott’s shop. I know exactly where it is.”

Chapter 6: The Shop with White Windows

We did not run home. You might think we would have run, with a name in the casebook at last and the shop only three doors away. But we walked, and we walked slowly, the way you walk towards a thing you have looked at all your life and never once seen.

Ivy Lane was quiet in the afternoon. Our own bookshop stood with its apple-green door and its window full of tired old books. Then the red postbox. Then the garden gate the colour of the sea. And then, three doors from my own front door, the shop with the white windows.

I stopped in front of it. So did the others.

It was a narrow little shop, thinner than the houses on each side, as if somebody had pushed it in between them as an afterthought. The door was wood, grey now, its paint long gone. The windows were painted white on the inside, so that the glass gave back nothing at all — just a flat, blind, milky white. Above the door was a pale clean patch on the brick, lighter than the wall around it, where a sign had hung for years and hung no longer.

“F. Mott. Bicycles,” said Leo quietly, reading a sign that was not there.

I had walked past this shop a thousand times. To school, to church, to the market. I had walked past it with my schoolbag, and with the shopping, and with nothing at all, and I had never once wondered about it, the way you never wonder about one brick in a wall. Now I could not stop looking.

“It has been empty my whole life,” I said.

“Not always,” said Bea. “The sign said *est. 1948*. That means it opened once. And if a shop opens, then somewhere there was a day when it was new, and full, and busy.”

That was Bea for you. She always turned a thing over to look at the other side.

“We need somebody who remembers,” said Leo. “Somebody old enough to know the history of it.” History is the story of what happened before — before us, before now.

I knew exactly who to ask.

Dad was in our shop, halfway up the tall ladder, doing the thing he calls tidying and Mum calls making a bigger mess higher up. Dusty the cat sat on the counter with his tail curled round his feet, guarding a pile of books that nobody was allowed to move.



“Dad,” I said. “The empty shop. Three doors down. The one with the white windows.”

Dad came slowly down the ladder. “Mott’s,” he said, before I had got another word out. “You mean Mott’s.”

My pencil was in my hand before his feet touched the floor.

“You remember it?” said Sam.

“Remember it?” Dad smiled the far-away smile he keeps for old things. “I bought my first bicycle in that shop. I was about your age, Sam – ten, eleven. It was red, and it was much too big for me, and Mr Mott said I would grow into it. And I did.” He took off his glasses and cleaned them on his waistcoat, which is what he does when he is thinking backwards. “Frank Mott. He

mended every bicycle in Foxton for forty years. If your chain came off, you took it to Mott's. If your bell would not ring, you took it to Mott's. He knew every bicycle in the town by the sound of it going past."

"So what happened?" I asked. "Why did it close?"

To close a shop is to shut it for the last time and stop the business for good.

Dad's smile went out slowly, like a light being turned down.

"A big shop opened over in Marlow," he said. "You know Marlow — the town along the river, with the railway station. This was, oh, twenty years ago now. A great bright place, cheap bicycles all in a row, everything new and shining. People took the bus over and came home with a bicycle in a box, and after a while nobody came to Mott's any more. Not for a new one, and in the end not even for mending. And a shop with nobody in it cannot stay open long."

"So he closed it," said Bea.

"He closed it," said Dad. "About twenty years ago. I remember the morning the white paint went up on the windows. Half the lane stood outside to watch, and nobody said very much."

He was quiet for a moment. So were we.

"And then?" I said.

"And then he moved away." Dad put his glasses back on. "To move away is to leave your home and go and live somewhere far off. His wife had died by then, and he had a daughter in another town, so he went to live near her. That must be fifteen years ago now. More, perhaps. None of us ever thought we would see Frank Mott again."

I looked at the others.

Sam's mouth was open. Leo had gone very still, the way he goes when the last piece of a thing slides into place.

Because we *had* seen Frank Mott. Or as good as. We had seen his tools hanging on their painted board. We had seen his workbench, and a wheel

turning slowly on a hook. We had seen his name signed in a rent book, month after month, in small neat ink.

Frank Mott was back in Foxton.

And nobody knew.

We went up to the attic and I opened the casebook flat on the table, and for a while none of us said anything at all.

Four of the five questions had answers now. I read them out slowly.

“Who took the bicycles? Frank Mott. What did he do to them? Cleaned them, oiled them, mended them. Where? The museum shed — and maybe his own old shop, three doors down. When? On market days, two days at a time.” I stopped. My pencil hung over the last line, the one that had been empty since the very first page of the case.

“Why,” said Bea.

The word sat there on its own.

“We know *who*,” said Bea, in the flat, sure voice she uses when she has hold of something true. “We do not know *why*. A man comes home after fifteen years. He rents a shed and tells nobody. He takes bicycles that are not his, in the dark, mends them beautifully, and gives them back better than they were — and still he tells nobody. Why do it all in secret?” A secret is a thing you keep to yourself, that you do not want other people to know. “The case is not solved till *why*.”

She was right, and I knew she was right, and it made my stomach drop a little. A name was not a reason. We had found our man, and in finding him we had only made the mystery bigger.

I wrote it in the casebook, under the four answers, on the line that had waited so long.

WHY? — and after it, still, nothing.

I would have sat there staring at that empty line all evening. But Sam suddenly sat up straight, the way he does when a thing he has half heard finally lands.

“Wait,” he said. “Oh. *Oh*. I heard something this morning, and I didn’t understand it, and now I do.”

Sam hears everything, half a day before the rest of Foxton does. The whole market runs on it.

“Uncle Ted told me, while we were stacking his boxes. There’s a rumour going round the lane.” A rumour is a story that passes from person to person, each one telling the next, and nobody quite sure whether it is true. “I thought it was silly. I thought it was nothing.”

“What rumour?” I said.

Sam looked at each of us in turn, saving it, the way he always does.

“Somebody,” he said, “has seen a light. In the old Mott shop. At night. Moving about behind the white windows, small and yellow, when the whole lane is asleep.”

Nobody spoke. Outside and three doors down, I could almost feel the empty shop standing there with its blind white eyes, saying nothing at all.

I looked at the last line of the casebook, and the single word waiting on it.

Why.

Perhaps, I thought, the answer came out at night.

Chapter 7: The Light at Night

You cannot solve a case by breaking the rules. That is the first thing to say. In some stories, I think, the children would have crept out of the house at midnight in their coats, and nobody would have known. But that is not how our club works, and it is not how our house works either.

So I asked.

“Mum,” I said at supper. “Dad. We want to watch the old Mott shop tonight. From my window. To see if the light is real.”

Dad looked at Mum. Mum looked at Dad. That is a thing parents do — a whole conversation with no words in it.

“From your window,” said Mum. “Not in the lane.”

“From my window,” I said. “We won’t go out. We promise.”

“And the others?”

“Only if their mums and dads say yes.”

Mum thought about it. Then she smiled. “Well,” she said, “you cannot watch a shop with nothing warm to drink. I will make cocoa.”

That was how the whole club came to be sitting at my bedroom window on Friday evening, with the light off and the curtains open. The evening is the quiet end of the day, when the sky goes from grey to blue to black, and the lamps come on one by one along the lane.

From my window you can see straight down Ivy Lane. Our own shop is right below. Then the red postbox. Then the sea-green gate. And then, three doors along, you can just see the corner of Mott’s shop and its two white windows, pale as milk in the dark.

Mum came up with the cocoa. Cocoa is warm chocolate milk, the kind you drink with both hands on a cold evening. She had made four mugs, and she had put a little too much sugar in, which is exactly the right amount.

“Lights out by ten,” she said from the door. “Whatever you see. And if anything frightens you, you come straight down and get me. That is what I am for.”

Dusty the cat came in behind her and sat on the windowsill like a fifth detective, his tail curled round his paws.

Then we waited.

Waiting is most of what a detective does, and nobody tells you that. The church clock struck eight. Sam told three market stories and finished his cocoa. The church clock struck nine. Sam’s head began to nod, and Bea poked him awake. She had her watch and her notebook open on her knee, and she wrote down the time every little while, though there was nothing yet to write.

“Maybe it was only a rumour,” Sam whispered. “Maybe there is no light at all.”

And then there was a light.

Leo saw it first. He did not shout. He only put his hand flat on the cold glass and said, very low, “There.”

We looked. Behind the white windows of Mott’s shop, three doors down, a soft yellow light had come on. It was not bright. It glowed through the white paint like a candle behind a sheet. And it *moved*. It slid slowly across one window, stopped, and slid back — the way a light moves when somebody is carrying it from place to place.



Somebody was inside the empty shop. That was certain now. Not a rumour, not a story Uncle Ted had passed along the market. A real light, and a real person carrying it.

Nobody drank any more cocoa after that.

We watched the light for a long time. It went to one side and stayed there, as if the person had set it down to work. Now and then a shadow crossed it. Bea wrote down every minute. Sam did not nod off again.

Then, all at once, the light went out.

The shop went dark and blind again. My heart was beating hard. For a moment nothing happened at all. Then the grey door of the shop opened, and a figure came out into the lane.

A figure is what you call a person when you can see the shape of them but not the face — just a dark outline against the dark. This figure was thin, and not tall, and on its head was a flat cap. Even from three doors away, even in the lamplight, I knew that cap. It was the neat old man from the bench. It was Frank Mott.

He pulled the door shut behind him. Then he turned and walked up the lane, away from us, towards the corner by the church.

“Watch his hands,” breathed Leo.

I watched. And this is the part I did not understand, not then.

When Mr Mott takes a bicycle, he wheels it home. He walks beside it and pushes it along, slow and careful — the way you push a bicycle you do not want to scratch. We had all expected that. We had all expected to see him come out pushing a bicycle up the dark lane.

But his hands were empty. He pushed nothing. He carried nothing. He walked up Ivy Lane empty-handed — that is, with nothing in his hands at all — turned the corner, and was gone.

We sat and looked at each other in the dark.

“He didn’t take a bike,” said Sam. “He came all this way at night, and he lit his lamp, and he did whatever he did in there — and he went home with nothing.”

“No,” said Leo slowly. He was frowning at the empty lane, turning it over the way he turns everything over. “He didn’t take anything *out*. But the light was busy for a whole hour. He was doing something in that shop.” He looked round at us. “So if he didn’t carry anything away — then he *left* something.”

The church clock struck ten. Lights out.

I did not sleep well. I lay and looked at the ceiling and thought about a light that moved, and an old man with empty hands, and the two words Leo had said. *He left something*. Left what? And why leave it in a shop that the whole town believed was empty?

In the morning I found out.

I went down early, before our own shop was open, because I could not lie still any longer. The lane was grey and quiet and smelled of new bread from the bakery. I walked the three doors along to Mott’s, the way you walk

towards a thing you are half afraid of, and I stopped in front of the white windows.

Something had changed.

On the left window, low down near the corner, there was a small round patch where the white had gone. Not a hole in the glass — a place where the whitewash had been wiped clean away. Whitewash is the thin white paint people brush over a window so that nobody can see in. Someone had rubbed a little circle of it clear with a cloth, no bigger than the bottom of a cup. A little round spy-hole, at exactly the height of a person leaning down to look.

I leaned down. I put my eye to the circle, and I looked into the shop that had stood empty my whole life.

The shop was full of bicycles.

Chapter 8: Full of Bicycles

A shop full of bicycles is not a thing you can keep to yourself. I stood at the little spy-hole for one more minute, and then I ran.

I ran the three doors home, and up the narrow stair, and I told the club. It was market Saturday, so they were already there — Leo with his magnifying glass, Bea with her map, Sam with a bun from his uncle's stall. When I told them, the bun stopped halfway to Sam's mouth.

"Full of them?" said Sam.

"Full," I said. "Like a shop. Wheel to wheel."

We went straight back down and took turns at the spy-hole, one eye each, low against the cold glass. Bikes stood everywhere inside — some against the walls, some upside down on their saddles, some with no wheels at all. It was true.

"We have to go in," said Sam. He put his hand on the grey door and pushed. It did not move.

"Sam," I said.

"It's the case! It's *right there!*"

"It isn't our shop," said Bea. She said it quietly, but she said it the way she says *prove it* — as a thing that cannot be argued with. "We can't just walk into a place that isn't ours. That isn't looking properly. That's breaking in."

Leo nodded slowly. He does not like being stopped when a puzzle is that close, but he is fair. "She's right," he said. "A detective who breaks a door is not a detective. He's a burglar with a notebook."

That made even Sam smile, a little.

So we did the thing our club always comes back to. When the door is somebody else's door, you do not open it. You find a grown-up who can. And on a market Saturday there was only one grown-up to find.

We found PC Hobbs by the fountain, standing beside his tall black bicycle, watching the square the way he does — slow, and missing nothing. When we told him, all four of us at once, he held up one hand.

“One at a time,” he said. “Ada. From the top.”

So I told it from the top, and he took the little notebook out of his top pocket and wrote as I spoke. A light at night. An old man with empty hands. A spy-hole wiped clean on the inside. A shop that had stood empty my whole life, now full of bicycles.

Hobbs did not laugh, and he did not tell us it was nothing. He put his notebook away and looked down the lane towards the white windows for a long moment.

“You did the right thing,” he said, “coming to me and not going in. That door is grown-up work now.” He got on his bicycle. “Come on, then. But you touch nothing, and you stand where I put you. Understood?”

“Understood,” we all said.

The old Mott shop looked smaller with a policeman in front of it. Hobbs took off his glove and knocked on the grey door — three times, hard, so the sound went right down Ivy Lane. To knock is to hit a door with your hand so the people inside will come. We waited. Nobody came. He knocked again, louder.

“Mr Mott?” he called. “It’s Hobbs.”

Nothing. The shop stayed shut and blind.

“Right,” said Hobbs. He did not push the door, and he did not force it. Instead he wheeled his bicycle to the corner and spoke to a man reading his paper outside the barber’s — Mr Alder, who I knew a little. Mr Alder owned three of the empty shops on the lane. He was the landlord of Mott’s old shop: the man who owned the building and let other people use it. If anyone could open that door the proper way, it was him.

Mr Alder found the key on a big ring of keys, and he grumbled a bit, and then he came. So it was all done correctly. Nobody broke anything. The

landlord turned his own key in his own door, with the constable beside him, and the door of the shop that had been shut for twenty years swung open.

We stood where Hobbs had put us, just inside, in a row. And we stared.

I do not know what I had thought we would find. Something like a robber's den, I suppose — a dark heap of stolen things, dust and mess and shame.

It was nothing like that.

It was a workshop — a place where somebody mends things. And it was *clean*. It was spotless. Not one speck of dust lay on the long workbench. The floor was swept. The window ledges were wiped. It was cleaner than our own kitchen at home, and our kitchen is clean. Somebody had loved this room and cared for it, every corner.

Along the whole back wall hung tools — spanners and pliers and little oilcans and files, each one on its own hook, each hook drawn round with a painted shape so you could see at a glance if one had gone. The air smelled of oil and metal and, underneath, of new paint.



And the bicycles. Everywhere, the bicycles.

Two of them stood in the middle of the floor, up on wooden stands, halfway through their mending. One had its chain off and laid out neat as a snake. The other had a new brake cable, its old one coiled beside it. Tied to the handlebars of each bike was a small brown card on a loop of string.

“Luggage labels,” said Bea softly. A label is a little card you tie to a thing to say something about it — a name, a place, where it must go. She leaned close to read one without touching it. On the card, in careful old handwriting, it said: *Mrs Dabney — back Thursday.*

The other said the same. *Back Thursday.*

I felt something turn over inside me. These bikes were not stolen. They were *booked in*. Somebody had taken them, and written down whose they were, and written down the day they would go home again — mended.

“He gives them back,” I whispered. “He always meant to give them back.”

Then Leo said, “Look up.”

Above the workbench, where a shopkeeper might hang a clock, there were three photographs in plain frames. A photograph is a picture made with a camera, of a real thing that was really there. Leo can read a picture the way he reads mud on a shoe, and he read these one by one.

The first was old and brown, the colour all gone to honey. A young man in a cap stood proudly in a shop doorway under a bright new sign: *F. MOTT — BICYCLES*. In the corner, small, someone had written *1958*.

The second was a little newer. The same shop, but busy now, three bicycles in the window and a boy sweeping the step. *1975*.

And the third. The third was only of one thing. A boy — I could not tell how old, seven or eight, perhaps — sitting on a bicycle far too big for him, both feet off the ground, grinning as though the whole world was his. And the bicycle was painted green. The exact green of a park bench. The exact green of Sam’s smeared mudguard.

Nobody said a word. Even Hobbs stood still.

I had come in ready to find a thief. Instead I stood in the cleanest, kindest room in Foxton, in front of a picture of a boy on a green bicycle, and I understood that we had got the whole case wrong from the start. This was not a robber. This was a man who could not stop mending things — and who had never stopped, not once, in twenty years.

Behind us, the door opened.

We all turned round together. And there in the doorway stood the neat old man from the bench, in his grey coat and his flat grey cap, with an oilcan in one hand and his key half out of his pocket. He looked at the constable, and the landlord, and four children in a row in his spotless workshop.

Frank Mott stood very still. And on his face was the look of a boy caught with his hand in the biscuit tin — a boy who knows, exactly and at once, that he has been found out.

Chapter 9: Mr Mott's Why

Nobody shouted. That is the first thing I want to write down, because I think it matters.

A man had been caught, and there were four children and a policeman and a landlord all standing in his workshop, and nobody shouted at all. Frank Mott just stood in the doorway with his oilcan. And PC Hobbs was the first to speak, in a gentle voice, as if the two of them met every day.

"Hello, Mr Mott," he said. "I think it's time we had a talk. Somewhere warmer than this, perhaps."

And that is how the whole case ended up in our bookshop, round the little table by the stove, with Mum's brown teapot in the middle and Dusty asleep on the window sill.

Dad knew him at once. "Frank Mott," he said, and shook his hand as though they were old friends, because they were. "You sold me my first bicycle. Red. Far too big."

"You grew into it," said Mr Mott. It was the first time I heard him say more than his own name. His voice was quiet and a little rusty, like a hinge that has not been used in a long while.

Mum poured the tea. I took out the casebook and my pencil, and I opened it to the empty line — the line we had left blank since the very first day. The line marked WHY.

"Mr Mott," I said, "may I write down what you tell us? It's how our club works."

He looked at the fat brown book for a long moment. Then he almost smiled. "A proper record," he said. "Yes. Write it down. It's time somebody did."

So he told us. And I wrote. This is his story, as near as I could keep to his own words.



He had been a bicycle man all his life, he said, and his father before him. For forty years he mended every bicycle in Foxton, and he knew each one by its sound as it went past his door.

Then the big shop opened in Marlow, cheap and shiny, and one by one the people of Foxton went there instead. His own shop grew quiet. And then it grew empty. He had painted the windows white himself, he said, because he could not bear to look in and see it bare.

“And my wife was ill by then,” he said. He turned his teacup round and round in his hands. “When she was gone, the town was too full of her. So I went to live with my daughter, away in the north. A good girl. A good house.” He was quiet for a moment. “But her town was not my town. I did not know a single bicycle in the whole street. Nobody there had ever heard the name Mott.”

He had retired, he told us — he had stopped his work, because he was old now, and old men are supposed to rest. But resting, for Mr Mott, was the hardest work of all.

“So I came home,” he said simply. “An old man comes home.”

He rented the shed behind the museum from Mrs Ashby, just to have something to do with his hands — the hall clock, the door hinges, the weathervane. But it was not enough. He would walk up Ivy Lane, and he could not walk past his own old shop. Twenty years shut, and still he could not pass it. So he asked Mr Alder, who owned it now, if he might keep his tools inside. Just to store them, he said. That was all he had asked for.

From the corner, Mr Alder said gruffly, "That was all he asked. I never thought—" and did not finish.

"But tools in a room want to be used," said Mr Mott.

Then he told us about the market days, and about the bench under the lime tree.

"I would sit there," he said, "and watch the square. And I would *hear* them. A brake that squeaked — that little cry a brake makes when it is dry and wants oil." He shook his head. "A front basket hanging loose from its strap. A mudguard rattling like a loose tooth. I heard every one." He spread his big hands flat on the table. They were marked and scrubbed clean. "And these could not sit still."

So he began. He would wheel a bicycle away, slowly and carefully so as not to scratch it, mend it in the night, and bring it home two days later. He wrote each one on a little card, so he would not forget whose it was.

For a while nobody spoke. The stove ticked. Then it was Bea who said it. She said it kindly, but she said it plainly, the way she always says the true thing.

"You mended them beautifully, Mr Mott. But you didn't ask."

Mr Mott looked down at his tea.

"No," he said. "I did not ask."

"That's the part that was wrong," said Bea. "Not the mending. The mending was lovely. But taking a thing that isn't yours — even to be kind with it, even to give it back better — that's still taking."

PC Hobbs nodded slowly. "A kindness done in secret is still a kindness," he said. "But it has to be asked for first. Otherwise the person you're being

kind to only knows one thing: their bicycle is gone. And a person with a missing bicycle is frightened, not glad — until it comes back.”

“I know it now,” said Mr Mott quietly. “I think I have known it all along, and I did it anyway.” He looked round at us. “I owe them all the truth. Every owner. I must go to each one and tell them what I did.” He seemed to grow smaller in his chair. “And I do not know if they will forgive an old man who took their bicycles in the dark.”

“They will, Frank,” said Dad, and he said it as if it were a plain fact, like the day of the week. “This is Foxton.”

Sam had been very quiet, for Sam. But now he leaned forward.

“Mr Mott,” he said, “everybody else’s bike came back in two days. Mine was gone eight. Did I do something wrong?”

Mr Mott almost laughed. “No, lad. Your bicycle did.” He shook his head. “That mudguard of yours was not just loose. It was bent, and rusted through where it fixed to the frame, and rubbing on the wheel. I had to take it right off. Straighten it. Scrape it. And paint it fresh, so it would not rust again.” He looked at Sam. “I had no bicycle-green paint left, so I used a little of the park-bench green from the shed. That is the mark you found on it, I think. It was not quite dry.”

Beside me, Leo went very still. There it was — the smear of green that had led us all the way here — explained in one plain sentence.

“And then I needed a new clip to hold the mudguard on,” Mr Mott went on. “The only place that had one was the big shop in Marlow. I had to wait four days for it to come by post.” He spread his hands again. “Eight days. I am sorry it was so long. I did not like keeping it. A boy needs his bicycle.”

That was the most Mr Mott had said all afternoon, and something in it made Sam’s ears go pink.

All this time, Bea had her timeline open on her knee. She had been ticking each bicycle off against it while he talked — she cannot help it. Now her pencil had stopped, and her face had gone careful, the way it does when the numbers do not add up.

She looked up.

“There’s one bicycle in the book still missing,” she said quietly.

Everyone turned. She put her finger at the very top of the page.

“The first one. Right here. It went six weeks ago.” She looked at Mr Mott.

“And it never came back.”

The room went quiet. Even the teapot seemed to hold its breath.

And Mr Mott — who had answered every question we had, gently and honestly, all afternoon long — looked at the page, and said nothing at all.

Chapter 10: The First Bicycle

The room stayed quiet for a long time. Mr Mott looked at the top line of the casebook, where Bea's finger still rested. The first bicycle. Six weeks gone.

I will be honest. I was afraid. Not of Mr Mott — nobody could be afraid of Mr Mott. I was afraid of the answer. All afternoon every question had had a warm reply, and now here was one he would not touch.

At last he set down his cup.

"That one," he said, "is the one I could not bring back."

He turned the cup round in his hands, round and round.

"It belongs to old Mrs Finch. She lives next door to Miss Petherton — a little black bicycle, near as old as I am. She has ridden it to church every Sunday for fifty years." He shook his head. "Six weeks ago I took it, the way I took the others. But this one I could not mend in a night. This one I could not bring home in two days."

"Why not?" said Sam.

"Because the frame was cracked," said Mr Mott.

He said it the way a doctor says a hard word. Bea wrote it down at once, and I could see her mouthing it — *frame* — and not quite having it. So Mr Mott showed us with his hands.

"The frame is this," he said, drawing a shape in the air. "The steel bones of the bicycle. Everything hangs on the frame — the wheels, the seat, the handlebars, all of it. If the frame goes, the whole bicycle goes." He looked down. "And hers had a crack. A long crack, low down, where nobody would see it until it was too late. One day, riding hard, it might have come apart under her."

Nobody spoke. We were all thinking of little Mrs Finch, sailing off to church on a bicycle that might break in half.

"So you see, I could not give it back the way it was. It was not safe. And a cracked frame is not a thing you mend with oil and a cloth. It wants new parts. Real parts, from a real workshop."

“And there is no bicycle workshop in Foxton now,” said Dad softly.

“There is one in Marlow.” Mr Mott almost smiled at how much it cost him to say it. “The big shop. The very shop that closed mine. I had to write to them, like any other customer, and ask for the parts. And then I had to wait for the post.”

He spread his hands.

“Six weeks is a long time to wait for the post. A little piece here, a little piece there. But it is nearly done now. It hangs in my shed behind the museum, and it wants only an hour or two of work.” He looked up, and for the first time his eyes were bright. “It will go back to Mrs Finch better than the day she bought it. That I promise.”

And just like that the fear went out of the room, the way water runs out of a sink. I looked at Leo, and Leo looked at me, and I think we were both a little ashamed of what we had almost let ourselves believe.

Bea closed her timeline. “Then the case is finished,” she said.

“The case, maybe,” said Sam. “But the bicycle isn’t. He just said so.” He grinned. “So let’s finish it.”

That is how, on a bright Monday after school, the whole club walked out to the shed behind the museum, with Mr Mott going ahead and Mrs Ashby waving from the museum door.

The shed was just as we had seen it through the dusty window, weeks ago — only now we were inside it, and it was not a secret any more. It smelled of oil and metal and clean rags. Every tool hung on the wall in its own painted shape, so that one missing tool would show at a glance. And there, up on a stand in the middle of it all, was the little black bicycle.

Mr Mott put on his apron and became a different man. In the bookshop he had been small and sorry. Here he stood up straight.

“Right,” he said. “She is nearly ready. But there is work in her yet, and four pairs of young hands beat one old pair. Who wants a job?”

Everyone wanted a job.

He gave Bea a soft cloth and a tin of polish and set her on the frame — “gently, mind, she has waited long enough for a shine.” He gave Leo the wheels, and showed him how to spin each one and watch it turn, to see that no spoke was loose and the wheel ran true. He gave me an oilcan and pointed me at the chain: one careful drop on each link. And to Sam he gave the best job of all — the new part, come at last by post from Marlow, still in its brown paper.

Sam unwrapped it as if it were a birthday present. Inside was a short, bright piece of steel, curved to fit.

“That,” said Mr Mott, “is what mends a cracked frame. Not a patch — a proper part, made for the job.” He held it against the frame, and now I could see the crack: a thin dark line in the old black paint, no wider than a hair. “It braces her, here, so she will be stronger than before. Hand me the small spanner. No — the next one along.”

Sam passed him spanners and held things still and asked the name of everything, and Mr Mott told him: the fork, the hub, the pedal, the brake block, the little bell. Sam said each name back as if he were learning a song.



We worked all afternoon, and it did not feel like work. Bea polished the frame until it threw back the light. Leo found one loose spoke and was prouder of it than of anything all week. My chain ran black and smooth and silent. And slowly, part by part, the little black bicycle stopped being a broken thing on a stand and became a bicycle again — Mrs Finch’s bicycle, ready for fifty more Sundays.

“There,” said Mr Mott at last. He stepped back and wiped his hands on a rag. “Finished.”

We all looked at it. It shone.

Then Sam — who can never look at one thing when there are twenty things to look at — began counting the tools along the wall. His lips moved. He counts everything: coins, buns, the steps up to the attic.

He stopped counting.

“Mr Mott,” he said slowly, “there are two stools.”

I looked. He was right. By the workbench stood two wooden stools, side by side. One was worn smooth and shiny, the way a stool goes when a

person sits on it every day. The other was just as old and just as worn — as if someone had sat there every day for years, and then one morning got up and never come back.

“Who is the second stool for?” said Sam.

Mr Mott looked at it for a moment. And then he smiled — a small, faraway smile, the kind you smile at something that happened long ago.

“That,” he said, “was my apprentice’s stool.”

“Your what?” said Sam.

“My apprentice. The boy who learned the trade from me. He sat on that stool every day for years, and I taught him everything I knew about bicycles.” Mr Mott touched the worn seat with one finger. “Forty years ago, that was.”

“Where is he now?” I asked.

Mr Mott’s smile did not change, but something behind it did.

“He has a shop now,” he said. “Over in Marlow.” He looked at the little black bicycle, shining on its stand. “The big one. The one that closed mine.”

Chapter 11: Two Menders

The next evening we took the little black bicycle home.

Mr Mott wheeled it himself, all the way from the shed to Mrs Finch's door, and he would not let anyone else touch the handlebars. The bicycle rolled along beside him, black and shining, its new bell winking in the low sun. We walked behind like a small parade.

Mrs Finch lived next to Miss Pethernton, in a cottage with a green door and too many flowerpots. When she opened the door and saw her bicycle, she put both hands over her mouth.



“Oh,” she said. “Oh, my old friend. I thought you were gone for good.”

Then she saw Mr Mott, and her face changed. Not angry — only puzzled.

“Frank Mott,” she said. “Is that you? After all these years?”

I think that was the hardest part for him, harder than the cracked frame, harder than any of it. He took off his cap and held it in both hands, the way a boy stands when he has broken a window.

"Mrs Finch," he said, "I owe you the truth, and here it is. Six weeks ago I took your bicycle from the square. I did not ask you. I did not tell you. I saw it standing there, and I saw the crack in the frame, and I could not leave it. It was not safe for you to ride." He turned his cap round in his hands. "It took me six weeks, because the new parts had to come from Marlow. But I have mended it, and I am sorry. I should have knocked on your door on the very first day and asked."

Mrs Finch listened to all of it. She did not say a word until he had finished. Then she reached out and patted his arm.

"Frank," she said, "you have brought my bicycle back better than I have known it in twenty years. And you have told me the whole truth, standing here on my step, when you could have said nothing at all." She smiled. "You cannot ride to church for fifty years and not learn how to forgive a man. Now come in and have a cup of tea, both of you — all of you."

I looked at Mr Mott. Something went out of his shoulders that had been sitting there all week. He had been carrying it a long time.

That evening changed something in him. Over the next few days he stood a little straighter. And on Thursday, when we came to the shed after school, he was sitting at the bench with a pen and a sheet of paper, and he had ink on his fingers.

"I am writing a letter," he said, "and it is a hard one."

We knew who it was to. His apprentice — the boy who had sat on the second stool forty years ago, and who now owned the big shop over in Marlow.

"For twenty years," said Mr Mott, "I thought of that shop only as the thing that closed mine. But he was my apprentice. I taught him everything I knew." He folded the letter carefully. "Maybe it is time I stopped feeling sorry for myself and wrote to the boy. I do not even know if he will remember me."

He remembered him.

The reply came faster than any of us thought. It was not a letter. It was the man himself.

On Saturday morning — market morning — a small blue van came slowly up Ivy Lane and stopped outside the old shop with the white windows. A big man climbed out. He was near as old as Mr Mott, grey and broad, with kind eyes and hands like shovels. He stood and looked at the whitewashed windows for a long moment, as if the sight of them hurt him.

Then Mr Mott came out of the shed, and the big man's face opened up like a window in the morning.

"Frank," he said. "Frank Mott. Look at you."

"Hello, Tom," said Mr Mott.

His name was Mr Webb — Tom Webb — and forty years ago he had swept this very step and learned the whole trade at Mr Mott's bench. Now he shook Mr Mott's hand and would not let go of it.

"Frank," he said, "your letter has been on my mind all week. I never knew. All these years I never knew my shop was the one that closed yours. Nobody told me. You had gone away, the old place was shut, and I thought — I thought you had simply retired." He shook his head. "If I had known, I would have driven over the very next day."

"You could not have known," said Mr Mott. "I made sure of that. I painted the windows white so nobody could see in."

Mr Webb turned and opened the back of the van, and we all leaned in to look. It was full — full of boxes and shelves and hooks, and on every shelf lay spare parts: new wheels, bright chains, brake blocks, bells, all the small pieces a bicycle needs to be made well again. It was a whole workshop on wheels.

"I did not come empty-handed," said Mr Webb. "And I did not come only to say sorry. I came with something to propose."

He looked round at all of us then — at Mr Mott, at Dad, at the four of us with our casebook.

“Foxton lost its bicycle man twenty years ago,” he said, “and it should never have happened. So here is my plan. A bench on the market, every Saturday, for Frank Mott to mend the town’s bicycles again. Not in secret this time — out in the open, where the whole town can see. My shop in Marlow will send the spare parts, free, for as long as he wants them. That is the least I owe the man who taught me my trade.”

Mr Mott could not speak. Neither could I, and I always have something to write.

“There is only one thing,” said Mr Webb. “A bench on the market is not mine to give, or Frank’s to take. The market belongs to the whole town. A plan like this must go to the market committee — and the committee must say yes.”

I knew about the committee. It was the small group of grown-ups who ran the market: Mr Alder was on it, and the churchwarden, and old Mr Prentice who wore a gold chain round his neck. They met in the town hall. They decided who could sell where, and what could stand on the square. And now they would decide about Mr Mott’s bench.

That was when PC Hobbs came across the square with his notebook already open.

“Good news travels fast in Foxton,” he said. “The committee is meeting next Saturday, at ten o’clock in the hall. Mr Webb’s plan is on the list.”

He looked at the four of us, and something in his eye told me what was coming before he said it.

“And so are you,” he went on. “The committee has heard that the Ivy Lane Detectives solved this whole thing. They want you to present the case at the meeting — the whole case, casebook and all — in front of everyone.”

Sam cheered. Bea reached for a pencil. Leo nodded slowly, already working something out behind his eyes.

And me?

I am the one who writes the cases down. I am not the one who stands up and says them out loud. I looked at the fat brown casebook in my arms, full of my small neat writing, and I felt something I did not often feel. My hands went cold. My mouth went dry. There is a word for it, and I will write it down because it is true.

I felt nervous.

Present the case. In front of the whole town.

Gulp.

Chapter 12: The Workbench on the Market

Saturday came the way hard days always come — too fast.

By ten o'clock the town hall was full. I had never seen so many people in it. The committee sat behind a long table at the front: Mr Alder, the churchwarden, and old Mr Prentice with the gold chain round his neck. Everyone else sat on rows of wooden chairs, and there were not enough chairs, so people stood along the walls as well.

The whole town had come to hear about the bicycle man.

We had made a big sheet of paper, as tall as Bea, and pinned it to the wall at the front. On it, in Bea's best letters, were the five questions.

WHO. WHAT. WHERE. WHEN. WHY.

On the table below it we had laid out our exhibits: the old enamel sign, *F. MOTT — BICYCLES*, and the casebook, open. And on the casebook, curled up fast asleep, was Dusty.

"Of course," whispered Sam. "The one day we need him to look serious."

Nobody wanted to move him. A detective who works from a cushion, Leo always says — and Dusty had decided that today the cushion was our most important page.

Then Mr Prentice tapped the table, and the hall went quiet, and everyone looked at me.

I was going to present the case.

I will tell you the truth, because this is a casebook and a casebook is always true. When they all looked at me, my hands went cold and my mouth went dry, just as they had all week. I am the one who writes things down. I am not the one who stands up and says them out loud. I opened my mouth, and no words came.

Then I looked down at the casebook, under the sleeping cat, and I saw my own writing. My small neat writing, six weeks of it, every question and every answer.

And I understood something.

I did not have to make a speech. I only had to read.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I said. My voice shook, but it came out. “This is the casebook of the Ivy Lane Detectives. I am going to read you the case of the green bicycle.”

So I read.

I pointed to the first question on the sheet.

“WHO,” I read. “A gentleman in a flat grey cap. Mr Frank Mott.”

People turned to look at Mr Mott, who sat near the front with his cap in his hands.

“WHAT. He took bicycles from the square — but only bicycles with something wrong. A loose basket. A broken brake. A bell that had not rung in five years.” Somewhere in the hall a voice said, “That was mine,” and it was Miss Petherton, and she was smiling.

“WHERE. He mended them in secret, in the old museum shed, and in his own shop with the white windows. And he brought every one back — cleaned, oiled, and better than before.

“WHEN. Two days later, always. Except mine,” said Sam, out loud, because Sam cannot help himself, “which took eight days,” and the whole hall laughed.

The laugh helped. After that it was easier.

“And WHY,” I said.

I stopped. This was the question that had taken us the longest. I closed the casebook — gently, so as not to wake Dusty — because I did not need to read this part. I knew it by heart.

“Because he could not stop,” I said. “Mr Mott mended the bicycles of this town for forty years. Then his shop closed, and he went away, and he came home to a town full of squeaking brakes and nobody to mend them. He did

a kind thing in the wrong way. He knows that now. He has said sorry to every owner, on every doorstep, himself.”

The hall was very quiet.

Then old Mrs Finch stood up at the back, leaning on her stick.

“He brought my bicycle home better than it has been in twenty years,” she said. “And I have forgiven him. So should we all.”

And the whole town applauded. They clapped — for Mr Mott, and I think a little for us too. Mr Mott looked at his cap and went very red.

Then Mr Webb stood up — big Tom Webb from Marlow — and told the committee his plan, the same plan he had told us. A bench on the market, every Saturday, for Mr Mott to mend the town’s bicycles out in the open. And his own shop in Marlow to send the spare parts, free, for as long as Mr Mott wanted them.

Mr Prentice and the churchwarden and Mr Alder put their heads together and talked in low voices. Then Mr Prentice tapped the table again.

“All in favour?” he said.

Every hand on the committee went up.

“The plan is passed,” said Mr Prentice.

Passed. It meant yes. It meant the committee had agreed, and the bench would happen. Sam grabbed my arm so hard it hurt.

By noon it was done, out on the square, in the sun.

They set a strong wooden table near the fountain — the very fountain where the whole case had begun. Mr Webb carried out a fresh board and fixed it above the bench. On it, newly painted, it said:

F. MOTT — BICYCLES est. 1948 mending again

Mr Mott laid out his tools, each in its painted shape, the way he liked them. He stood behind the bench in his cap and his grey coat, and for the first time

since we had met him he did not look caught, or sorry, or sad. He looked like a man in his right place.

“Now then,” he said. “Who is my first customer?”

There was a small silence. Then a tall black bicycle came wheeling through the crowd, and behind it was PC Hobbs.

“This front brake has squeaked for a year,” said Hobbs. “I could take it to Marlow. But I would rather bring it to the best mender in Foxton.” He set it against the bench. “I believe I am your first customer, Mr Mott.”



Mr Mott ran his hand along the handlebars the way you greet a dog you know. “A squeaking brake,” he said softly. “Leave it with me, constable.”

There was one more thing.

Sam wheeled his own green bicycle up to the bench. Bea had a little tin of paint and the thinnest brush from the shed.

On the rear mudguard — the same mudguard that had started everything, still green with Mr Mott's bench-green — Bea painted a tiny mark. A small brown book, no bigger than a stamp, and under it two little words.

Case One.

"Every case gets a mark," said Bea. "And this was the first."

Sam looked at it for a long time. Then he grinned. "Case One," he said. "There had better be a Case Two."

There was.

The market was packing up. The stalls were coming down, and Uncle Ted was stacking his empty boxes, when Miss Petherton came hurrying across the square with something under her arm.

"Ada," she called. "All of you. Wait."

She held out a parcel. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with string, a proper old-fashioned parcel, soft at the corners with age.

"I found it in the library this morning," she said, "in the box where people return their books. It was sitting right on top, as if someone had left it there in the night. But there is no name for who sent it. Only who it is for."

She turned it over. On the front, in careful old handwriting — the sort of writing they used long ago, all curls and slopes — were four words.

To the Detectives of Ivy Lane.

We all looked at the parcel. Then we all looked at each other.

"Who left it?" asked Sam.

Miss Petherton shook her head. "Nobody saw. Nobody knows."

Leo took it and weighed it in his hands, already thinking. Bea reached for a pencil. Dusty, on the casebook, opened one eye.

I opened the casebook to a clean new page. And at the top, in my small neat hand, I wrote:

Case Number Two.