

THE CASE OF THE DASTARDLY DOGNAPPERS

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To My Family



Lucy

Brave, loyal and athletic. She wants to be an Olympian so don't get in her way . . .



Max

The geek with a wicked sense of humour. Self-styled child genius – just don't tell his mum.



Joe

Adventurous, funny and a great cook – but don't believe everything he says.



Charlie

Fierce as a lion, she loves her dog Sherlock more than people. Don't ever call her Charlotte!



Sherlock

Loud bark, cold nose, big heart – the fifth member of the club.





1

THE DINNER PARTY

Joe was arguing with his mother, and it was not going well.

'I've already told you, Mum,' he said. 'It's a matter of life and death.'

Penelope Carter rolled her eyes with the weary expression of someone who has more important things to do than listen to a matter of life and death. 'All you've told me,' she said, as she tied a kitchen apron around her waist, 'is that you have to go to the school sports ground. It's a Saturday, Joe. Surely, it can't be that important?'

Joe took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. 'It's like I said,' he explained, as calmly as he could

manage. 'Lucy's running in an important race today and I'm meeting the others so we can cheer her on.'

'Well, there you are then,' said his mother, selecting a knife from the wooden block on the kitchen counter. 'Lucy Yeung spends her whole life running races. She's bound to win; she always does. So why do you have to be there?'

'Because it's what friends do, Mum,' said Joe. 'This race is important for Lucy. If she wins, she'll get to try out for the county athletics squad. I *have* to be there.'

Penelope Carter took a heavy package from the fridge and began to unwrap it. 'As I explained to you, Joseph, I have *very* important clients coming for dinner tonight and I need you to be here.'

Joe's mother had started a new job, working for an estate agent in the town, which, she explained, meant that she had to 'show houses' to her clients. Joe couldn't imagine why someone had



to be shown a house. In his experience, houses generally stayed in one place, and they had addresses so that people could find them easily. Showing people where they were didn't sound like much of a job.

When he pointed this out to his mother, she had become quite annoyed. 'It's not like that, Joe,'

she had said, in one of her 'you wouldn't understand' voices. 'The job of an estate agent is very skilled. It's about matching the right sort of people with their ideal property. My clients are people of taste and refinement.'

His mother finished unwrapping the package and studied the contents carefully. Joe looked over her shoulder then recoiled quickly. The package appeared to contain a large blob of slime with tentacles.

'What is *that?*' he said, wrinkling his nose.

'Fresh octopus,' said his mother, as though this was obvious. 'I'm making a seafood stew with a herb salad. It will be lovely.'

Joe stared at the octopus and thought that the last thing it looked was 'lovely'. If this was what people with 'taste and refinement' ate, then he was pretty sure he didn't want to spend an evening with them.

'Are you *sure* you want me there?' he said. 'I mean, I wouldn't want to get in the way of

that whole "matching people with their ideal property" thing.'

His mother gave him a stern look. 'Oh no you don't, my lad. My clients are extremely important people. Lord and Lady Fitchwitherington are practically related to royalty and tonight they're coming here for dinner and they're bringing their daughter with them. So, I need you to be here.'

Joe sighed. He knew better than to argue with his mother, but there were other ways to get out of the dinner party. If he promised to be back on time, he could always claim later that he'd missed his bus or forgotten the way home.

'Okay, Mum,' he said, putting on his most sincere smile. 'I'll just pop out for a little while to cheer for Lucy and then I'll be straight back in time for dinner. How's that?'

Penelope Carter fixed her son with the sort of glare that had been known to reduce shop assistants to jelly. 'You'd better be, my lad,' she said, wagging a finger in his direction. 'I want my clients

to see that we have a happy and stable home life. So, if you're not back here being happy and stable all evening then you will be spending the rest of half-term confined to your bedroom.'