Midwinter Pie

"A secret is like a gift beneath the Christmas tree," I say to Violet as I lower my bottom into the beanbag. "Exciting to think about, but you can only open it if your name is on the label."

Then, because I always feel good when I'm quoting the Rules of Lost-and-Foundering, I give my friend my most annoying mic drop grin, dialled up to ten.

Violet looks unimpressed.

"I'm surprised you get any detective work done at all, Herbie, with ideas like that."

"I've never actually claimed to *be* a detective," I reply. "I'm a Lost-and-Founder, Vi. There's a difference, you know."

It's evening and we're sitting in my lost property cellar, in the cosy glow of the wood-burning stove, surrounded by a century's worth of forgotten items, mislaid whotsits and assorted doodaddery of all description. Icy snow scratches at the basement window as the dismal weather of late December gusts around the town of Eerie-on-Sea. Violet is in my armchair, up to her chin in blankets and the purrs of Erwin the cat, while I, Herbert Lemon – Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel – am sprawled in the firelight like a pro. And in my hand is the thing that has prompted all this talk of rules and secrets.

And what is that thing? Well, see for yourself.

It's a box.

An old tin box that has clearly spent time in the sea – a box about the size of a paperback book, which is locked tight shut. There is no key, but attached to the box is a label. And on that label is a single word:

PRIVATE

The box was found this afternoon in the hotel lobby by Mr Mollusc the manager. I saw him trying – and failing – to get it open before he headed my way.

"Work to do, boy!" he said, carelessly chucking the box onto my desk just as I was closing up for the day. "If you can call it work, that is."

"I can," I replied, flipping my sign to CLOSED. "And I *do*."

And I pulled down my cubby hole grill with a bang.

I still took the box, of course. Whatever old Mollusc-breath thinks, it *is* my job to look after lost things for their rightful owners. And to try to find those owners, too, if I can.

"But, Herbie," Violet cuts into my thoughts, "how are you going to find the rightful owner of that box if you *don't* open it? There could be a name and phone number written in there. It could be case closed and 'Bravo, Herbie!' in three seconds flat if only you'd take a peek. And don't make any excuses about it being locked," she adds, "we both know *that* won't stop you."

Violet glances meaningfully at a shelf near the peg where I hang my Lost-and-Founder's cap. There – gleaming in the warm firelight, and packed full of mechanical wonders – is the pearlescent shell of my trusty clockwork hermit crab.

"Clermit could pick that lock easily," she says. "Let's wind him now!"

I hold up the label so Violet can read the word PRIVATE again. I feel the gaze of all the Lost-and-Founders in history staring down the ages at me, and I pass that stare on to Violet – with interest! – as I shake my head.

"Then hand it over," Violet cries in exasperation, "and *I* will!"

She makes a lunge for the box, spilling Erwin onto the floor. There's a brief struggle in the beanbag, but for once I emerge victorious and Violet is repelled.

"Honestly, Herbie –" Violet flops back in her chair, laughing, her hair crazier than ever – "just open the pesky thing and save yourself a ton of bother. I promise I won't tell."

“What if I don’t need to open it?” I say then, squinting closely at the battered and barnacled old box, turning it round and round to examine it from every side. “What if I can work out who it belongs to using nothing but clues?”

“We-ow!” says Erwin, giving me a narrow look as he climbs back onto Violet’s lap.

“I’d be amazed too,” Violet agrees, stroking the cat apologetically. “And anyway, using clues *is* detective work.”

“But taking care of people’s lost property isn’t. I can’t believe, Vi, that even after you’ve been in Eerie a whole year, you still don’t know my methods.”

Violet folds her arms.

“Go on, then, Mr Lost-and-Founder – what ‘clues’ have you found?”

“There’s a thumbprint, for a start,” I reply. “Well, it’s more of a thumb *smudge*, on the base of the box. It’s fresh, and I think …”

I give the smudge a good sniff.

“… yup! It’s gravy. Smells like chef’s finest Midwinter Pie. That’s only been on the menu since yesterday, so the box must have been lost recently.”

Then I shake the box. It sounds like there’s something inside.

“Could be a shell,” I say, “or … or a pebble…”

“Or,” Violet declares, putting on a rough old fisherfolk voice, “it could be a scale of the fearsome malamander – the legendary creature that haunts our shores at this, the darkest time of year, arr!”

And she flashes her eyes and waggles her fingers like claws, and I find it hard not to grin as I pick up my magnifying glass.

“Well?” Violet continues, watching me scrutinize the box. “Is that it for clues?”

“Not quite.” I peer into the lock. “This box clearly belongs to a hotel guest who likes good food …”

“Pure guesswork,” Violet replies. “And you said that already.”

“… and who is,” I continue, “er, *forgetful*, obviously …”

“Obviously!” Violet laughs. “You’re starting to sound desperate.”

“… and who has short black hair.”

Violet stops laughing.

“Where do you get *that* from?”

“Call it Lost-and-Founder’s intuition,” I reply, with a shrug. Then I add, when I see Violet’s expression, “Also, there’s a hair trapped in the lock, Vi, and it’s short and, um, black.”

I flip open the great leatherbound register, which is on my lap, and turn to the next clean page. This is the official book where I, and all the Lost-and-Founders before me, record the lost things that are handed in. I start to write down the details of the mysterious tin box, such as they are, including one tiny, *tiny* extra little detail that I haven’t mentioned to Violet yet.

Because Violet doesn’t give me the chance.

“So that’s it?” she says, incredulous. “A black-haired, pie-munching, absent-minded hotel guest? Genius! I can’t wait to meet them.”

I ignore her and keep writing,

“Oh, face it, Herbie, you’ll never find the owner of the box this way. And what good will the Rules of Lost-and-Foundering be then? No, I bet you’ll have that old thing cluttering up the place till someone comes and asks for it. Like the rest of the crazy stuff down here.”

“Do you really want to bet?” I reply.

“All right!” Violet throws off her blanket and Erwin again, and jumps to her feet. “How about this: if you haven’t found the rightful owner by this time tomorrow, Herbert Lemon, you’ll hand that box over to me, and I’ll have a go. Using proper detective skills. No rules and regs are going to stop *me* looking inside. Deal?”

“Deal,” I agree. I’m definitely not going to mention that tiny, *tiny* extra detail now.

“And if you’ve quite finished being impossible,” Vi says then, picking up her coat, “we’d better get going. Or have you forgotten what we’re doing tonight?”

I shut the ledger with an ominous thud.

I get reluctantly to my feet.

“Don’t look like that,” Violet grins, as she winds her scarf round her neck. “We promised to help, remember? And, judging by the weather outside, it’s the perfect night for it.”

“That’s what worries me!” I reply, pulling on my biggest coat and slipping the old tin box into the pocket. I take a look at the darkness beyond the window, and try not to think about the date. We’re just two days out from Midwinter Night, when legend really does say that a terrible creature called the malamander lays a magical egg that can grant your heart’s desire – the night the monster is most dangerous of all.

Of course, you probably don’t believe in the malamander. You maybe think there’s no way a fish-man can be real. And that’s fine. Frankly, I wouldn’t believe in it either, not if I hadn’t seen and heard the things I barely survived seeing and hearing a year ago. But even so, whether you believe in monsters or not, you’d still be bonkers to go near the sea on a night like this, which is why I can’t believe I agreed to help out on Blaze Westerley’s Eerie Monster Tour in the first place.

“*Come on*, Herbie,” says Vi, already at my cellar window, “It’s not as if we’re *actually* hunting the malamander. It’s just a bit of harmless fun.”

“The surest way to find a monster,” says a feline voice, “is to let the monster find you.”

Erwin, who has finally claimed the whole of Violet’s chair, is kneading the blankets and purring up a storm like any other cat in the world.

“Is that supposed to be helpful?” I say to him, as I grab my cap and slip Clermit beneath. “Because it isn’t!”

“He’s just jealous that he’s not coming too,” Violet grins. “As long as we keep off the beach, Herbie, we should be fine.”

And so saying, she opens the basement window – letting a billow of snowy air tumble into my home – and we climb out into the legend-haunted streets of Eerie-on-Sea.