The Muddlemoor Mysteries series

Peril at the Bake Off

The Book Club Bank Heist

The Chicken Farm Fiasco



THE Chicken Farm Fiasco

by Ruth Quayle

illustrated by
Marta Kissi

Andersen Press

First published in 2023 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The rights of Ruth Quayle and Marta Kissi to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text copyright © Ruth Quayle, 2023
Illustrations copyright © Marta Kissi, 2023

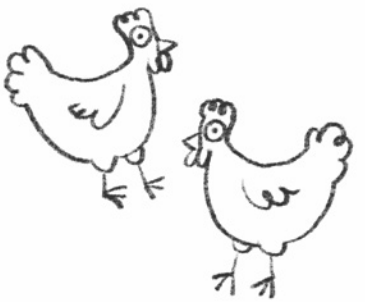
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

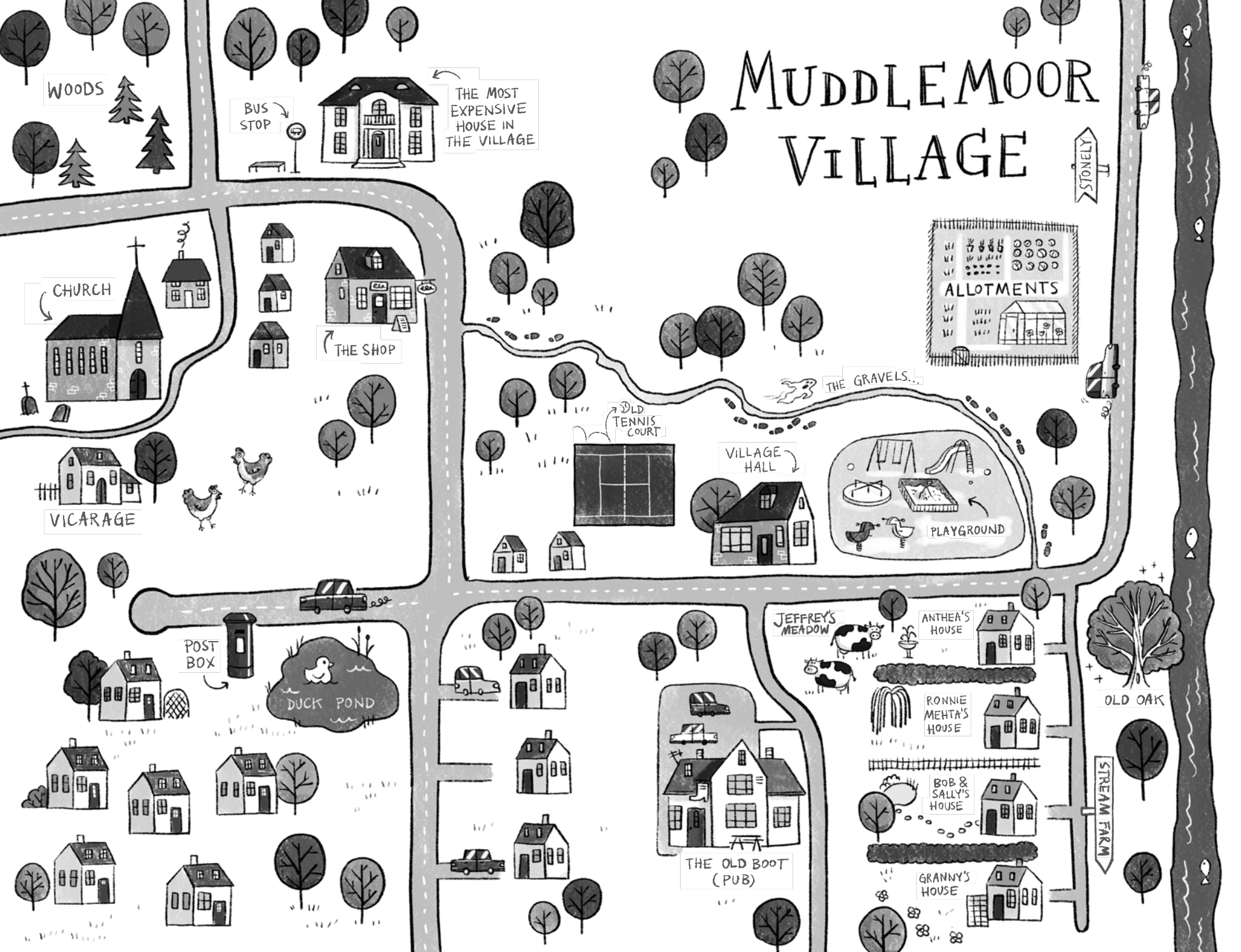
ISBN 978 1 83913 255 1

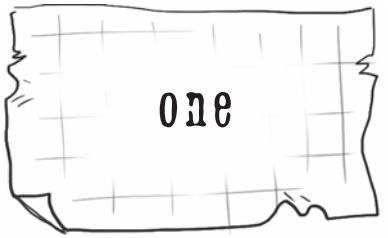


For Charlie,
number one plot-untangler.
– RQ x

For my husband James,
with all my love
– M.K.




MUDDLEMOOR VILLAGE
WOODS
BUS STOP
THE MOST EXPENSIVE HOUSE IN THE VILLAGE
STONELY
CHURCH
THE SHOP
ALLOTMENTS
THE GRAVELS...
OLD TENNIS COURT
VILLAGE HALL
PLAYGROUND
VICARAGE
POST BOX
DUCK POND
JEFFREY'S MEADOW
ANTHEA'S HOUSE
RONNIE MEHTA'S HOUSE
OLD OAK
BOB & SALLY'S HOUSE
STREAM FARM
THE OLD BOOT (PUB)
GRANNY'S HOUSE



This is a story about the Easter holidays, except it has nothing to do with chocolate eggs or fluffy bunnies or roast lamb.

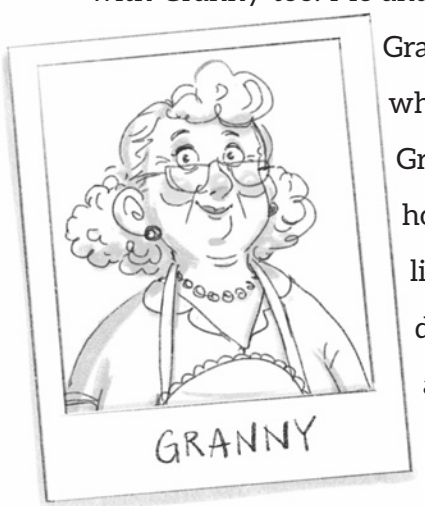
It has a teeny amount to do with chicks, but not in a good way.

I can't tell you the whole plot straight away because I don't want to ruin the story. Once, my mum's friend Suzy told me the whole plot of a book I was reading and after that I didn't fancy reading it any more. Mum's friend Suzy is always telling me about books that are 'wonderful' but 'wonderful' books are not my favourites. I prefer ones that are gripping and funny.

Hopefully this book will be gripping and funny but, right now, all I can tell you is that it is about the Easter

holidays. Actually, that's not quite right either, because it's not ABOUT the Easter holidays, it's just about what happened during them. It is quite a dangerous story. It is a bit shocking.

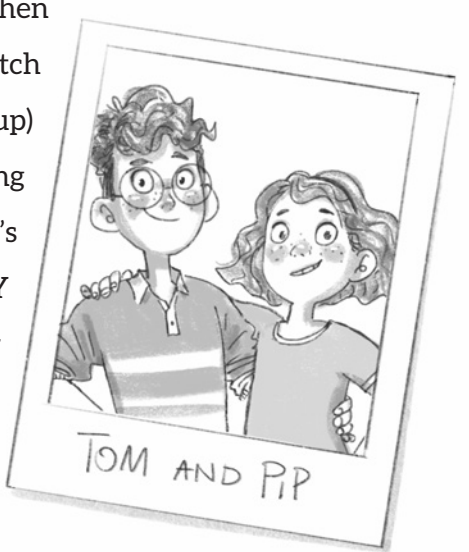
Normally I love Easter. For one thing, I am mad about chocolate (even the dark sort that makes you thirsty) and for another thing, at Easter I always go to stay with my granny in Muddlemoor (Muddlemoor is the name of her village. It is in the countryside). This year I was even more excited than usual because my cousins, Tom and Pip Berryman, were staying with Granny too. Me and my cousins often stay with Granny in the school holidays when our parents are working. Granny says we get on like a house on fire. She says this like it's a good thing but I don't know what is so good about a house burning down. Once, I tried explaining





this to Granny but she burst out laughing and said, 'You lot and house fires have plenty in common – you're both EXTREMELY destructive!' And then she said, 'Scallywag!' and gave me a hug.

This year's Easter was anything but normal. It was actually quite scary. Not just 'hands over your eyes' scary or 'can't go to the toilet on your own' scary (which is what happens when me and my cousins watch *Jaws* without a grown-up) but a bit scarier than being sent to the headteacher's office for a 'chat'. And WAY scarier than when our burglar alarm goes off in the middle of the night (lots of things make our



burglar alarm go off in the night, including spiders, and I'm not *too* scared of spiders because they are living creatures and I love all living creatures, except maybe cows).

Luckily, me and my cousins are used to dangerous situations when we are staying with Granny in Muddlemoor. The first time we stayed with her on our own, we discovered that one of her neighbours was SPYING on her with a robot spy cat. Since then, things have got worse. Last time we went, we had to protect her from the police AND a gang of bank robbers. Nowadays, we are used to having to start our own investigations to stop Granny getting in trouble. Sometimes we get in trouble ourselves.



But if you haven't read about our previous investigations, don't worry. All you need to know is that Muddlemoor is a hotspot for crime. You should also probably know that Granny is lucky to have us around to keep an eye on things, even if she doesn't realise it.

I don't mind that Muddlemoor is a hotspot for crime because whenever I am there I have Tom and Pip to help me out. Tom and Pip are way cleverer than the children at my school and they are also good at using their initiative. Like for instance, whenever they make a den in their garden at home, they don't just hang a blanket over a branch like I do, they build a proper shelter out of sticks and planks of wood and leaves and bits of moss and their parents let them sleep in it – even when it's freezing cold outside. Once they made their own fire and cooked sausages on it WITHOUT A GROWN-UP.

When I heard about this, I invited Isabelle and Alexander Bennett (who are twins in my class at school) to help me make a fire in our garden. But even though the Bennett twins are REALLY good at outdoorsy things, e.g. building dens and climbing trees, and even though they are ALMOST as clever as Tom and Pip,




the fire wouldn't light because all the sticks in my garden were too wet – and then we ran out of matches, so we went inside and made hot chocolate in the microwave instead.

I asked Isabelle and Alexander if they thought we were lacking in the initiative department but Isabelle said not necessarily because initiative is different depending on where you live. Alexander pointed out that some people who live in the countryside and are used to cows and tractors don't have much initiative when it comes to, say, London. And I knew exactly what they meant because when Tom and Pip come to stay with us in our flat they are always stepping off the pavement and nearly getting run over by the Number 73 bus. Last time they came to stay with me they didn't even know about having to wait for their turn at the skate park.

But you don't have to be a genius to know that making a fire needs more initiative than walking along a pavement without getting run over. If my cousins lived in London, they would learn how to walk to the park and wait for buses in a jiffy.

One day I would like to live with my cousins because life is more fun when they are around to keep me company. Sometimes I ask Mum if we can move to Wales to live next door to them but she says it isn't possible because her job is in London and so is her favourite Turkish restaurant (there are lots of Turkish restaurants near to where we live which is lucky because me, Mum and my big sister Bella (who is at university) love kebabs more than McDonalds).

This is quite a long story because a lot happened at Granny's over the Easter holiday but I will try to give you a shortish version so you won't get bored. Also my hand gets achey if I write for too long.

Tom's hand never gets achey when he writes but that's because he has a new green fountain pen with a padded cushion for his fingers. Plus, he is a brainbox. But Tom didn't fancy writing this book because he has quite a few books of his own to be getting on with,

including one about the life cycle of an ant (Tom is going to be a scientist when he grows up, or maybe a jockey).

My cousin Pip didn't want to write it either because you have to sit down to write a book and Pip is not keen on sitting still for longer than a millisecond. She prefers doing cartwheels and climbing trees and she is better at making films than writing.

So that's why you've got me, Joe Robinson, age ten and a quarter. I'll try to make this story gripping and funny all the way to the end and I promise it is a hundred per cent true.



two

It all started on the second day of our holiday at Granny's when Mr Hodge came round with a pile of leaflets. Mr Hodge is very old and his favourite word is 'fascinating', even though he is not one bit fascinating himself. He has straggly white hair that smells of old sofas and he always wears the same blue jumper with dried soup on it.

Mr Hodge doesn't go anywhere without his metal detector because he is interested in finding 'fascinating' objects that used to belong to people a long time ago, e.g. the Romans. He is also very interested in telling us about the 'fascinating' objects he finds. Once he invited us over to his house in Church Lane to look at a display of Roman artefacts in his living room and even though

we stayed for fifty-seven minutes he didn't offer us a biscuit, not even a rich tea.

Now, whenever we see Mr Hodge, we try to make sure we have something important to do so we won't get stuck talking to him.

We were in the sitting room trying to fix a broken video camera that Pip had bought for 99p in a charity shop in Cardiff when we spotted Mr Hodge walking up to Granny's front door. Straight away we grabbed the video camera and tried to escape into the garden before Mr Hodge could see us.

But just as we were running through the hall, Granny answered the front door and suddenly Mr Hodge was inside.

'Oh, there you are, children,' said Granny. 'Mr Hodge has popped over for a cup of tea!'

Tom waved at Mr Hodge and I said 'Hello', but Pip carried on running because she is allergic to making conversation.

Mr Hodge handed Granny a box of chocolates.

'Gosh!' said Granny. 'What have I done to deserve these?'

'Well,' said Mr Hodge, pulling a pile of paper out of his shopping bag. 'Mrs Rooney was selling them at half price! Also I was hoping you might be able to help me fold these leaflets. They're for the parish council meeting this evening.'

Granny looked at her watch.

'Oh, all right!' she said cheerfully. 'You've come to the right house. I have lots of helpers here.'

'Well,' said Mr Hodge, 'I did wonder.'

Me and Tom had to think on our feet because we knew that Granny and Mr Hodge were about to ask us to fold leaflets and one thing I know for a fact is that folding is not quick because once I tried to make a true-life book to get a Blue Peter badge and it took me ALL weekend.

'Oooh, Pip's fallen over!' I said (because Pip was pretending to be hurt in the garden).

'Oh dear, what now!' said Granny, turning round.

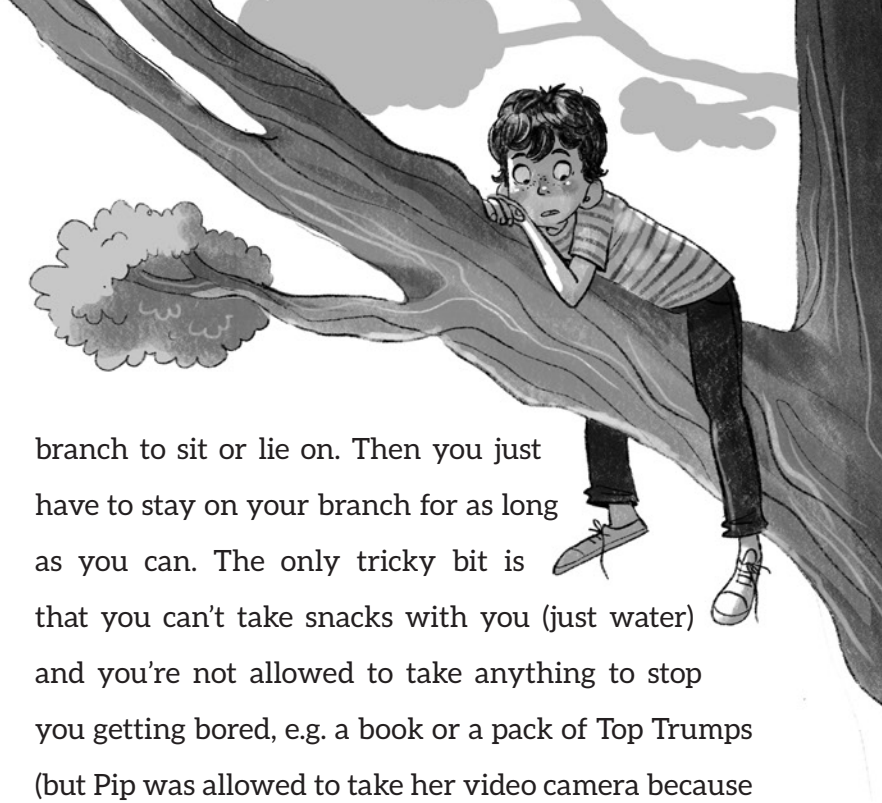
'Don't worry, Granny!' shouted Tom, pushing past Granny and Mr Hodge. 'We'll sort Pip out, you just get on with helping Mr Hodge with those leaflets!'

Tom flung open the French doors and grabbed my arm. 'Run!' he said under his breath and we raced out onto the patio.

'Honestly,' said Granny, in a loud voice. 'Those children are a complete menace. They only arrived yesterday and the place is already a bomb site.' I could tell she wasn't really cross, though because when I looked back through the French doors, she gave me a wink.

We pretended to help Pip up and then we decided to play the Boredom Cup in the magnolia tree at the bottom of Granny's garden. The Boredom Cup is one of our favourite games. We play it a lot, even when there are other things we could be doing, e.g. going to the zip wire at the village playground.

The rules of the Boredom Cup are very easy to remember. You just climb a tree and find a good



branch to sit or lie on. Then you just have to stay on your branch for as long as you can. The only tricky bit is that you can't take snacks with you (just water) and you're not allowed to take anything to stop you getting bored, e.g. a book or a pack of Top Trumps (but Pip was allowed to take her video camera because it didn't actually work).

The Boredom Cup is more fun than it sounds. Tom invented it and he normally wins because he isn't as fidgety as me and Pip. Plus, he is good at testing himself on capital cities to pass the time. Tom and Pip know more capital cities than I do because their dad (my Uncle Marcus) tests them on long car journeys. Once I asked Mum why she doesn't test me on capitals in the car but she said she doesn't

have enough headspace to drive AND think of capital cities at the same time. When me and Mum are in the car together we listen to Radio 1.

We had only been playing the Boredom Cup for about ten minutes when Pip, who was on a branch above me, shouted, 'What's that?' and pointed to something in Jeffrey's Meadow.

Tom swung round so fast to look, he nearly fell out of his branch.

'Do you mean the white thing that isn't a cow?' he said.

'It's a sign,' said Pip.

Tom squinted. 'Of what?'

'No,' said Pip. 'An actual sign. Look.'

I pushed a big branch to one side and leaned over so I could see what they were talking about. Right in the middle of Jeffrey's Meadow was a large white noticeboard covered in blue writing, except I couldn't read the writing because it was too small and I don't have supersonic vision, unlike my teacher, Mr





Saunders, who can see EVERYTHING, even when he's on the other side of the classroom.

'Right,' said Tom, wiping his glasses. 'Let's pause the Boredom Cup and go and investigate.'

Tom jumped off his branch and me and Pip climbed down after him because when it comes to investigating in Muddlemoor, there is no time to waste.

Tom and Pip headed over the fence into Jeffrey's Meadow and set off across the damp grass. I tried my best to keep up with them but they had grown a lot since I last saw them and my legs weren't as long.

There weren't any cows, so we didn't need to stick to the edge like we normally do but we still kept our wits about us because once we were chased by a herd of bullocks in Jeffrey's Meadow and Tom says we can never be too careful.

'Do you think it's a poster advertising a circus?' asked Pip. (Pip is mad about circuses and is always hoping one will come to Muddlemoor when we are staying with Granny.)

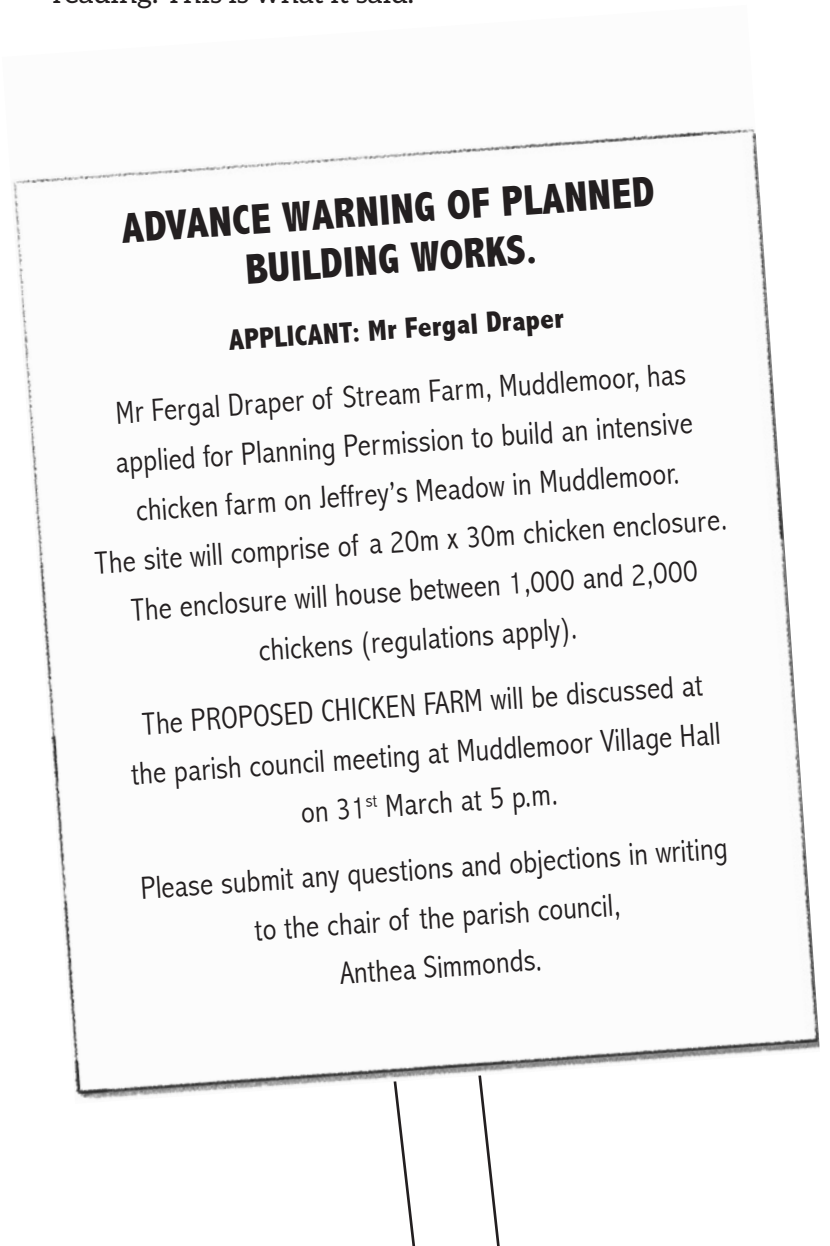


'I don't think so,' said Tom. 'Jeffrey's Meadow belongs to Mr Draper and I can't imagine that circuses are top of his agenda.'

We nodded because Mr Draper is a local farmer and he is not a pleasant man. Once, when we were picking blackberries near his farmhouse, he set his dog on us and another time, when the vicar was collecting food for the harvest festival, Mr Draper REFUSED to give anything because he said he was 'stone broke' but we knew this wasn't true because he had just bought himself a brand-new Land Rover Discovery.

Mr Draper has a bald head with strands of greasy hair and a long black moustache. He normally drives a tractor or strides around the countryside with a stick but sometimes he sits at a table outside the Old Boot pub and shouts at people. Last summer when Mr Draper was behind Pip in the queue at the village shop he got really impatient because Pip was taking ages to choose her sweets and then he STORMED OUT without paying for his Snickers bar.

When we finally reached the white sign, none of us said anything because we had to concentrate on reading. This is what it said:



Tom looked at me and Pip and rubbed his chin.

'Today is the thirty-first of March. This must be the meeting Granny and Mr Hodge are going to later.'

'What do you reck?' said a loud, confident voice.

We spun round and straight away Tom went bright red because it was Sophie Pearce and he has a secret crush on her (except it isn't very secret because everyone knows about it).

'I didn't know you lot were back in Muddlemoor,' she said. 'I'm guessing you've read about the chicken farm.'

We nodded.

'Mr Draper is an EVIL person,' said Sophie. 'He needs to be stopped before he turns this field into a torture chamber.'

'Torture chamber?' I asked, because I couldn't remember reading anything about torturing.

Sophie sighed.

'Torture chamber, battery chicken farm, same difference.' She paused and took a deep breath. 'He's

going to pack thousands of chickens into tiny cages and he won't care how they feel because he's only interested in selling cheap eggs to supermarkets and making lots of money. But I know the truth about what goes on behind the scenes and it isn't pretty. Look!'

Sophie held up a magazine with an article about battery chicken farming. One of the photographs was of a chicken trapped in a tiny cage. It didn't look happy.

'Chickens don't deserve this,' said Sophie, tapping the magazine. 'They're lovely creatures, friendly, funny, clever, if you know what you're looking for. I know a lot more about chickens than Fergal Draper and that's why I'm starting a protest group.'



Sophie unrolled a large piece of laminated cardboard, covered in bubble writing. On one side it said:

And on the other it said:

LONG LIVE CHICKENS!

'I'm sticking it OVER this sign,' explained Sophie. 'When you're part of a protest, you don't stop at *anything*.'

Sophie pulled out a roll of black tape and started to stick her poster on top of the white sign.

I waited for Tom to say something but he was a bit too busy staring at his feet.

'Can anyone join your protest group?' I asked, because I couldn't stop thinking about chickens being trapped in tiny cages.

'Course,' said Sophie. 'Make yourselves a placard and come to the village hall later. The parish council are having a meeting about the chicken farm at five and I'm going there to make a loud fuss. I've tipped off the local newspaper.'

Sophie's phone rang.

'Gotta go,' she said, and then she answered her phone and walked back towards the village, talking loudly.