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## The Harbor Crocodiles

### Case 3

# The Mystery of Cat Mansion

Translation by Paul Davenport



### The Tabby Cat

*It all began the day Leonie made the acquaintance of a mysterious tabby cat. This is what happened:*

Leonie was on duty all alone in the detective bureau of the Harbor Crocodiles on a Friday afternoon. As they weren't working on a case at the moment there wasn't really that much to do besides cleaning up, and she didn't feel like doing that. She decided to do something to improve her skills as a detective. She picked up a detective novel and started reading.

She had borrowed a whole bunch of *Inspector Quizly* books from the library. She loved the series because the reader was challenged to think about the cases and try to solve them. She was secretly glad that her two friends weren't there.

Pat had gone to Lüneburg with his family to a birthday party. Ollie and his dad had gone into town to buy a special device for his computer.

Leonie's mother, the photographer Ann Storm, was busy taking fashion photos in the streets of Harbor City. So Leonie was alone for the afternoon.

But she was by no means bored.

It was a warm sunny day in June.

She browsed, sunned herself and watched the ships that sailed by on the Elbe.

She had taken out the binoculars and was watching a Chinese container ship when something rustled behind her in the bushes.

Turning quickly, she discovered a young tabby cat. It sat under the garden hedge and was staring at her with green eyes as mysterious as an Egyptian sphinx.

'Hey, you!' Leonie cried and stretched out her hand.

The cat approached her hesitantly. At first it seemed to be afraid of her. Finally, purring loudly, it rubbed its nose and ear on Leonie's bare leg.

'How thin you are! I can count your ribs,' she said full of pity. At that moment, the cat began to meow and two little cats came out from under the bushes!

'Hm. There must be a nest here somewhere,' Leonie murmured. 'Wait here a minute. I'm going to run to the Pilot House Café to Grandpa Bloom and get you some milk!'

She was about to start off when Grandpa Bloom came up the path to the club house and cried: 'Ollie called! He's coming at 7! He wants you to wait in the club house till he gets there. Pat's coming, too.'

'It's about time!' Leonie laughed. 'We've got three baby cats to take care of!' She pointed toward the club house.

Curious as cats are, they had in the meantime slipped into the club house of the Harbor Crocodiles and made themselves at home. They were playing tag and romping around the room.

Grandpa watched them. After a while, he said, 'I'm going to get them something to eat!'

When Ollie and Pat showed up toward evening, they were just as fascinated by the cats as Leonie.

'Three? That's no coincidence. There's one for each of us,' Ollie said.

'They can stay in our club house until we find out who they belong to,' said Pat.

'If you ask me, they can stay here permanently,' said Leonie. She had already grown very fond of the tabby cat.

'I'll ask my grandpa if he'll make a cat flap in the club house door. He's in his workshop, I think!' Ollie said and hurried off.

'No problem,' Grandpa Bloom said when Ollie found him in the cellar of the pilot house. 'And there's a cat litter tray somewhere in these shelves, too!'

'You're the greatest, Grandpa,' Ollie said.

'Well, maybe the second greatest,' Grandpa Bloom said, a little embarrassed by so much praise.

But cats have a mind of their own.

The next morning they were gone again, vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

'What a bummer!' Ollie said as he mixed the red paint for the window frames. 'I had already got used to them.'

'They must belong to someone who has gone on holiday and left them behind,' Pat mused. Like Ollie, he had a job to do. There was a leak in the roof and the tar paper had to be patched.

Leonie planted flowers in the flower pots.

Little by little, Grandpa Bloom's old garden shed was turning into a first-class detective bureau!

On Sunday afternoon, as Leonie was laying on her stomach in the sun reading the Inspector Quizly Case, *The Mystery of Spooky Hill*,<sup>1</sup> something dark suddenly jumped over her back and landed next to her on the blanket.

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<sup>1</sup> you can read it, too! You find the free download on [www.buecherbruecken.de](http://www.buecherbruecken.de)

'Hey, it's you, tabby cat! You scared me silly! Where have been all this time? And where are your friends?'

The cat moved around her, purring loudly, as if it wanted to tell her something.

'I know, I know, you're hungry!'

She went and got the cat food she had bought for the cats and a saucer full of water.

Where were Pat and Ollie? They were supposed to be there long ago. Leonie went to the garden gate and stood there, impatiently. Finally, Pat came skating up the path. And not far behind him, she could see Ollie, too.

'You're ten minutes late. And you're always complaining that I'm never on time!' Leonie said.

'I had to help Mom and grandma. They wanted to rearrange the tables in the café,' Ollie said. 'There's going to be a big birthday party later on today.'

'What's your big hurry?' Pat wanted to know.

'That's why!' said Leonie, pointing at the tabby cat, which was sticking very close to her. 'Our friend, the tabby cat is back! It seems to want to tell me something but I don't know what.'

'I do,' Pat said. 'It's hungry.'

'I just got some milk for it,' Leonie said. 'Now look at that!'

The cat had begun moving toward the garden gate, as if it wanted Leonie to follow it.

'Maybe it wants to lead us to its friends,' Ollie said.

Pat thought for a moment and said, 'Yeah, maybe someone caught them or put them in a cage or something.'

'You mean a cat catcher?' Leonie asked. 'I heard on the radio that animal catchers are underway, and that you should keep a close eye on your pets.'

'Are you saying this is a case for the Harbor Crocodiles?' Ollie wrinkled his forehead.

'Why not? At any rate, I'm going to follow it and see what it wants to show me,' said Leonie with a determined look in her eye. 'Are you coming with me?'

'Sure thing, Inspector,' Pat said with a broad smile. 'We're all in this together!'

Pat's smile soon vanished. The cat was fast and following it wasn't easy. It seemed to be happy that these dumb humans finally understood what it wanted. For a long time, it led them along the riverbank, then it suddenly turned and headed up the steep path towards the Elbe park.

'Boy oh boy, this cat is worse than a drill sergeant!' Ollie said, huffing and puffing like a steam engine. He wasn't as fit as Pat and Leonie, who were running at least ten meters ahead of him.

Suddenly, the cat disappeared into the bushes.

Ollie stopped to catch his breath. 'We can't be crawling through people's gardens just because of the cat!' he said.

'The hole in the fence is too small for us anyway,' said Leonie.

'Not even Ollie could get through it,' Pat said with a wink of his eye.

'It's probably a short cut. If we run around the houses, we'll see it again on the other side of the garden,' Ollie said.

'You go around to the right, I'll go left,' Leonie said to the two boys, her eyes wide with excitement.

No sooner had she said it than she was off.

But when they met again in the next side street and looked around there was no cat in sight. They shook their heads, baffled.

'It's all right,' said Leonie after a while. 'If the cat really wants to show us something, it'll come back. It knows that we've lost its trail.'

Suddenly, there was a noise in the bush beside them. Then the cat came out, meowing and glaring at them.

'It's thinking: only humans can be so dumb,' Ollie laughed.

'What do we do now?' Leonie, her hands on her hips, said to the cat. 'Where do you want to take us? Talk to us!'

The cat slipped under the hedge of a nearby garden and ran toward a white mansion at the other end of the garden. It jumped onto the balcony rail, climbed up onto the gutter and vanished under the roof.

'Wow! Not even Spiderman could match that!' Ollie said.

'Yeah, it's a good thing there's a normal entrance, one for humans,' Leonie said. 'Come on, we'll ring the doorbell.'

They read the name on the doorbell panel. 'Linda de Meer. Sounds high-class, doesn't it?' Pat murmured.

'The whole house is high-class. With turrets and stuff like that,' Ollie laughed. 'The owners belong to the upper 10%, that's for sure.'

Leonie thought for a few seconds. 'Then why was the tabby cat so hungry? There's something fishy here,' she said.

'Maybe this is a case for an animal rights group,' Pat said.

'Let's see what the owner has to say.' Ollie pressed the doorbell. Once, twice, three times. But no one came to the door.

### **The white Mansion on the River**

Taking a closer look at the mansion, the three detectives realized that it had seen better days. There were cracks along the walls of the turrets and on the mossy roof some tiles were missing. The front was almost completely covered with ivy.

'Like a little fairytale castle,' Leonie said with a smile.

'A dilapidated castle, if you ask me,' said Ollie. 'The windows are badly in need of paint.' The remains of red paint under his fingernails reminded him that he was a specialist when it came to painting.

The trees in the garden had grown so high that they blocked the view of the Elbe.

'The hedge hasn't been trimmed for ages and neither has the lawn. Maybe no one lives here anymore,' Pat mused.

'For some reason the tabby cat wanted us to follow it here. So let's go inside,' Leonie said. 'Maybe it's just that the bell on the garden gate that doesn't work.'

The gate wasn't locked, so they went on through right to the front door.

'Here's yesterday's newspaper!' Ollie picked it up and showed it to the others.

'Someone must live here. Otherwise, there'd be more than one newspaper here,' Pat said.

'There's something funny going on. I can smell it,' Leonie said, wrinkling her nose.

'Right. Let's have a look around,' Ollie said and pressed hard on the doorbell.

Ding, dong, ding, dong. The bell rang loud and clear!

But no one came to the door.

The three detectives went all around the house. All the shutters were half closed, probably because the past few days had been very warm. There was an annex behind the house, perhaps where the gardener had lived. But the door and shutters were closed there, too. It was a mystery why the tabby cat had led them to this place.

'Shh! Listen!' Pat whispered when they reached the front side of the house again.

Through the half-closed shutters on the second floor they could clearly hear the sound of someone moaning.

Pat was excited. 'I think someone's calling for help,' he said. He held onto Leonie's sleeve.

'You're right,' Leonie said.

'Is anyone there? Help! Help! Please help me!' came a weak cry.

'Someone's in trouble! We got to help!' Pat said.

'We've got to get into the house first. But how?' Leonie looked at the others helplessly.



'Through the guest toilet window,' Ollie murmured, pointing at a tiny window on the first floor, which was half open. 'Lift me up. Sometimes it's practical to be small like me.'

With a boost from Pat, Ollie reached the window. He reached inside and unlatched it. Then he crawled through.

Leonie watched nervously. 'Whew! Good work!' she said to Pat and let out a long breath.

A few long moments later, Pat said, 'What's taking him so long?'

It seemed like an eternity before Ollie finally opened the front door and let them in.

'Mrs. de Meer is up there. She must have fallen! Come on!' he cried. 'She's in great pain. She can hardly speak.'

The moaning was louder now. They ran up the stairs.

When they reached her, Ollie bent down and said, 'These are my friends. We're going to help you.'

The poor woman lay at the head of the stairs, completely exhausted. 'I can't move. It's too painful,' she moaned.

'What happened?' Pat wanted to know.

'I fell...yesterday...and...can't move...!' She tried to straighten up but couldn't. The pain was too great.

'I think I broke a rib,' she whispered. 'I was on the attic stairs. Suddenly, I lost my footing and fell down and landed here. My nephew was right. He said I shouldn't use those stairs anymore. It's too dangerous. I haven't used the cellar stairs for a long time now. They are even steeper than the attic stairs.'

'You need a doctor,' Leonie said.

'Dr. Angus is my doctor. The phone is behind me, in the corner,' she said.

'I know him,' Leonie cried, picking up the phone. 'He came to our house when my mother had the flu.'

She dialed but the line was dead.

'That's not the first time,' Mrs. de Meer said. 'My nephew was going to get the phone repaired for me but didn't get around

to it. In the corner of the park there's a pay phone. You can call - '

'I'm off!' Leonie cried and hurried out.

While Leonie ran to the phone, Ollie and Pat tried to make the elderly woman comfortable.

'You should try to drink something!' Ollie said.

'Yes, yes,' she said thankfully. 'I'm very thirsty.'

'I can tell from your voice,' Pat said. He went to the bathroom and got a glass of water.

'Thank you,' Mrs. de Meer said and drank it quickly.

'I was terribly thirsty but I was in such pain that I couldn't get myself a drink.'

Pat and Ollie nodded.

'One of the steps on the attic stairs must have been loose. Unfortunately, I'm far-sighted. I can't see very well up close when I have on my long-distance glasses. That's how it happened!'

Pat gave her a worried look. 'You could have broken your neck,' he said, softening his words with a smile. 'Is there anything else we can do for you? Are you hungry?' he asked.

'No, but my cats are. Could you feed them, please?' she said.

She seemed to be more worried about her cats than about herself. 'I wasn't able to care for them properly the past several days because I wasn't feeling well. There must have been something wrong with the food.'

'There's some cat food in the kitchen. Their feeding dishes are also there. My nephew wanted to bring me some *Kitekat* from the supermarket. He should be here today or tomorrow.'

Shortly after that, Leonie came back from the pay phone (public phone?) and said, 'Dr. Angus will be here right away. He's only got one emergency case to take care of first. We're to stay with Mrs. de Meer and give her something to drink.'

'We've done that already,' Ollie said.

'Thank you.' Relieved, Mrs. de Meer closed her eyes.

'The cats have been taken care of,' Pat said as he returned from the kitchen.

'And the step on the attic stairs was loose, just like she said. No wonder she fell!' Ollie held the step in his hand and showed it to Pat and Leonie. He pointed to the holes where the nails were. They were a different shade than the rest of the step. All around them were scratch marks. Someone must have removed the nails. Not long ago!

But Pat didn't say what he was thinking. He didn't want to upset Mrs. de Meer. If she knew that the step had been intentionally loosened...

Pat and Leonie realized at once what Ollie meant.

'Do you live alone in this house?' Pat asked.

'Yes, I've lived here alone for seven years - since my husband died,' she said without opening her eyes. 'Alone with my cats.'

'There are at least a hundred, aren't there?' Pat said. 'The house is full of them.'

'Not quite that many. Sixteen or seventeen, I believe,' she said, smiling awkwardly. 'Over the years there were more and more of them. All of them strays. I just couldn't bring myself to send them away, not even one of them. And I had enough room. Besides, they were my friends and I didn't feel so alone.'

'Don't you ever have visitors?' Pat pressed. 'Doesn't anyone take care of you?'

'Up to now I've always gotten on well alone. From time to time Dr. Angus drops by. Or the pastor. Sometimes my nephew Heino visits me, but, uh, he's not really interested in me,' she said in a bitter tone of voice. 'I have the feeling that he only drops in to see if I'm still alive. Sometimes he brings me a batch of cat food. That saves me from having to cart it home. After all, he's got a car.'

Just then, the doorbell rang.

It was the doctor.

'Mrs. de Meer,' he said, shaking his head. 'What on earth have you been up to?' He felt her pulse, measured her blood

pressure and listened to her heartbeat. There was a worried look on his face. 'I think it's best to get you to a hospital fast. You're dehydrated and need an infusion. On top of that, you've probably got a couple of broken ribs.'

'Well, yes. My old bones aren't strong. I know that,' sighed Mrs. de Meer. 'I'm no spring chicken, am I?'

'Not to worry. We'll get you fixed up again,' Dr. Angus said with a smile as he finished giving her an injection. After that, he took out his cell phone and called an ambulance.

'What will happen to my cats when I'm in the hospital?' Mrs. de Meer asked anxiously. 'They're all that I have.'

'We'll take care of them for you,' Leonie said. 'I like cats very much.'

'We can come here every day and feed them,' Ollie said.

'That's good of you, but cats can take good care of themselves if they have to,' the doctor added.

'They're used to being fed,' sighed Mrs. de Meer. 'They are very special cats. They're like my own children to me.'

'I know,' Ollie said, 'they are really special cats. They were smart enough to go for help when you were in need.' He told about how the cats led him and the others to her house. And how nervous he was when he climbed through the toilet window and entered the house.

'I felt like a burglar!' he said.

Mrs. de Meer took him by the hand and murmured: 'Oh, thank you. I'll never forget what you've done for me!'

All at once, the siren of the ambulance could be heard in the distance.

'I'll show them the way!' Pat cried and hurried down the stairs.

The ambulance men entered the house carrying a stretcher. Carefully, they lifted the old woman onto it. The doctor's injection had begun to work. She looked much more relaxed now.

'Stop!' she cried to the children as she was being carried away. 'You need the key to the house, so you won't have to

climb through the window again! It's in the key cabinet next to the cellar door. It's the largest one. The cats can get in without help. They've got their own 'entrance', a little hole in the roof next to the tower room.'

'We saw the tabby cat go through it,' Ollie said.

'Don't you worry about a thing,' said Leonie, patting the old lady gently on the shoulder. 'We'll take care of everything.'

'And tomorrow, after we've fed the cats, we'll visit you in the hospital,' Pat promised.

### **Robbers don't have Cats**

That evening at supper, when Leonie told her mother the story about the cats, Ann Storm wasn't quite as enthused as her daughter.

'The mansion on the river could have been a robber's den or something like that,' she said.

'Robbers don't have cats!' Leonie was upset by her mother's words. 'And what about Mrs. de Meer? What would have happened to her, if we hadn't found her?'

'You're right about that,' her mother had to admit.

'You can't imagine how hungry the cats were! They licked their plates clean in the blink of an eye!'

'Are cats practically the only ones living at the house now?' Ann Storm said, surprised.

'Yep. Now that Mrs. de Meer is in the hospital, they're there alone. They like it there. And we'll go there every day and feed them.'

'Well, I feel better about that than if you were starting on a new criminal case,' Ann Storm laughed.

At that moment the telephone rang.

It was the hospital in Altona.

Mrs. de Meer was on the line. She had got the Storm's telephone number from Dr. Angus.

'I just wanted to thank your daughter, Mrs. Storm,' the old lady said. 'If it weren't for her and her friends I would probably still be lying on the floor, in so much pain that I couldn't move.'

She went on to say that she would have to stay in the hospital for at least two or three weeks. 'Will feeding the cats get to be too much of a problem for the children?'

'You can best talk with Leonie herself about that,' Ann Storm said.

Leonie assured Mrs. de Meer that she liked nothing more than taking care of cats because she was so fond of them.

The next day the three detectives set off for the mansion right after school. It was raining cats and dogs.

It took them about ten minutes to get there. In the pouring rain, the mansion didn't look as friendly as it did the day before in the sunshine. It looked mousy gray. The ivy covering made it appear somehow mysterious, Leonie thought.

Pat laughed. 'It seems like Mrs. de Meer spends all her money on cat food. There's nothing left for paint,' he said.

'Or she doesn't even notice that the paint is peeling. After all, she doesn't have good eyes and she's inside almost the whole day,' Ollie added.

As they approached the front door, they were being watched by curious cat eyes from every window.

Four or five cats came out from under the bushes and from behind a pile of wood and slipped between their legs into the house. They knew that there would soon be something to eat.

Watching and waiting, they eyed the visitors.

Only the little tabby cat with its two friends came up close and rubbed the children's legs.

'I bet you're the welcoming committee,' said Pat, scratching them behind the ears. The other cats hung back, shy and cautious. It was only when Leonie emerged from the kitchen with the food that they came forward and began to eat.

Gradually, they became less fearful. Some of them curled up comfortably in the corners, others ate their fill and hurried off again.

'I'll see to the litter boxes,' Ollie said. Lucky for him, they were quite clean, as the cats had been outside during the night.

Pat washed up the empty bowls and swept the kitchen.

'We should clean and air out Mrs. de Meer's bedroom, so that everything is tidy when she returns,' Leonie suggested.

The rain had stopped. She opened the window. The air was fresh.

Down below, she noticed a dark-colored car, parked where she hadn't seen a car before. The garden gate was wide open. Before she knew what was happening, she heard the deep voice of a man behind her: 'Who are you? The new maid?'

Leonie spun around and found herself looking into the eyes of an unshaven man wearing jeans and a gray T-shirt. He was standing in the bedroom, staring at her with a cocky look on his face.

'Who - who are you?' Leonie said in a shaky voice.

'I don't think that's any business of yours,' he answered arrogantly. 'After all, I'm in charge here. Or I soon will be. Where is my aunt?'

'You mean Mrs. de Meer? Oh, she's in the hospital...'

'And in the meantime you're prying around here?'

'I only fed the cats and aired out the room.'

'Fed the cats?' he said sarcastically. 'They should be poisoned. There's nothing but dirt and cat hair all over the place! Achoo!'

'Cats are clean animals...'

'Shut your mouth,' said the man. 'The old woman is gaga. That's obvious, isn't it? A house full of cats. Ugh! It's time I took matters in hand. What's the name of the hospital?'

'Altona,' Leonie replied.

'How long will she be there? Achoo!' He had to sneeze again before Leonie could answer.

'A long time, maybe,' Leonie said. 'She broke some ribs.'

'Are you here alone?'

'No, my two friends are here, too. They're outside in the garden, cleaning the litter boxes,' she said.

'Well, I'm going down to the cellar,' he growled. 'I was told that there's something wrong with the telephone.'

Leonie breathed a sigh of relief when the sinister-looking man hurried off.

After a while, he returned carrying a brown carton. At the door he turned and said in a loud voice: 'You can use the telephone. I got it to work again.'

'Who was that?' Pat wanted to know. He and Ollie had come through the terrace door into the living room and only saw the man from behind.

'Mrs. de Meer's nephew,' Leonie replied. 'He came to repair the telephone. He was in the cellar.'

She picked up the telephone and held it to her ear. 'Sure enough! There's the sound of the dialing tone!'

From outside the house came the sound of a motor.

'It's a Volkswagen Bully,' Ollie said with the air of an expert. He looked out the window.'

'The guy brought a brown carton with him,' Leonie said. 'Wasn't he supposed to bring cat food?'

'We'll report everything to Mrs. de Meer,' said Pat. 'Come on. We should have been at the hospital long ago.'

'Wait a minute. I've got an idea.' A bright smile crossed Leonie's face.

'We'll call the hospital. I'll tell Mrs. de Meer that the telephone is working again and ask her if she needs anything.'

Mrs. de Meer was pleased about the call. She asked Leonie to bring her a nightdress from her bedroom closet and some towels and a bar of soap.



Leonie told her about her confrontation with her nephew.

'Well, well. He repaired the telephone.' She fell silent a moment, then said, 'Strange. I don't remember telling him it wasn't working this time!'

'Then he must have psychic powers,' Leonie said.

'Well, maybe he tried to call and noticed that the line was dead,' Mrs. de Meer mused.

'And he took some brown cartons from the cellar with him,' Pat shouted into the receiver.

'He collects empty cans. I save the ones from the cat food for him,' Mrs. de Meer said.

'He didn't ring the doorbell when he came,' said Leonie. 'That's why I was shocked when he suddenly appeared in your bedroom.'

'Hm. In my bedroom?' said Mrs. de Meer. She paused a moment, then added, 'Would you do me a favor? Lock the bedroom door and bring me the key when you come.'

'Got it!' Leonie promised.

### **Another Surprise Guest**

School was out after the fourth class on Wednesday. Art education was cancelled. It was a happy surprise for Leonie, Pat and Ollie. Now they could go to the cat mansion sooner than planned.

As they hurried through Elbpark, they ran into Inspector Voss, who was jogging during his midday break.

'Hello!' he called. He stopped to catch his breath. 'Everything all right with you?' he asked.

'Just fine, Inspector,' Ollie said with a big smile.

'What are you up to this time of day in the park?' Don't you have school?'

'Yeah,' said Leonie, 'but our art class was cancelled. We're on our way to feed our cats.'

'Your cats?' Voss looked at them as if he hadn't heard right.  
'Since when do you have cats?'

'Go ahead. Tell him!' Ollie said, stepping on her foot and laughing.

Taking turns, the three of them recounted the story of the cat mansion.

The inspector nodded. 'Now that's very interesting,' he said at last. He was very fond of these clever kids. They had helped him solve several difficult cases. But he wasn't terribly fond of cats. He was secretly pleased when the cell phone in his fanny pack started ringing.

'There's been a holdup in a jewelry store on King Street. I must be off!,' he murmured. 'It's the third robbery this week. it must be a gang! See you later!' he said and hurried away.

When Leonie, Pat and Ollie neared the mansion this time, the front door was ajar.

'I locked the door yesterday, I swear I did,' Pat said in a loud voice.

'Maybe the wind blew it open,' Leonie mused. She hesitated, then said, 'Or maybe Mrs. de Meer's nephew has come again, probably with a fresh supply of cat food.'

Ollie took a deep breath. 'Hello! Is anyone there?' he cried.

But no one seemed to be there. Not even a cat!

The children listened for a long moment, then went through the door.

Inside, the house was silent as a grave.

'This is really scary,' Ollie said nervously.

When they entered the living room, there were cats everywhere, some lying on easy chairs and others on the sofa, all asleep!

'Hello, you sleepyheads!' Leonie shouted.

She went over to Mrs. de Meer's rocking chair and patted the tabby cat, but it didn't move.

At that moment, a couple of sleepy-looking cats came out of their hiding places.

'Something is wrong here!' Ollie growled. 'It's almost as if the cats have had too much to drink! They're stumbling over their own paws.'

'Yeah, they're all lying around, snoozing. It's like a kind of sleeping sickness has broken out,' Pat said.

'It reminds me of the story of Sleeping Beauty!' Leonie laughed.

'Apropos Sleeping Beauty: Do you think they're under a spell or something like that?' Ollie wanted to know.

'Could be,' Leonie replied. She turned to the tabby cat again. 'Wake up, my friend!' she said in a loud voice. No reaction. Not even when she scratched behind its ears.

'That's not normal.' Ollie shook his head. 'Something strange is going on here. Cats are light sleepers.'

Pat went to the kitchen. A moment later he came back and said, 'Someone has put cat food in their bowls! I washed the bowls out yesterday after the cats finished eating.'

Leonie grew suspicious.

'Maybe the nephew did come. I'll take a look upstairs. While I'm at it, I'll check to see if the bedroom door is still locked. When I told Mrs. de Meer that her nephew had been there, she insisted that I lock it when I leave.'

She hurried up the stairs.

The door to the bedroom was locked.

When she came back down and told the others the bedroom door was locked, the two boys shook their heads.

'Hm,' said Pat. 'Maybe we're just imagining things. It must have something to do with the mysterious atmosphere in this old house.'

'I don't think so,' Ollie shook his head. 'It's not just our imagination. There are strange things going on here!'

The three of them went into the kitchen and took a closer look at the cats' bowls.

Ollie shook his head. 'Canned cat food. And still fresh. Otherwise the color would be paler and the surface drier,' he said.

Leonie picked up a bowl and sniffed. Wrinkling her nose, she said, 'We should definitely have it examined. I have a feeling that someone put sleeping tablets (pills) in it!'

'But why do a thing like that?' Pat asked.

'To put them down, for example, and then sell their fur to a fur trader,' Ollie said grimly. 'I read in the newspaper that they can be used to make blankets for rheumatics. They pay up to 30 or 40 Euros for one cat.'

'How cruel!' Leonie cried angrily.

'Hey! Slow down,' Pat said. 'Maybe the nephew only wanted to have some peace and quiet for a while. I would guess that he's allergic to cats. He's always sneezing, isn't he. If so, it's clear that that's a very stressful situation.'

'But no reason to put poison in their food!' Leonie's eyes flashed with anger.

'You're right about that,' Pat admitted.

'So what should we do now?' Leonie asked, looking first at Pat, then at Ollie.

'It's time for a powwow,' Ollie said.

The old grandfather clock next to the fireplace struck twelve noon.

Only an hour before they would have to go home for dinner.

They sat cross-legged on the carpet in front of the fireplace in the living room. Leonie had the sleeping tabby cat in her lap and ran her fingers through its fur, causing it to purr happily.

That calmed everyone down.

Looking at the cat, Pat said, 'it doesn't seem to be deathly ill, does it?'

'Whatever, we should still have that cat food examined,' Ollie insisted.

'We can call Inspector Voss,' Leonie suggested. The police laboratory can do the examination.'

'He's probably got his hands full with those jewel thieves,' Pat said.

Just then came the sound of a door squeaking upstairs.

'Someone's upstairs!' Ollie cried and jumped up.

'Thieves or spirits?' Leonie murmured. 'There's no one there! I was upstairs myself a few minutes ago and didn't see anybody, I swear!'

For a long moment, they looked at each other helplessly.

'Maybe it was only a draft that caused the door to shut,' Pat said softly.

'Yeah, wind spirits,' said Leonie with a forced smile. 'The best thing to do is to go up there and look. The three of us together!'

At that moment the floorboards upstairs creaked. Someone was trying to move about soundlessly. But old wooden floors are creaky, and stepping on them without making any noise is impossible.

'Uh-uh. Without me,' Ollie whispered. 'I'm going to call the police.' He picked up the phone but there was no dialing tone.

'It's out of order again!' Ollie cried.

'Damn!' whispered Leonie and put her arm around the tabby cat. Yawning but still asleep, it stretched out its paws, as stiff as a board.

'If there's someone up there, he'll be coming down soon. Let's hide before he sees us!' Ollie cried.

'The best place is here - behind the big easy chair,' Pat said.

The three detectives waited and waited, but no one came down the stairs.

A few minutes later, the sound of a motor starting up outside the house surprised them. Ollie ran to the window. But he was too late. Through the thick hedge, all he could see was a car driving away.

'If my ears aren't playing tricks on me, that's the same car as the one before,' Ollie said.

'You mean the one the nephew drove away in?' Pat wanted to know.

Ollie nodded. 'That's the one!'

'Whoever it was, he's gone,' Leonie muttered. 'But how did he get out of the house? He can't fly, can he?'

'Probably the same way he got in,' said Pat.

'Maybe he's a cat burglar and climbed up the ivy vines,' Ollie laughed.

It took the three of them several long minutes before they dared to climb the stairs.

Reaching the top, they got another shock: the bedroom door was open!

'Broken open!' cried Leonie wide-eyed. She showed the others the scratches next to the doorknob.

Cautiously, one step at a time, they entered the room. Ollie pointed at a square shape on the wall, brighter than the rest. 'Look! The little picture that hung over Mrs. de Meer's bed is missing. It was there yesterday.'

Leonie and Pat knew exactly what he was talking about. They, too, had noticed the pretty picture of a girl with a blue bouquet in her hand.

'A break-in!' Pat cried. 'If that's not a reason to call Inspector Voss, I don't know what is!'

'Come on! The telephone box is not far from here!'

### **Inspector Voss sends a Deputy**

'Well, well! A new case for the Harbor Crocodiles,' the inspector said on the phone. 'I'm afraid I can't get away right now but I'll send a patrol car to you.' It was clear to Leonie that he didn't take the case of the cats as seriously as the robbery in King Street.

'There's more to it than that. The burglar poisoned the cats - or, at least, he put sleeping potion in their food,' Leonie said.

'The attempted murder of a cat. Well, well. Hmm,' Voss said. Leonie noticed that he was leafing through some papers while he was talking.

'Of eighteen cats!' Leonie said, indignantly. 'We saved the remains of the cat food. Could you have it examined in the police laboratory for us?'

'Cat food? Hmm, I'm not sure...' Voss hesitated. 'Well, okay, I guess it's all right. Maybe it does have something to do with the break-in. Put it in a plastic bag and give it to the officer in the patrol car.'

'Thanks, Inspector,' Leonie said, a little disappointed by his lack of enthusiasm.

'And please: Don't do anything foolish! Stay in touch with me and don't take any unnecessary risks,' the inspector warned.

Leonie smiled to herself. 'He does take us seriously after all,' she thought.

'I'm going to send you my red cell phone. Just like the last time! So you can reach me at any time. As soon as the officers arrive, you are to leave the scene of the crime, got it?'

'Got it,' Leonie said.

Then Pat took the phone. 'We are on our way to the hospital, to visit Mrs. de Meer. Is it okay to tell her about what we've found out? Or do you think it would upset her too much?'

'Go ahead and tell her. But gently. Maybe she can explain what happened. Ask her who has a key.'

Apparently, Inspector Voss did take the matter seriously, even though it was only about sleeping cats and a missing picture of doubtful value.

While the three detectives were waiting for the patrol car, Ollie wrote down the main facts about the case:

**Time of the crime:** 12 o'clock

**Perpetrator:** unknown

**Getaway vehicle:** probably a dark blue Volkswagen Bully

**Crime:** Door broken open, picture stolen,  
eighteen cats poisoned (or almost)

**Evidence:** Cat food (must be examined)

empty square on the wall (where the picture  
hung)

loosened step from the stairs (cause of the  
'accident'?)

**Witnesses:** Leonie, Ollie and Pat

**Circumstances of the crime:**

The perpetrator entered the house at some point before  
11.45 (time of our arrival) through the front door.

He probably possesses a key.

The front door was not broken open.

The cats had eaten the food before we came.

The remains of the food were not discolored and the surface  
was not dry. The food was obviously fresh.

Where did the perpetrator hide when we arrived at 11.45?

The theft of the picture took place at approximately 12  
o'clock. The perpetrator escaped in a dark blue Volkswagen  
Bully.

How he left the house is unknown. He did not take the stairs.

When Ollie had noted down the last point, he looked up and  
said, 'How did the guy get away?'

'It wasn't through a window. I checked. They are all locked  
from inside,' Pat said.

'Is there a back door?' Ollie wanted to know.



'I've only seen two doors: one to the attic and one to the cellar,' said Leonie. 'there is no back door.'

'Well, it's impossible to escape through the cellar,' Pat said. 'The cellar windows are barred!'

'What about the roof?'

'The windows on the roof are barred, too. I checked them out,' said Leonie.

'Do you suppose there's a secret door?'

She was about to answer Pat's question when the cruiser arrived. Two officers got out and walked up the graveled path to the house.

'So you are Inspector Voss's deputies. Well, well,' the younger officer said with a condescending grin as Leonie led him and his colleague into the house.

'These are the famous Harbor Crocodiles, Anton,' the older officer said to the younger man. 'They deserve a little more respect.'

Ollie gave Officer Anton his fact sheet and said, 'I've listed the most important points.'

'Well done,' Anton said as he scanned the list.

Pat handed him a plastic bag with the bowl and the cat food.

'Cat food? Now that's something we've not yet had in the laboratory,' Anton murmured, shaking his head. 'The inspector has some funny ideas sometimes.'

'It was *our* idea,' Leonie said quickly.

'There's nothing more for us to do here, Willy,' Anton said to his colleague after a while.

Willy nodded. 'The Harbor Crocodiles have taken care of everything.'

To make sure, the two of them went through the house once more, but they found nothing suspicious.

'Nothing unusual,' Willy noted in his report. Then they said goodbye. They insisted that the children leave the house at the same time they did.

Pat inserted a rose petal in the crack of the door before he locked it.

'What's that all about?' Anton asked.

'If we find the petal on the ground the next time we come, we'll know that someone was here while we were away,' Pat said.

'Great idea!' Anton said.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' said Willy. 'We're supposed to give you the red cell phone with Inspector Voss's compliments. Can you come with us to our car?'

'Of course!' Pat said.

After they were given the cell phone, they started for home. It was already half past one.

Ollie's stomach growled. His mother growled, too - because he came home so late!

'Where were you the whole time?' Jenny Bloom complained. She and Grandma and Grandpa Bloom had long since had dinner.

'I'll tell you in a minute!' said Ollie. 'But I've got to have something to eat first.'

### **Captain Frisby's fantastic tip**

The Harbor Crocodiles had agreed to meet at the club house at quarter past three.

After Ollie had picked some flowers in the garden, they set off for the hospital.

'Hello! Stop! It's the Harbor crocodiles!' cried a familiar voice.

It was Captain Frisby, the old sea dog, taking his usual afternoon walk along the Elbe. 'You've been invited to a birthday party, is that it?' he said, nodding at Ollie's bouquet.

'Nope. We're visiting Mrs. de Meer in the hospital,' Ollie explained.

'Mrs. de Meer? Captain de Meer's widow?' said Frisby, surprised.

'We don't know who her husband was. What we do know is that she lives in that white mansion with the turrets,' Pat cut in.

'Right. That's Linda de Meer. She used to be a real looker. Her husband passed away long ago.'

'You know her, do you?' Ollie was very surprised.

'I knew her husband better. He was a ladies' man, always on the go. His wife kept a close eye on him, so he had to sneak out of the house at night. Sometimes he even drove as far as Travemünde, to the casino there. He loved to gamble.'

'He sneaked out?' Leonie said, wide-eyed. 'How did he do that?'

'I heard he had a secret exit in his mansion, but he never told anyone where it was. Not even his best friends. Otherwise it wouldn't have stayed secret long, would it?' the captain laughed. 'Somebody told his wife about it at some point and then - well, that was the end of his secret nightly excursions! Apparently she threw him out. After all, the house belonged to her. That's why he couldn't gamble it away like he did the rest of his wealth.'

'Wow! What an exciting story!' Pat said.

'All my stories are exciting,' the captain laughed. 'But I've got to go now. Otto Floss is waiting for me. We're going to take some of his pigeons to an international competition in Denmark. The last time there, Otto came in third. Not Otto, of course, his pigeons.'

'Lots of luck to you!' Pat cried.

The three of them said goodbye to their friend, who had been a great help to them in many a criminal case.

'What he said about a secret exit is a great tip,' Pat said.

'What do you think?'

Leonie nodded. 'Definitely. We've got to go back to the house and search for it.'

'But first we have to go to the hospital. Come on, let's get a move on!' Ollie said.

## **Mrs. de Meer knows More**

Mrs. de Meer was over the moon when the Harbor Crocodiles came to visit her again. It was obvious that she was feeling much better.

A nurse was busy fluffing up her pillow. After that, she attached a new bottle of nutrient solution to the stand next to her bed. While they were waiting, the three detectives held a quick powwow.

'We won't say anything about the cats. That could upset her too much,' Ollie whispered to his friends.

'I'm sorry you had to wait,' Mrs. de Meer said after the nurse left the room, 'but these bottles are very important. They contain liquid food and pain killer, which drips directly into my veins.'

'You still have a lot of pain?' Leonie asked sympathetically.

Mrs. de Meer nodded. 'You can't put ribs in plaster like you can a broken leg,' she said. 'You just have to have patience and wait for them to heal.'

'You're looking well. Not so pale as you were yesterday,' Ollie said.

'How are my cats?'

'Fine. After they were fed, they soon fell asleep,' Leonie said, choosing her words carefully.

'Does anyone besides us have a key to the house?' Pat asked after a while.

'Only my cleaning woman. And she's been in Majorca for the past couple of weeks. Oh, yes - and my nephew Heino. But why do you want to know that?'

'Because someone was in the house today - between ten and twelve o'clock.'

'That couldn't have been Heino,' murmured Mrs. de Meer.

'Why not?' Leonie wanted to know.

'He was here with me today between ten and twelve.'

The Harbor Crocodiles exchanged disappointed looks. That eliminated their main suspect.

'But, tell me, how do you know there was someone in the house if you didn't see him?' Mrs. de Meer said in a doubtful tone.

'Because whoever it was broke into your bedroom and stole the picture above your bed,' Pat replied.

'Oh my God!' said Mrs. de Meer and turned as pale as she was right after the accident. 'That's a very valuable picture. Painted by the famous French artist Renoir. I inherited it from my father. He knew the artist personally. I'm very attached to it. We must contact the police immediately.'

'We've already done that,' Pat assured her. He went on to tell about their friend Inspector Voss and the police officers Anton and Willy.

Mrs. de Meer insisted that they tell her everything in detail, just as it happened.

'We were in the living room when we heard noises upstairs. We were afraid and hid ourselves. We waited to see who would come down the stairs, but the thief didn't use the stairs. He escaped from the second floor without coming down the stairs! Is there a secret door or something like that on the second floor?'

'Nonsense! that's a crazy idea!' Mrs. de Meer laughed. 'Although when my husband was still alive, I sometimes had the feeling...' She smiled.

The three detectives gave each other a knowing look.

'Then he drove away. In a blue Volkswagen Bully. At any rate, I think it was a VW Bully,' Ollie said.

'My nephew has got a vehicle like that. But, as I said, he was with me between ten and twelve o'clock. He was unusually nice to me. He even brought flowers with him.'

She pointed at a large bouquet of roses.

'So your nephew had an alibi,' Pat said dryly.

'You talk just like real detectives,' Mrs. de Meer was astonished.

'We *are* real detectives,' said Leonie. Haven't you ever heard of the Harbor Crocodiles?'

'Now that you mention it, I remember reading something about that in the newspaper. So you are the ones who found that crocodile in the Elbe.'

'Exactly!' said Leonie.

'And now we want to help you. We're going to try to find your valuable painting,' Ollie said. 'There's a website with stolen paintings, paintings on the wanted list. Art dealers check it before they buy a famous painting. We'll get it posted there.'

'Posted? I don't understand. How does that work?'

'You've got a photo of that painting, haven't you?' Ollie asked.

Mrs. de Meer nodded.

'We'll scan it and ask Inspector Voss to pass it on to that website. Then anyone can see it there.'

'That's Spanish to me,' Mrs. de Meer said, shaking her head. 'But it sounds good. so go ahead and do what you think is right.'

'Your nephew hasn't brought any cat food yet,' said Pat. 'Do you want us to get it?'

'Have a look around the cellar first. Sometimes he puts it there,' she said. 'But be careful, the stairs are steep. That's the reason I haven't gone down there for ages now. If you don't find any there, buy some from the supermarket. Here's the money.' She reached into the drawer of her bed table.

'It's possible that Heino is angry with me. I almost threw him out a few days ago when he criticized me because of the cats.'

'Good for you! After all, it's your house!' Leonie said in a loud voice. 'And the cats are yours, too.'

Mrs. de Meer smiled.

'He even scolded me for letting strangers into the house. They snooped through the whole house, he said. I'd like to know why he gets so upset about that.'

'He might claim that we're the ones who stole that painting,' Ollie said.

'Humbug,' Mrs. de Meer said. 'If there's anyone who lets strangers in the house, it's him! Sometimes really shady-looking characters. I've often quarreled with him about that.'

'Did your nephew live in your house?' Pat wanted to know.

'At times. But I was always glad when he wasn't there. He was on the road a lot. On business. He used to drive those big trucks. But then he had a bad accident. So now he does odd jobs working at the harbor or driving truck. He doesn't have a steady job as far as I know. I don't like the kind of people he hangs around with. I'm afraid he'll end up becoming a criminal.'

'Does he still sometimes stay overnight in your house?' Ollie wanted to know.

'Not really. We don't get along well together, as I said.'

They continued to talk for a while, then the Harbor Crocodiles said goodbye.

'We got a whole lot of interesting information, don't you think?' Leonie had a pleased look on her face.

'Yeah, for example, that the nephew can't be the guy we're looking for because he's got an alibi,' Pat muttered.

Ollie thought for a moment. 'But he's also got the kind of friends who are capable of committing a crime,' he said.

'We're going to stay on the ball!'

### **Inspector Voss shows interest**

When Leonie returned home she found a note on the kitchen table:

Be back at 8 at the latest.

Voss called. Wants to meet with you in the club house at 3.

Spaghetti and salad in fridge.

### \*\*\*Mom

Leonie smiled. The three stars meant three kisses. Her mother's secret code.

She ate the spaghetti and salad, then phoned her friends.

'Inspector Voss wants to meet with us. At the club house at 3 o'clock!'

Both Pat and Ollie promised to be there on time.

The Harbor Crocodiles were already at the club house at 2:30! And that was a good thing because it gave them time to tidy up their bureau, which had become quite messy when they had renovated it.

At quarter past three, when the inspector had still not showed up, the three grew impatient. Leonie decided to call him.

'Yes, yes, I know,' he said. 'I'm late but there's a problem: a robbery in a jewelry store. A half million dollars worth of Rolex watches were stolen. Vanished without a trace! Two weeks ago there was a similar case.'

'We've got some news, too,' Leonie said. 'The painting that was stolen from Mrs. de Meer is very valuable. A genuine Renoir.'

At first the inspector said nothing, then Leonie heard him gasp. 'A genuine Renoir,' he repeated incredulously.

'Exactly,' said Leonie.

'Okay, I've got something for you, too. Somebody did mix some sleeping powder into the cat food,' the inspector said. 'I'll bring the laboratory results with me. I'll be there in a half hour.'

'Amazing!' Leonie cried triumphantly, after finishing the call. 'Our case now has the inspector's undivided attention! Even though he has so many more important cases.'

'In my opinion, our case is quite important. After all, it was attempted murder. Remember the step in the stairs that was intentionally loosened. Mrs. de Meer could have broken her neck instead of just her ribs,' Pat said in a dark voice.



'Pat is right!' Ollie cried.

'And we didn't even tell him about the loose step,' Leonie murmured.

'Maybe it's better we didn't. We've got no proof that he loosened it,' Ollie said.

Finally, the inspector arrived, breathing heavily. Leonie was the first one to see him. He was jogging along the promenade, wearing a sweat suit. The bureau of the Harbor Crocodiles could only be reached by foot. Voss had decided to combine his visit to the children with his daily fitness program.

Ollie was amazed. 'Boy, oh boy,' he's a fast jogger!' he said.

'An inspector has to be fit,' said Pat.

'It's really great that you've come, Inspector. We know that you've got several other important cases,' Ollie said as Voss entered the garden, slightly out of breath.

'A promise is a promise,' said Voss. 'But it's true: these break-ins can get on your nerves, I can tell you that.'

He told them that it was probably the work of a large gang together with a ring of fencers.

'Fencers are people who sell stolen goods on the black market,' the inspector explained.

'I know,' Ollie said.

'Well, I didn't,' Leonie admitted.

'The thieves rob the goods and pass them along like a hot potato. Someone must keep them safe until the coast is clear.'

'Or the fencers act quickly and move the stuff to another city or another land,' Pat said.

'That's possible, of course. But some of the stolen goods turned up here in Hamburg on the black market after a couple of months. That might mean that the goods haven't left the city. but we don't know the hiding place. We call them

the Chewing Gum Gang because we've often found chewing gum wrappers at the crime scenes.'

'Funny name,' Ollie remarked. 'What brand?'

'Wrigley Spearmint,' Voss replied. 'But I'm afraid that's no great help.'

'True,' Ollie smiled. 'Cause that would make us suspects, too.' He pulled a package of Wrigley's Spearmint out of his pocket.

'But now to your case...'

Inspector Voss insisted that the children give him a comprehensive report on what they had learned. He listened with growing interest.

He especially liked Ollie's idea of searching for the missing painting on the Internet.

'Your methods are state of the art! We also used the Internet to help us solve a case recently. When a dealer was offered several very valuable rare antiques he grew suspicious and checked the Internet. He found them on our online wanted list.'

When the Harbor Crocodiles then told him about Frisby's idea that there might be a secret door in the house, the inspector gave them a skeptical smile and said, 'Of course that would be a good explanation for the way the perpetrator vanished. But believe me, secret doors are things the authors of detective stories or similar fairytale storytellers dream up, but which have got little to do with reality.'

'Couldn't we just take a look...?' Leonie suggested. she wasn't one to give up easily when she set her mind on something.

The inspector hesitated a long moment.

'We've got to go to the house tomorrow and feed the cats anyway. We promised Mrs. de Meer we'd do that,' Pat said, straight-faced.

'We can't go through the whole house with our eyes closed,' Ollie added.

'Well, all right,' said the inspector, 'but only during the day and only all three of you together. If you notice anything

wrong, speed-dial me on my cell phone, got it? I'm quite sure that it's not dangerous for you to go into the house. You aren't cats. But you can never know. So I'll have Anton and Willy take a close look at the white mansion when they're on patrol.'

### **The mystery of the secret door**

It was one of those school days in which there seemed to be no bell. The classes went on and on. The teachers weren't to blame. It was rather because Pat, Ollie and Leonie thoughts were wandering elsewhere. And also because on such a warm day, they would have been 'cool' to be at the swimming pool.

Working from his memory, Pat sketched an outline of the mansion in his math notebook. Under it he scribbled, 'Where could the door be?'

Then he tore out the page and passed it on it to Leonie. She was studying the sketch when suddenly Mrs. Holler's harsh voice brought her back to reality.

'Leonie Storm and Pat o'Brian! What are you doing? Exchanging love letters?'

All the kids laughed and Leonie and Pat turned tomato red. Mrs. Holler went over to Leonie and looked at the drawing. Of course, she couldn't understand what it was all about.

'Is that going to be your house?' she asked in a mocking tone.

Everyone laughed again.

'It's a brain game,' Ollie said, thinking quickly. 'You have to draw the floor plan of a house in as few strokes as possible. The piece of paper came from me.'

Ollie was the best in the class in math and had nothing to fear from Mrs. Holler. He was right. She smiled at him and said, 'All right, then go to the board and explain the last problem for us.'

Ollie shifted gears at once - from the cat mansion to math. He paused a short moment, then went to the board and solved the problem quickly.

'Hey, thanks, man,' Pat said after the lesson.

'Yeah, you saved our skin,' sighed Leonie.

They were suddenly surrounded by classmates wanting to know how to play the new game.

'It's like hangman,' Ollie laughed. 'But backwards: for every letter you guess correctly, you get to draw a line. The winner is the first one to complete a house.'

Well, a detective must be inventive.

Also, when it comes to making up excuses.

Finally, the last bell rang and school was out for the day.

At once, they set out on their way to the white mansion. All three of them had told their parents that they would be home for dinner later than usual.

'There's something wrong here. I can feel it in my bones,' Pat said.

There were tire tracks in the gravel of the driveway. Someone with a car must have been there.

'The rose petal!' Pat said when he came to the door. He bent down and picked it up. Someone had been *inside* the house while they were away. That was proof!

'Uh-oh! The cats!' Leonie cried. Her first thought was that the cat hater, whoever it was, could have broken into the house again. Maybe he had really poisoned the cats this time.

The door was locked.

They rang the doorbell. Nothing stirred.

Pat opened the door.

They went inside, wired up and ready for anything.

Thank goodness! The cats were fresh and lively. Apparently, they had coped well with the effects of the sleeping tablets. Obviously hungry, they followed the children into the kitchen. It was plain that they hadn't been secretly fed.

'Before we give them the dry food, let's check to see if there's any canned food in the cellar,' Pat suggested. 'They prefer canned food.'

Leonie didn't like dark places. 'Come on, tabby cat!' Leonie said to her furry friend. As if the little cat could protect her.

Ollie whistled loudly and out of tune, as they went down the steep stairs.

'Are you afraid?' Pat asked him.

'Of course not. I always whistle when I go down stairs,' Ollie said. 'It's a habit of mine.'

There was only a weak light bulb in the cellar. It was a good thing that Ollie had brought a flashlight from the kitchen with him. He shined it around the dark room. There was a stepladder in one corner. Over that was a telephone connection. The wires were visible.

'Sloppy work,' Ollie said with a dry laugh. 'It's no wonder that the telephone doesn't function properly. All you have to do is pull out one of these wires!'

While looking for the canned cat food, they also looked for a secret door.

But they only found a locked cellar door. They decided to try to open it. Luckily, one of the keys from Mrs. de Meer's set of keys fit it and Pat opened the door.

Pumped up, they went inside.

What they found was just a boring cellar room full of junk. Only junk. But what was that?

'Hey, look over there! It's canned cat food!' Pat said with a happy smile. 'Enough to last a long time!'

On a shelf were two dozen cans of *Kitekat* cat food. Next to it, on an old workbench, was a strange gadget.

'What on earth is that?' Leonie's mouth fell open.

Ollie shined the flashlight all over it like a searchlight.

'I would say it's a device for sealing cans,' he said.

'Grandpa and grandma had one like that. When they had their big garden. They used to preserve fruit and vegetables.'

'It looks like it was used not long ago,' Pat said. 'At any rate there aren't any cobwebs on it like on everything else.'

'Maybe someone cans cat food,' he mused. 'It's possible that our friend Heino buys cheap cat food and puts it in the Kitekat cans!'

Ollie shook his head. 'That sounds far-fetched to me. Come on, we've been down here long enough.'

'Eek! You can say that again,' Leonie cried. She had just noticed a huge spider hanging directly over her head.

They hurried up the stairs, each of them carrying two or three cans of cat food with them.

In the kitchen, Leonie took a close look at one of the cans. She read the label carefully and then said, 'We should throw these cans away! The use-by date was a year ago!'

'You're right!' Pat said. 'It's a good thing we have the dry food.'

'I think it's better to buy some fresh canned food from the supermarket! We've got enough money,' said Ollie.

The three of them threw the old cans in the garbage bin in front of the house. Then they set off for the supermarket.

When they returned, the cats, obviously very hungry, dug into the fresh food.

Suddenly, Leonie cried, 'Where's the tabby cat?'

'Oh, it's probably somewhere on the grounds,' Ollie said.

'Maybe it's hiding somewhere in the house,' Leonie mused.

'Let's just keep searching for the secret door,' said Pat. 'Maybe we'll find the tabby cat while we're at it.'

They began in the living room. They knocked on the walls and on the brick facing of the fireplace but found nothing.

In Mrs. de Meer's bedroom they found a hidden door but it only led to a wall cabinet.

'The door can't be in her bedroom. If Captain Frisby's story is right, Captain de Meer must have used another room for his secret exits,' Ollie said.

'The library! Let's look in the library. I've got a feeling that's the right place,' Pat said.

They looked behind curtains, under carpets and behind bookcases. But they found nothing!

Leonie forced a smile. 'That's why they're called secret doors!' she said. 'If they could be found right away, Mrs. de Meer would have found it long ago. It has to be very well hidden.'

They were about to leave the room when Ollie suddenly paused and said, 'Hey! Did you hear that?'

He cupped his hand behind his left ear and put his ear up close to the shelf behind the desk.

And then the others heard it, too: it was the sound of a cat, meowing weakly.

'Tabby cat! It's the tabby cat! I could recognize that sound anywhere!' Leonie cried joyfully.

'It's been locked up, somewhere behind the shelves. We've got to get it out of there!' Ollie said.

'It probably crawled into a hole chasing a mouse and can't get out again!' said Pat.

'Maybe, but I think it's trying to lead us onto the right track again,' Ollie murmured. 'I'll eat my hat if its hiding place doesn't have something to do with the secret door. Someone used it and the cat followed him without being seen.'

'Could be,' Pat conceded.

Leonie tried to make contact with the cat. When it meowed anxiously again, she spoke to it softly.

'Here it is!' Ollie said, pointing to the part of the shelf where the large volumes with the nautical charts lay.

'And there's a mark!' Pat cried.

With his sharp detective eyes Pat had discovered finger prints on a dusty shelf. The library had obviously not been dusted for ages. Well, the cleaning lady was on vacation in Majorca and Mrs. de Meer was too weak to climb the stepladder.

Pat pointed at the finger prints. 'He supported himself here.' He thought for a moment. 'And somewhere within reach of here he probably triggered the mechanism that uncovers the secret door.'

He reached out with his other arm to demonstrate what he meant.

'Look!' Leonie cried out suddenly, pointing to a chewing gum wrapper stuck between some books. 'Wrigley's Spearmint!'

'You're mixing up the cases,' Ollie laughed. 'The Chewing Gum Gang is Inspector Voss's main suspect. Ours is the nephew, Heino. He probably has one or more accomplices!'

Finally, it was Ollie who noticed a volume about animal life by Brehm, which looked more worn than the other books. He pulled it out. Behind it was a small flip switch in the wooden wall of the shelf. He pressed the switch. The soft sound of a motor was heard. Shortly, the shelf began to turn on its central axis, revealing a dark passage.

'Yikes,' Leonie said, staring into the darkness. 'Is that the way to the cellar?'

'According to my sketch,' said Pat, 'it's the way to the gardener's house. Where's the flashlight?'

'I forgot it in the kitchen,' Ollie said.

'I'll be right back,' Leonie shouted and rushed down the stairs.

'A secret door to the gardener's house,' Ollie said to Pat. 'That was just what the old sea dog needed: He told his wife that he was going to have a nightcap in the library before bedtime. His wife goes to bed, not suspecting anything. As soon as she's asleep, he goes through the bookshelf wall into the gardener's house and on to his nightly escapades.'

Leonie returned with the flashlight and began shining it through the darkness of the opening. She could see a rear wall. Pat crawled into the opening. He touched the rear wall with his hand and cried, 'Wood!'

'I don't understand,' Leonie said, taken by surprise. 'I thought the house only had stone walls. The gardener's house, too.'



'Maybe it's paneling,' Pat said. Then he pressed hard against the wall. It slowly opened, filling the passage with light. The children scrambled through and looked around.

'We climbed through an old closet and are now in the bedroom of the gardener's house!' Leonie cried in amazement.

'The closet is a good camouflage. Seen from the side of the gardener's house, it looks completely harmless, especially when it's full of clothes,' Pat said.

'Have you noticed anything else unusual?' Ollie wanted to know.

Pat and Leonie looked at each other and shook their heads.

'The room is bright. Yesterday, the shutters were closed. What does that mean to you?'

'Someone was here today and opened them!' said Leonie quickly.

'We know someone was here. My trick with the rose petal proved that already,' Pat reminded his friends.

'What we didn't know is that someone sometimes spends the night in the gardener's house. Apparently without telling Mrs. de Meer.'

Ollie pointed at the unmade bed in the corner of the room.

On the nightstand was an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarette butts and chewing gum wrappers. *Wrigley's Spearmint!*

'It's strange. I never used to notice them, but now I do. I see those wrappers all over the place now,' Leonie said with a little laugh.

'Well, people who leave a lot of litter behind them are easy to follow,' Ollie said.

In the wastepaper basket was an empty package of sleeping tablets. 'The nephew! I'll bet it was the nephew who gave the cats that stuff. Or an accomplice of his!' Leonie's eyes flashed in anger.

'It all comes down to the same,' Ollie said. 'But how can we prove it?'

'The packet!' Leonie said.

'Millions of people take sleeping tablets!' said Ollie. 'That would be the same as claiming the guy is part of the Chewing gum Gang because we found a Wrigley chewing gum wrapper of his.'

'Let's have a look around in the cellar,' Leonie suggested.

They climbed down the stairs.

There was no cellar.

Downstairs there was only a kitchenette and a little living room. But what a surprise! The living room was full of packages and wooden crates.

They were about to examine the crates when they heard footsteps in the gravel walk.

Leonie went to the window and cried, 'Heino's coming! Scram!'

Whatever happened, he mustn't know that they had found the secret door!

The three detectives hurried up the stairs and climbed through the closet back into the library. They had just closed the secret door when Heino came bounding up the stairs, swearing like a sailor. He had found their school bags in the kitchen. 'Where the hell are you? Snooping around again? If I get my hands on you...'

'Just a moment,' Pat said calmly, as Heino confronted him.

'Here's a telephone. We'll call Mrs. de Meer and she'll tell you that she allowed us to be here.'

'Now let me ask you the same question: What are *you* doing here?' Leonie said.

'That's none of your damned business, you nervy little twit,' Heino hissed and hurried back down the stairs.

'He's heading for the cellar,' Leonie whispered.

Before they could decide what to do next, Heino came hurrying back, his face red with anger, and cried, 'The cans! Where are the cans?'

'Do you mean the cat food cans?' said Leonie coolly.

'What else?'

'In the garbage!' all three said at once. Immediately, Heino rushed from the house straight to the garbage bin and fished out the cans. He took them to his car and raced away. Unfortunately for him, he had overlooked one can.

Pat grabbed it and went to the kitchen.

'There must be something other than cat food in those cans,' he murmured as he began twisting the handle of the can opener.

Ollie and Leonie looked on nervously. *What was in the can?*

'Rolex watches!' Pat cried. "Embedded in foam so they don't rattle!"

'So they can be safely smuggled!' Ollie remarked.

Leonie took the red cell phone and pressed the speed-dial. Luckily, Inspector Voss answered at once.

'Hello, Inspector, I think we've solved the case. More precisely, both cases. In the trunk of a dark blue Volkswagen Bully with the license number HH-HM737 you'll find *Kitekat* cans packed with Rolex watches and maybe other valuables. And here in the gardener's house there are also some suspicious-looking wooden crates. Also, we found some Wrigley's chewing gum wrappers.'

'I'll be right there!' said Voss quickly.

The three detectives looked at each other, relieved.

'I'd say the case is as good as solved,' Ollie said with a sigh.

'Two cases. Ours and Inspector Voss's,' Pat added.

Leonie picked up the tabby cat, looked it in the eye and said, 'If you hadn't helped us, we'd never have solved the case, that's for sure!'

Anton and Willy received the call about the wanted person on their police radio. They stopped Heino's car as he was about to take the freeway entrance ramp to Bahrenfeld. The cans were full of jewelry and other stolen valuables. And there

were more stolen goods in the crates in the gardener's house, ready to be removed.

Finally, Mrs. de Meer's painting was returned to her after it was reported being offered on an Internet auction.



