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Opening extract from

Half Moon Investigations

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Chapter 1

THE FIRST RULE OF INVESTIGATION

My name is Moon. Fletcher Moon. And I'm a private detective. In my twelve years on this spinning ball we call Earth, I've seen a lot of things normal people never see. I've seen lunch boxes stripped of everything except fruit. I've seen counterfeit homework networks that operated in five counties, and I've seen truckloads of candy taken from babies.

I thought I'd seen it all. I had paid so many visits to the gutter looking for lost Love Hearts that I thought nothing could shock me. After all, when you've come face to face with the dark side of the school yard, life doesn't hold many surprises.

Or so I believed. I was wrong. Very wrong.

One month ago a case came knocking on my door that made me consider getting out of the detective business for good. I'd just turned twelve and already I had a dozen successful investigations under my belt.

Business was good but I was ready to start solving actual crimes. No more kids' stuff. I wanted real cases that paid real money, not just whatever the kid happened to have in his pocket at the time.

It all went wrong the day I decided to break Bob Bernstein's first rule of investigation: *Be invisible. Put the pieces of the puzzle together, but never become one of those pieces yourself.*

Herod Sharkey made me forget that rule.

As every private investigator knows, Bob Bernstein is the legendary FBI agent turned PI who founded the Bernstein Academy in Washington to train aspiring investigators properly. He also wrote the *Bernstein Manual*, which every student needs to know by heart if they are to have any hope of qualifying. I knew the manual from cover to cover, and I had qualified at the top of my online class, though I had to use my dad's birth certificate to do it. Luckily we both share the same name.

September twenty-seventh. That day is as clear to me as a high-resolution photograph. The end of our first month back in school after the summer holidays. Unfortunately the summer didn't know it was over and was pouring on the sunshine. The heat came off the tarmac yard in sheets, wrapping itself round the students of St Jerome's Primary and Secondary School.

I arrived at the gates around the usual time. Eight fifty. I like to be ten minutes early wherever I'm going. Gives me time to get my finger on whatever pulse is beating. Private detectives need to be in touch with our environment. The *Bernstein Manual* says that: *A detective never knows where his next case is coming from.* For all he knows, it could be a puzzle that he has already solved, if he's kept his eyes open. So I keep my eyes wide open. I can tell you which kids have wart acid on their fingers. I know who's passing lovey-dovey notes around in the senior yard and even which teachers stop off in Burger Mac on their way to school.

But nobody can possibly see everything. Not even the legendary detective Bob Bernstein. That's why I needed my informants. Doobie Doyle was the best one I had. An eight-year-old snot-nosed snitch with sharp eyes and a big mouth. Doobie would sell out his own mother for a sweaty handful of jelly beans. Unfortunately, when I say Doobie was snot-nosed, it's not just a turn of phrase. Doobie never went anywhere without a couple of green yo-yos hanging from his nostrils, which he then snorted back up so hard that they wrapped round his brain. Actually, it was the perfect disguise. It was all people noticed about him. If Doobie ever wiped his nose, his own mother wouldn't be able to pick him out of a line-up.

On that morning, the twenty-seventh, he was at the gates waiting for me. I was surprised. Usually I had to track him down. This must be important.

'Morning, Fletcher,' he said, trotting along beside me.

I didn't look down. A close-up view of Doobie was not how you wanted to start your day.

'What have you got for me?' I asked casually.

'Did you see *Captain Laserbeam* last night? There was a mud monster.'

Doobie was a good snitch, but he distracted easily.

'Let's talk about cartoons later, Doobie. Do you have some information?'

'Yep. Good stuff. But I want to see the badge.'

I sighed. Doobie always wanted to see the badge. It was shiny, and he was eight.

'OK. One peek, then spill the beans.'

I reached into my trouser pocket and pulled out a small leather wallet. I flipped it in front of Doobie's face. Inside were a laminated card and a gold-plated detective's badge. Sunlight winked along the badge's ridges, and for a long moment I was mesmerized by it. Even after six months, I sometimes found it hard to believe that it was finally mine.

'Wow,' said Doobie with real reverence, which gave way quickly to doubt. 'You sure this is real?'

I tapped the laminated card. 'It's all right there,

Doobie. Fletcher Moon. Graduate of the Bob Bernstein Private Detective Academy.'

'Can I have it?' asked Doobie, just like he did every time he saw the badge.

No,' I replied, slipping the wallet back into my pocket. 'This took me two years to earn. Even if you had it, it wouldn't be yours.'

Doobie frowned. This kind of thinking was a bit advanced for someone who hadn't yet worked out the mechanics of a handkerchief.

'So, what have you got for me, Doobie? Something juicy, I hope.'

'I dunno what I've got,' he said. 'I only came looking 'cause everyone knows I'm your secret snitch and they asked me to find you.'

I stopped. 'Who asked you?'

'Herod Sharkey,' replied Doobie. 'I don't know who the other one is, but he's big, really big.'

Herod Sharkey. According to school-yard rules, that name shouldn't have bothered me in the least. After all I was in sixth class and Herod was merely a fourth-class student. But the Sharkey family weren't ones for rules. In fact, if there *was* an unbroken rule somewhere, the Sharkeys would drive several hundred miles out of their way just to break it.

Herod was one of the school wild men. The teachers have a name for people like Herod. They call him one of the 'usual suspects'. Whenever anything went missing, he was routinely summoned to the principal's office for questioning. Nine out of ten times, Herod had the missing thing in his pocket. The other time, he had probably buried it in the sports field. It wouldn't be long before the police began to call at the school looking for him.

So why would Herod Sharkey be looking for me? I didn't own anything valuable. *Except my detective's shield.* My hand went instinctively to my pocket, but the wallet was still there. I decided to check it every thirty seconds or so, just to be on the safe side.

I dropped my bag off at the sixth-class spot, then followed Doobie around the side of the school, past the oil tank that had been painted to look like Thomas the Tank Engine, to the basketball court, where all the major student business was conducted. If you needed to hire someone to tell someone that a third person fancied them, this was the place to find that someone. The basketball court was also the agreed location for school fights. I could see from the ragged ring of kids that someone had booked an early slot to settle a disagreement.

'Where's Herod?' I asked Doobie, though I already

knew. Herod was a Sharkey, so there was only one place that he was likely to be.

'He's fighting. They're headlocked.'

I nodded. Headlocked was better than pinwheeling. A person could get himself injured getting involved in a pinwheeler.

There are several kinds of school fight. The three most popular kinds are the Pinwheel, the Hold-Me-Back and the Headlock. In the Pinwheel, the two fighters run at each other, eyes closed and arms spinning. The object was to catch your opponent with a lucky shot, but more often than not the enemies missed each other by yards. The Pinwheel was popular with younger kids.

It could be argued that the Hold-Me-Back is not, strictly speaking, a fight at all, since the object is to avoid the conflict altogether. In a Hold-Me-Back, the foes scream 'Hold me back' as loudly and often as possible until a teacher arrives to break things up. Following the adult's arrival, the secretly relieved opponents are led away by their friends, still shouting things like: 'You were lucky, bum-face. I would have murdered you.'

The Headlock was what we were dealing with on that day. The Headlock does exactly what it says on the tin. Two boys get each other in a mutual headlock and whoever lets go first is the loser. Grip is everything in the Headlock. Some boys favour lacing the fingers,

others go for the wrist grip. It depends really on length and strength of fingers. There are many reasons why the loser loses. Not being able to breathe is one, needing a toilet break is another. There is a schoolyard legend of two bitter enemies, Burton McHale and Jerry Canty, who stayed headlocked for twenty straight hours. Their friends brought them food, and they went to the toilet without using the bathroom, if you see what I mean. Those who have tried this tactic say it is only embarrassing the first time.

I approached the circle round the fight, uncertain why my feet were carrying me there. What could be here for a detective? I was not fond of violent situations. It wasn't that I'd never been in a fight, it was just that I'd never won one. But there was a stronger instinct driving me forward. I smelt a mystery. My detective's nose pulled me closer to the action. I could no more ignore this than a magpie could ignore a diamond ring on a window sill.

Doobie elbowed his way through the crowd.

'I got him. I got Moon.'

The crowd parted, repelled by the sight of Doobie's nose. Nobody wanted to chance contact with those stringy greeners. I followed through to the eye of the hurricane. All eyes were on me, which was not how it was supposed to be. Detectives should

never be in the thick of the action. We were supposed to turn up later and ask questions. The closest a detective gets to a bullet is dusting the shell casing for prints. And yet here I was, following an eight-year-old into the middle of a fight circle.

There were two figures in the centre. One was Herod Sharkey, short and skinny with the signature Sharkey red hair. The other was not a boy, as Doobie had thought: it was Bella Barnes, the biggest kid in the school. Bella stood nearly six feet tall in her woolly stockings and played rugby on the boys' team. Nobody messed with Bella. Ever. Not even the teachers. And yet here was Herod Sharkey latched on to her back like a tick on a mutt.

I was stunned for a moment. Then I composed myself and took a mental snapshot of the scene, memorizing the details. According to the *Bernstein Manual*: *A detective never knows which seemingly insignificant fact will solve the case.*

So. Details. Bella Barnes. One eighty. Maybe seventy-five kilos. Eighty. Regulation school uniform, except for expressly forbidden drop earrings, which could catch on a doorknob and rip a lobe according to Mrs Quinn, the school principal. Though nobody had ever seen or heard of this happening.

Then there was Herod Sharkey. Known as Roddy to

his family, and not to be confused with his big brother, Red. About 1.37 tall, silver tracksuit and brown climbing boots. Not school regulation, but the height of ten-year-old cool. Herod had his skinny arms wrapped round Bella's neck, and they were barely long enough to meet at the front. Strictly speaking, this was not a classic headlock, as only one of the antagonists had a grip on the other.

Herod looked up from his struggle. His face was flushed but determined. A hush dropped like a blanket over the other kids as they waited for the little Sharkey to speak. I had a feeling that, whatever he said, I wouldn't like it.

'Moon, you nerd,' said Herod.

So far, my feeling was right.

'You're the big detective. Prove to this hippo that I didn't take her organizer.'

Bella bucked, tossing Herod like a rodeo jockey, but he held on grimly.

'You took it,' rasped Bella. 'April saw you.'

'Barbie is lying! I didn't take nothing.'

A delicate-looking girly-girl in the crowd pointed a finger at Herod.

'Double negative!' she squealed triumphantly. 'You did it, Sharkey. I saw you. You and your brother have been stealing from us for years.'

This was April Devereux, ten years old and already the head of an entire tribe of Barbites. Herod's description of her may not have been very politically correct, but it was accurate. If a Barbie doll walked through a magnification tunnel, April Devereux would emerge at the other end.

'You're lying!' shouted Herod. 'And Half Moon will prove it.'

I was wondering how long it would be before someone brought up my nickname. I had been christened Half Moon by Red Sharkey back when I was in third class. Even then I hadn't been the tallest stalk in the field.

'What do you expect me to do?' I asked him.

'You're always banging on about this famous detective's shield. So detect something.'

This was ridiculous. This was not how detectives worked.

'Go on, Fletcher,' said April Devereux, managing to speak and pout at the same time. 'Do us all a favour and prove I'm telling the truth.'

I grimaced at the gathered crowd.

'What can I do? I don't have the facts. I wouldn't know where to begin.'

Bella glared at me. 'You better begin,' she said hoarsely. 'Or I'm going to roll over and crush this ant.

Then I'm going to take your precious shield and stuff it somewhere painful.'

I paled but not as much as Herod.

'Hurry, Moon,' he said urgently. 'If I get crushed, my family will come looking for you.'

I felt as though I had wandered into somebody else's nightmare, but it was too late to back away slowly and close the dream door behind me. There were a hundred eyes on me, all expecting a rabbit out of a hat.

Doobie elbowed me. 'Go on, Fletcher,' he said. 'You can do it.'

I suspected that Doobie wanted me to enter the fray so that he could have my badge when I didn't come back.

April Devereux's gang of April clones stamped and pouted at me. It was quite unnerving. They generally looked so pink and harmless.

'I can't do anything here. You need a referee, not a detective.'

Herod's forehead was quite red now with the effort of hanging on.

'You better help, Half Moon. I'm warning you.'

There was no point in arguing. You couldn't debate with Herod Sharkey. It would be as pointless as trying to sell the vegetarian lifestyle to a T-rex. The best thing

to do would be to turn around and leave. So I gave that a try, but the crowd was not as eager to let me out as it had been to let me in. I was an interesting wrinkle in an otherwise boring headlock fight. The kids surged forward, forcing me closer to the fight itself.

As I was bumped backwards, I realized that I was in a very vulnerable position. All Herod had to do was scissor his legs.

Herod must have realized this too, for he suddenly kicked his skinny legs up and wrapped them round my neck. My balance was off, and I toppled to the ground, bouncing off Bella's thigh on the way down.

The other kids cheered. This was a positive development as far as they were concerned.

I was disgusted more than afraid. Herod was only ten, and small for his age, so he couldn't do much more than keep me on the ground, not in this position. But time was ticking on and soon the bell would ring, and Principal Quinn would make her way out here with her dogs, Larry and Adam, to see what the problem was. And the rules said that anyone caught in a fight paid a little visit to her office.

Herod's bootlaces were wedged up under my chin and his feet were hooked together. I tried to unwind them, but unfortunately I was one-handed. Bella had

rolled over my right arm. It felt like I had been steamrollered. Surely my arm was cartoon flat.

'You better start thinking, Half Moon,' said Herod. 'Otherwise we're going down to the office together.'

'Yeah, Half Moon,' chimed in Bella. 'Get your thinking hat on.'

Apparently I was the bad guy now.

There was a simple solution. Simple but not very macho. However, I had little time and no options. With my free hand, I grabbed Herod's left heel and tugged off his climbing boot.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'What are you doing? He's stealing my shoe.'

I wasn't, of course, stealing his shoe. What I was doing was much less dignified. Before Herod could figure out what was going on, I grabbed his foot and, with my index finger, began tickling the sole.

'What?' squealed the ten-year-old. 'Not fair! Stoppit!'

To give Herod his due, he held on for ten seconds before wriggling off Bella's back and out of range. He was on his feet with tears of anger in his eyes.

'What kind of fighting is that? That's baby fighting.'

He was right, of course. But I was a thinker, not a fighter.

I knelt up, coughing. 'Listen, Herod. I'm willing to

look into this organizer thing, but you have to let me follow proper procedure.'

I picked up Herod's boot, holding it out, mainly to show everyone that I wasn't trying to steal it.

Things could have calmed down then. A lot of kids were drifting away for line-up. Bella was up but winded and Herod was having a teary moment. The whole thing was running out of steam and would probably have turned into a Hold-Me-Back if Red Sharkey hadn't arrived.

Red burst into the centre of the circle on a mountain bike, scattering bystanders like skittles. Red Sharkey had always been at the centre of the rowdy crowd. Red made his points with fists and jibes. He was tall and wiry, with flaming red hair that had earned him his school-yard name. Most of the children and staff in St Jerome's didn't know Red's real name and wouldn't use it if they did. At thirteen, Red was the oldest kid in primary. He should have moved on to secondary school a year ago, but he hadn't attended much in his early years and had been held back.

For a moment, Red's eyes were wide and worried, then he saw his brother upright and apparently not bleeding. He jumped off his bike, kicking the stand with his heel during the dismount. I couldn't pull off a move like that if I practised for a year.

'Roddy?' he said, with a casual nod.

Herod scowled at his brother. 'I don't need you, goody-two-shoes. I can handle this.'

'So I see. Can't you stay out of trouble for a minute?'

Bella caught her breath. 'Your brother stole my organizer. Brand new.'

'I did not!' objected Herod.

Red frowned. 'Whenever anything goes missing in this school, the nearest Sharkey gets the blame.' He glanced at his brother. 'You didn't take it, did you?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

Herod took a second to think back over the past few days.

'Yeah. Certain. No organizer.'

'Right, that's it. He didn't take it. End of story. Nothing to see here, let's move it along.'

Good idea, I thought. *Red has more sense than his brother.*

But Bella wasn't backing down for anyone, even Red Sharkey.

'*He's* going to prove Herod did it.'

Oh no, I thought. *I'm he. He's me.*

'Who's going to prove Herod did it?' demanded Red.

'He is!' shouted several dozen people; most of them pointed too.

Red turned, following the fingers. His accusing gaze settled on me.

'Hey, Red,' I said, trying the friendly approach. 'How you doing?'

Red smiled mirthlessly. 'Half Moon. The man with the badge. This is not lost cats, this is the actual world. People could get in trouble.'

I shrugged. 'Tell your brother. He invited me.'

'Doobie is always going on about his partner the qualified detective, with the actual detective's shield,' said Herod. 'So let the nerd prove I'm innocent.'

I didn't know which disturbed me more, Doobie calling me his partner or Herod calling me a nerd.

'Yeah, let nerd-boy prove he's innocent,' said Bella, rubbing her neck. 'Or else Herod's guilty as far as I'm concerned.'

Red rubbed his temples, as though the stupidity of what he was hearing was giving him a headache. 'Listen to me. Half Moon plays at being a detective. His mammy bought him a toy badge somewhere, so now he goes around pretending to be Sherlock Holmes. It's not real. He can't *prove* anything.'

This was too much. I imagined the shield in my

pocket glowing with indignation. I took out the wallet, flipping it open.

'Actually, Red,' I said, 'this is a real detective's shield. I am a real detective. First in the academy.'

Red turned slowly towards me. Generally at this point, I would run away and find a dark corner to hide in, but some things are worth standing up for.

'So, you're a real detective. I bet criminals all over Ireland are turning themselves in. "What's the point?" they're saying. "Fletcher Moon is on the case."'

'Go, Fletcher,' snuffled Doobie, who was too young for sarcasm.

'So what does your big detective's brain tell you about the case of the missing organizer?' continued Red.

I shrugged. 'Nothing. I don't know the facts. I haven't had a chance to question anyone.'

Red leaned back on the saddle of his bike. I got the feeling he was more interested in poking fun at me than clearing his brother's name. Although, in all fairness, it would take two dozen lawyers and a time machine to clear Herod's name completely.

'I'm sure Bella can answer any questions you care to ask,' said Red, grinning in anticipation of my failure.

'Come on, Fletcher,' said April Devereux. Her Barbie buddies did some cheerleading hops. It was

nice to have somebody in my corner, even April and Co. Although I suspected that they were more anti-Sharkey than pro-Moon.

I cleared my throat and tried to sound professional. 'So, Miss . . . ah . . . Bella. Tell me what happened. Don't leave out any detail, however insignificant.'

Bella thought for a moment. 'Well, I got up at seven and I was thinking about these earrings for ages, 'cause Quinn says they're banned.'

I interrupted her. 'OK. You can leave out those details, stuff that only happened in your head and not in the actual world. Just tell us about the organizer.'

'OK. It was a birthday present. Diary, phone numbers, MP3 player, everything. If someone wanted to know the time in Tokyo, all they had to do was ask.'

The crowd oohed, impressed. Bella accepted their admiration with a little royal wave.

'So I brought it in today, for the first time. Only I forgot about it for a minute 'cause I was worrying about the earrings. I left my bag by the wall and went off for a walk around with the girls.'

The senior girls spent a large part of their break time on walk-around. Circling the yard, searching for little kids with no fashion sense to tease.

'So, halfway around I remembered my organizer and ran back to my bag. But I was too late; little Klepto Sharkey had already made off with it.'

'Klepto?' said Red, trying to sound incredulous.

'Yes, Red. Klepto. Short for kleptomaniac. He's a real Sharkey all right. Been stealing since he was in nappies.'

Red's expression was more resigned than furious.

'So maybe Roddy's been in trouble a few times; that's not proof of anything.'

April Devereux took a step forward from the rank of pink go-gos.

'I saw him searching Bella's bag. I saw him with my actual vision. That's proof, isn't it? I watch *Law and Order*, so I know. I'm a witness.'

I winced apologetically at Red. 'That's pretty strong. An eyewitness.'

'So where's the organizer?' countered Red. 'If he stole it a few minutes ago, where is it?'

I transferred my wince to Bella. 'That's pretty strong. No smoking gun.'

'I know that, Half Moon. That's why you're here. You don't think I'd be even talking to you if I didn't need something?'

All eyes were on me again, and not in a nice *oh look at that handsome young man in the shiny shoes I wonder if he's single* kind of way. It was more of a nasty *if he*

doesn't come up with the goods in ten seconds let's lynch him kind of way.

I considered the facts aloud. 'So, the organizer is missing and Herod Sharkey is the prime suspect. But if Herod did steal it, then he obviously stashed it somewhere.'

'Herod has little hidey-holes all over town,' said April. 'He's like some kind of rabbit, only one that steals stuff.'

'This hidey-hole would have to be on the school grounds. He only had a minute before Bella confronted him. Where could he go in a minute?'

This was a question with as many answers as there were degrees on the compass. And with so many thousands of footprints tracking across the basketball court, it was impossible to isolate just one set. Unless Herod had brought something back from wherever it was he'd gone.

I still had Herod's climbing boot in my hand. I flicked it over, studying the deep sole, hoping for a clue. I found one. The rubber was stained yellow and there were several buttercups trapped in the ridges. They were freshly ripped from the soil, with barely a trace of brown on the petals.

'The Millennium Garden,' I said, looking Herod straight in the face. He was suddenly pale and

open-mouthed. A reaction that told me I was right, so I took off, striding towards the school garden, leaving the rest to follow.

Those few moments, during the short walk from the basketball court to the garden, were the happiest moments I was to have for some time. This was what detective work was all about. Those precious seconds when you have made a breakthrough and you are so sure of it that the confidence seems to burst through your very pores.

The buttercups trapped in Herod's boot told me exactly where he had been in the past few minutes. Several years ago, at the beginning of the new millennium, the school got a grant for a commemorative wild garden. Every spring we were treated to the story at assembly by Principal Quinn. The garden was designed in a ring pattern. One ring for each millennium, each ring a different colour. Green, white and gold like the Irish flag. Green grass, white daisies and golden buttercups. Buttercups that were flowering again because of the Indian summer.

Of course, it could mean nothing. Maybe Herod had just walked through the garden on his way to school, but his reaction made me think differently.

I arrived at the garden, dragging the rest behind me like the Pied Piper. I looked hard at the ground for

several moments, then glanced sharply at Herod. He was staring at his own feet, but every few seconds his eyeballs would flick across to the buttercup ring. It was just as Bernstein said in chapter eight of the detective's manual: *The criminal's own body will betray him. Guilt is a powerful force and will find a way out.* In this case, through the eyes.

I stepped into the buttercup ring, careful to avoid crushing too many of Mrs Quinn's precious flowers, and thrust my fingers into the loose clay in the centre. Barely a centimetre down, I hit metal. There was a box down there.

'I have never seen that biscuit tin before in my life,' said Herod, jumping the gun a bit.

Red groaned. 'Moron. How do you know it's a biscuit tin?'

'I know,' replied Herod haughtily, 'because I put it –' He stopped then, because the penny had dropped.

'Exactly,' sighed Red. 'As I said. Moron.'

I was about to pull out the box when Bella barged me aside. She ripped the tin from the earth. Surprise, surprise, it was a biscuit tin.

Bella flipped the lid and selected her organizer from the contents.

'Half Moon was right,' she crowed. 'You did take it, you little Sharkey thief. Now I am legally entitled to beat you the length of the school yard.'

'That probably won't hold up in court,' I said from the ring of daisies.

Bella was not the only person annoyed with Herod. Red was having trouble containing himself.

'You promised me,' he said, fists clenched in exasperation. 'No more stealing in school. Don't you know what could happen to the family?'

'I didn't take it,' protested Herod. 'The box is mine, but I didn't put the organizer in it. This is a set-up.'

No one was convinced by this. Legend had it that Herod's first words were: 'I've been framed.'

I picked myself up from the ring and leaned over, shaking flowers from my hair.

'In Herod's defence, this is far from conclusive,' I said to my shoes. 'There are missing links in the chain of evidence.'

An impressed silence followed this technical-sounding statement, or so I thought. I looked up to find that it was more of a deserted silence. Everyone who had followed me to the Millennium Garden was now hightailing it back to the basketball court. They moved with a speed and silence that would have shamed a special forces squad. Even Red Sharkey was moving quickly, although he managed to do it in a nonchalant way.

There was only one person in this school that could

make Red Sharkey run anywhere. That person must be nearby, so I had better get a move on too.

'Fletcher Moon. I don't believe it.'

It was Principal Quinn. As usual she was flanked by Larry and Adam. I know dogs aren't supposed to smile, but I swear I could see them grinning behind their muzzles.

'Please tell me what you think you are doing.'

Apparently, telling a teacher what you think you are doing makes you think about what you have done.

'I think I am going straight down to the office,' I answered, hoping a bit of humour would lighten the tension.

Mrs Quinn chuckled, and for a second I was hopeful, but her laughter dried up like a waterhole in the Sahara.

'Correct,' she snapped. 'When I get back from line-up inspection, you had better be there waiting.'

It seemed to me that Larry and Adam sniggered then, or perhaps they growled. I didn't know which was worse. Mrs Quinn led them off to make sure that the class lines were as straight as rulers.

I trudged back through the school field towards the main building. The euphoria I had felt earlier drained down through the soles of my feet. Yes, I had solved the case, but I had broken Bernstein's first rule: *Never*

become a piece of the puzzle. A detective should not be afraid of the outcome of a case, as this fear will affect his work. The victim, witness and perpetrator had all known where to locate me if my findings went against them. The Sharkeys had tried to use me, but it had backfired on them and now Herod was a marked man. I was a marked man too, or I would be. Several marks probably, if Red had his way.

The school 'bell' rang. It was a computer bell that used a sample of Mrs Quinn's own voice. 'Line up, students,' the bell said. 'Don't make me ask again.' Of course it did ask again. Over and over again. Jimín Grady had been expelled recently for sneaking into the office and replacing Mrs Quinn's voice sample with his own. His voice sample had not been quite so polite.

I was just picking up my bag when Red Sharkey appeared from inside the porch shadows. He emerged from the darkness one limb at a time, like a cartoon villain.

'You think you're very smart, don't you, Half Moon?' he said, his eyes blazing with unpredictable anger.

'My name is Fletcher,' I said, feeling pretty proud of myself for not allowing my shaking knees to fold underneath me.

'Well, *Fletcher*, I better not hear any more about this organizer thing. I have enough trouble without a toy detective stirring things up.'

There was something new in Red's voice as he said this. The anger was still in there, but there was desperation too. And I got the feeling that the anger was not all directed at me.

'As far as I'm concerned, it's a closed case, but I'd advise your brother to steer clear of Bella for a while.'

Red nodded, accepting the advice, then remembered that he was supposed to be angry with me. He leaned in close, brushing against me.

'Roddy will steer clear of Bella, and you'll steer clear of us. As of now, Half Moon, you are retired. Got it?'

I stared him down. I wasn't retiring for him or anyone else. I thought I was being really brave holding his gaze like that, but five minutes later I realized that this was just what Red Sharkey wanted. It gave him the opportunity to steal my shield.