

**SAXBY SMART**  
PRIVATE DETECTIVE



**THE**  
**HANGMAN'S**  
**LAIR**

AND OTHER CASE FILES

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# CHAPTER ONE

SOMETIMES IT'S FAR FROM EASY being a brilliant schoolboy detective like me. After a while, you get a reputation around school for being able to solve any mystery, no matter how strange or mind-mangling.

So I was very embarrassed when *The Mystery of the Money Stolen From the School Office* left me completely clueless. Half of St Egbert's School was keeping a close eye on me as I examined the scene of the crime and talked to possible suspects. The pressure on me to get a result was made even worse by the fact that the headteacher had only allowed me to investigate once the police had been called in and *they'd* been left clueless too.

It was like this: a wad of cash, totalling four hundred and twenty pounds, had been sitting on the school

secretary's desk at lunchtime on Monday. This money had been collected from pupils, and was going to pay for a school trip that all of my year group had been looking forward to.

The secretary, Mrs McEwan, had been in the office the whole time. She'd turned away from her desk for about ten seconds (to thump the computer's very expensive printer to get it working, she told me quietly, but shh, don't tell anyone, especially the Head). When she turned back, the money was gone.

She'd run out into the corridor. Nobody in sight. She'd searched the office. Nothing had fallen off her desk.

The police left later that day, scratching their heads (although that may have been something to do with the headlice epidemic we had at St Egbert's that week). Everyone turned to me.

At first, I was fairly confident that I'd come up with an explanation for the theft, and be able to catch the culprit. But as the days wore on, everyone started looking grumpier and grumpier at me, and I started going redder and redder in the face. By the time the lice had been beaten back with sprays and lotions, I had to admit that I was beaten too.

Like I said, it was very embarrassing. Even more embarrassing than the time I wore my tattiest pants instead of my swimming trunks by mistake. And *that*

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was oh-help-I-want-to-crawl-under-a-stone time!

Late one afternoon, I was sitting in my garden shed – or my Crime Headquarters, as I prefer to call it. I was flopped in my Thinking Chair – the battered old leather armchair where I do all my flopping and thinking.

I gazed around me at my desk, at my files of case notes, and at the gardening and DIY stuff I'm forced to share the shed with. I took off my glasses and gave them a quick polish with my sleeve. I stared out of the shed's perspex window.

I was utterly clueless. This case had got me more baffled than . . . than . . . good grief, there wasn't even a simile to describe how baffled I was! There were no clues and I had no idea how to uncover more information.

I let out a deep sigh and flicked back through my notebook, just in case there was some tiny detail I'd missed, something that would unlock the mystery.

'Who am I fooling?' I muttered to myself. 'There's no way I'm going to find out who stole that money now.'

Suddenly, there was a thunderous knocking at the shed door. I almost fell off my Thinking Chair in fright.

'Who's that?' I cried.

The door swung open and Bob Thompson stood there, blocking out the daylight like a slab of concrete with a head stuck on top of it. I shrank back a little in my Thinking Chair.

'H-hi, Bob,' I stuttered.

Bob Thompson was St Egbert's School's number one thug. In terms of sheer villainy, he was second only to my arch enemy, that low-down rat Harry Lovecraft. As readers of my earlier case files will know, Harry Lovecraft hatched his evil schemes using sneakiness, cunning, deceit and trickery. Bob Thompson just hit people. Everyone was scared of Bob Thompson. As he stood there, looming over me, three feeble thoughts kept running up and down in panic inside my head:

1. Oh dear, Bob Thompson knows where I live.
2. Oh dear, Bob Thompson's in my shed.
3. Oh dear, Bob Thompson's going to hit me.

'Please don't hit me,' I said.

Suddenly, he looked a little sheepish. 'Why would I do that?'

I sat up. 'Well, you hit most people,' I grumbled.

Now he looked sheepish enough to fool a shepherd. 'Yes, well, I suppose that's what I've come to talk to you about,' he said quietly.

I would have offered him my Thinking Chair to sit in, or my desk to perch on, but I had a feeling that neither of them would take the weight.

'How can I help you?' I said.

'Well, y'see,' he said. 'It was *me* who took that money from the office.'

# CHAPTER Two

FOR A MOMENT OR TWO, I wasn't sure whether to be either a) relieved that the mystery was solved, or b) annoyed that I hadn't been able to track Bob down as the thief. Bob Thompson wasn't someone I'd ever have expected to outwit me. Out-thump me, yes, but not outwit me.

'How did you manage it?' I gasped. 'I take it you devised some brilliantly complex plot? You worked out a fiendishly clever method for pinpointing the cash and smuggling it out of the building?'

'No, I just snatched the money 'n' legged it.'

'Oh . . . But where did you go? Mrs McEwan came out of her office only a few seconds later and there was nobody around.'

'I hid behind the display boards in the waiting area,'

said Bob. 'There was a load of project work on Victorians pinned up there for visitors to look at.'

I slapped myself on the forehead. 'Of *course!*' I'd used exactly the same hiding place myself, during the case of *The Tomb of Death*. 'So you hadn't pre-planned the robbery at all?'

'No.'

I cleared my throat. 'Yes, well, it must have been the, umm, chance factor which threw me off the scent. Yes, that must be it.'

'I had to go to the office to give them a form,' said Bob. 'Just by chance there was nobody else in the corridor. Just by chance, Mrs McEwan turned away as I got to the office door. While she was giving her printer a good thump, I saw the money, and I took it. I hid behind the display boards until she went back into her office, then I legged it. I didn't know there'd be nobody about. I didn't even know that money would be sitting there on the desk. I just saw it there, and grabbed it. You do believe me, don't you?'

I had one good reason to believe him. There was a detail in his story which convinced me he was telling the truth.

Have you spotted it?



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Mrs McEwan had asked me to keep quiet about having to give that very expensive printer of hers a good thump, to get it to work. If Bob knew about that too, he must have been there to witness it.

'Yes,' I said. 'I believe you. But why tell *me*? If you feel a sudden need to admit what you've done, why not go to the headteacher?'

'Because I can't return the money,' said Bob.

'Why not?'

'Because I haven't got it any more. I need your help to get it back.'

I sat back in my Thinking Chair, letting out a sarcastic blow of the lips which can't quite be put into words, but which was a sort of 'prrrrrrrp'. 'Let me get this straight. *You* steal some money, but you want *me* to sort things out for you?' I would have added 'I don't think so, matey,' but I reckoned there might still be a chance of getting thumped.

'No, it's not like that,' said Bob. He shuffled across the shed and sat droopily on my desk. It managed to take the weight OK after all. 'If I go to the Head without the money, then I'll just get into a lot of trouble. But if I can bring the money back, then that'll prove I've changed.'

'Changed?' I said.

Bob shifted from side to side. This might have been

because he was having difficulty saying what he wanted to say, or it might have been because he was sitting on a couple of pencils.

‘Nicking that money has made me realise how . . . well, how nasty I’ve been to people all these years. What a bully I’ve been.’

I eyed him narrowly. ‘How so?’

‘I didn’t nick that money just for myself,’ said Bob quietly. ‘I live in Herbert Street, near that row of shops on the corner. There’s a gang of kids who hang out by those shops at night. They have a laugh, get into all sorts of bother, stuff like that, so I wanted to join them. But they’ve got this test you have to do before they’ll let you be one of the gang. An initiation test. You have to steal something. Not just a packet of crisps from the newsagent’s, something that’s really worth something. Anyway, I saw that money and I thought it’d be the perfect thing to get me into the gang.’

‘So you gave it to them?’ I said.

Bob nodded. ‘They were supposed to share it out, but they just laughed. They gave me a slap and told me to get lost.’

‘What, *you*?’

‘Most of them are even bigger than I am. They pushed me over, trod on me, sent me packing. I’d never had that happen to me before. I limped home. It

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made me think. I've been treating people like that for years, but now I've realised how they must have felt. I want to make amends. I want to, er, whassitcalled . . . turn over a new leaf.'

'And giving all the money back will show everyone you mean what you say,' I said.

'Right,' said Bob. 'If I can't give the money back, then it doesn't matter how much I say I've changed, nobody will believe me.'

'Hmm, you're right,' I said. 'OK, I'll help you. But only because it will make the playground a safer place! I'm doing this to stop half the school being frightened of you, it's not just for your benefit.'

He grinned at me with relief. Somehow, that was even more nerve-racking than having him loom menacingly over me.

'What else can you tell me?' I said. 'How do you know this gang haven't just spent the cash on . . . I dunno, whatever it is street gangs spend money on. Flowers for their mums, or something.'

'They always keep stolen stuff hidden for a while, until they're sure it's not being looked for any more,' said Bob. 'They put it somewhere away from where any of them live, so that if the police start sniffing around, they're not caught with it.'

'And where have they got this money stashed?'

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'I don't know,' said Bob. 'Not exactly. All I can tell you is that it's hidden somewhere inside The Hangman's Lair.'

# CHAPTER THREE

THE HANGMAN'S LAIR WAS THE creepiest place in town. It was an area of woodland, about half a kilometre square, which stood between the back of a long, disjointed row of houses and the gently curving line of the local canal.

There had recently been talk of turning the place into a wildlife sanctuary, but nothing had ever come of it. I can't say I was surprised. There wasn't much wildlife living there. The place looked like it was meant for alligators or giant poisonous insects, but the most dangerous animal you ever saw around there was the occasional grumpy squirrel. The Hangman's Lair was somewhere the local wildlife tended to leave well alone.

It was so called because, legend had it, it was where

the town gallows had stood hundreds of years ago. And where, it was said, the town's mad, one-eyed hangman had lived in a tiny shack.

As soon as I entered the wood, the bright daylight was reduced to a shifting, colourless gloom. It was barely half an hour since school had finished for the day, but in The Hangman's Lair it could have been almost any time, or any season. I was surrounded by a dark criss-cross of claw-like branches. The trees, their trunks all ridged and cracked with age, grew in horrible twists which made them look as if they were straining and struggling to crawl up out of the ground. Under my school shoes was a patchwork of mud and leaves. Some fallen twigs and branches formed a hazy straight line which vanished among the tree trunks. The whole place was eerily quiet. Nothing seemed to move anywhere, and there was a smell of decay drifting through the damp air.

I looked around, hardly daring to move or make a sound. The woods didn't vary from one end to the other. Whatever direction you looked in, everything appeared almost exactly the same: trees and branches, as far as the eye could see. And the eye couldn't see all that far with all those trees and branches in the way. Standing there, I immediately understood why The Hangman's Lair had gained its reputation.

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I took a slow, deep breath.

'Why didn't I bring anyone with me?' I muttered to myself. My words vanished on the air, absorbed by the earth and the canopy of twigs.

I could also understand why the gang from Herbert Street had chosen this spot to hide their loot in. Nobody would ever think of taking a pleasant stroll through The Hangman's Lair of an evening! Well, vampires and werewolves, possibly, but nobody else.

I looked left, right, up, down. That stolen money was hidden away in here somewhere, but *where*? Each tree looked like every other tree, and each patch of ground looked like every other patch of ground. You'd almost have to *live* in this horrible place to even find your way around. And so, unless I literally mapped out the entire . . .

Wait! Maybe the gang had made a map? Maybe there was no way to locate the money without it?

No. On second thoughts, definitely not. Bob told me that the gang hid stuff in case the police came 'sniffing around', as he put it. If the police came across a map pinpointing the location of the money, then the gang might as well not have hidden it in the first place. A location map would be ideal evidence.

Besides, this was a street gang we were talking about. Were they the sort of people who'd go to the time and

trouble of making a map anyway? Well, they might when there was four hundred and twenty pounds at stake. Hmm, still seemed unlikely.

No, there was no map. Which meant that there was only one possibility left, as far as I could see. There *was* a way I could locate the money.

Have you worked it out?



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The gang must have marked the hiding place somehow. Without a map, there'd be no other way of making sure they didn't lose track of the money.

Obviously, I wasn't going to find an 'X' carved into a tree trunk, or anything as blindingly obvious as that. But there had to be a mark of some kind. There had to be something, either on a tree, or marked on the ground, that would be distinctive enough to lead the gang back to the hiding place.

Actually, you know, thinking about it, the mark *could* be something obvious. The gang would hardly expect someone else, someone like me, to come looking for it. They *might* have left a mark in plain sight!

Two hours later, I came to the conclusion that they hadn't. Not only was there no mark in plain sight, there was no mark that I could 'sight' at all!

I'd combed The Hangman's Lair from end to end. I'd examined every tree, I'd squelched through every muddy puddle, I'd snagged my school uniform on every spiky twig. Nothing. No scratches in tree bark, no carefully placed piles of stones, no items tied to branches. There was nothing whatsoever that might have been a marker, a flag or a signpost. However they'd hidden that money, they'd hidden it very well.

By now, it was six p.m. It was starting to get dark, and the shadows beneath the trees were precisely deep

enough to conceal everything from the outside world. You'd need to know exactly where you were going to find anything at that time, so further searching was pointless. Also, I was starting to get hungry. Also, I was starting to get quite scared, but I tried not to think about that.

On my way home, an unpleasant and worrying train of thought rumbled slowly through my mind, like an old-fashioned steam train chugging through a long, dark tunnel. By the time I turned the corner into my street, rapidly scribbling notes in my notebook, I'd come to a decision. I had a definite plan of action. And it wasn't one I was looking forward to.

I phoned my great friend Isobel 'Izzy' Moustique, St Egbert's School's all-round genius and official Princess of Facts and Figures. I needed to ask a couple of favours.

'First,' I said, 'see what you can find out about a gang of kids who hang around in Herbert Street. You know loads of people, someone will have come across them.'

'Okey-dokey,' she said. 'What's the case you're investigating this time?'

'Let's just say that if this works out, we'll be going on that school trip after all.'

'Great! I thought you'd drawn a total blank on the missing money,' she cried. 'You've finally got a lead?'

'Er, something like that,' I said hurriedly. 'Second, I need you to start a rumour.'

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'A rumour? Why? What about?'

That plan of action I mentioned needed . . . hmm, what would you call it? It needed a certain amount of back-up. If my plan was going to work, there was some very specific information that had to be out there on the local grapevine.

See if you can spot what that information was, when it crops up in Chapter Four . . .