

Chapter 1

THREE KIDS, THE GOSS AND AN ANGRY CAT

Sniffer was in a hurry. It was January 15th, his fourteenth birthday, but he was trying to ignore the thoughts of unopened presents that danced enticingly through his freckled red head. First, there was a deadline to meet and his tubby legs whirled like Catherine wheels as they powered a battered old bike along a pitch-dark, frosty lane.

Ollie ‘Sniffer’ Morris was the photographer of The Goss, a weekly newsletter he helped produce with his friends Max and Becky who had nicknamed him ‘Sniffer’ because he could smell a great news story from five miles away. With a circulation of two hundred and fifty, The Goss was no threat to The Sun or The Daily Mail; but the neighbours in Goss Street looked forward to catching up with all the local chit-chat when free copies arrived by e-mail every Wednesday at seven o’clock sharp.

Today was Wednesday. It was already five thirty and

The Goss went to press at six. Suddenly, Ollie's hip pocket began to vibrate and an American police siren wailed through the freezing night air. He swerved, pulling his mobile phone from the tangle of pencils, rubber bands and Snickers wrappers that clogged the pockets of his new jeans.

"Ollie Morris!" he panted, steering unsteadily with one hand.

"What's keeping you, Sniff?" barked a voice. "You're late!"

Ollie had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was Max Taylor, his editor, and it was clear that this was no social call.

"Where's that sensational picture story you promised us for page two?"

The boys had been best friends for as long as they could remember, but Max could be very demanding on press days and, like all good press photographers, Ollie was a master at talking his way out of tight corners.

"I'm minutes away," he lied, piling on the speed. "You're going to love it when you see my shots. See you in ten. Bye."

The depressing truth was that Sniffer Morris didn't *have* a sensational picture story for page two. Pocketing the mobile, he was trying to dream up some plausible excuse when a black cat darted out of the darkness and froze in the beam of his cycle lamp.

"Get out of the waaaaaaay!" he yelled, hitting a sheet of black ice that sent him careering into the kerb and flying over the handlebars into a tall bush. Slowly and painfully, he pulled himself from its thorny

branches and glanced back at the bike. It was lying at the roadside, its front wheel ticking quietly as it spun over a motionless black moggie.

“Oh no, I’ve killed it!” he panicked, rubbing his knee through a rip in his jeans. As he stumbled over to the wreckage, a bad-tempered hiss reassured him that the creature had survived. Sighing with relief, he took his camera from the saddlebag and took a shot through the revolving spokes, then continued his journey – steering slightly left to compensate for a seriously wonky front wheel.

The atmosphere in Max Taylor’s bedroom was humming as stories for *The Goss* took shape. Handouts from dozens of local organisations and clubs were scattered across the duvet or stuck to the wall alongside his photograph collection of TV newsreaders. Pride of place was given to the BBC’s Greg Armstrong and the young editor could hardly wait for a date to be announced for a talk the star had promised to give at school later that term.

The Taylors had moved to Goston shortly before Max was born. His father, Nick, made TV commercials and his mother, Sue, taught at the local primary school. They were a popular couple whose pride and joy was a long, unruly garden in which Mr. Taylor had spent most of the summer building a huge, rickety shed. He was now working from home on a big new campaign idea and, as Ollie’s bike limped into Goss Street, Max was rushing downstairs to his study, closely followed by Becky Roberts who was in charge of layout for *The Goss*.

“It’s quarter to six, dad!” he shouted, shouldering

his way in clutching handfuls of notes. “May we come in now?”

Mr. Taylor was used to being evicted every Wednesday so that The Goss team could put the finishing touches to their paper on the Adman Eye-Power Plus P.C., but today he had a deadline of his own to meet – and things weren’t going well.

“Blast!” he groaned. “I’ve got a really important presentation to make in the morning and it’s just eaten my storyboards! I *hate* this machine!”

“No worries!” said Becky, who knew that Mr. Taylor’s computer skills were on a par with the average orang-utan’s. “I’ll soon have you sorted!”

Small and feisty with a pretty, sensitive face, Becky was in the same class as Max and Ollie at Bridgemont School in Goston. She lived with her mum in a neat little cottage off the High Street and had a slight stammer which could be really annoying for her – especially when she was under pressure. French orals were a complete nightmare, but there was no-one to touch her when it came to I.T. Max and Ollie liked to call her their ‘IT Girl’, a pet name she pretended to hate, but which secretly made her feel special and quite proud.

“This won’t take a sec,” she said brightly, her fingers flying across the keyboard until Mr. Taylor’s work reappeared. “Don’t forget to hit ‘save’ next time.”

“You’re a star, Becky,” said Max’s long-suffering dad, heading for the kitchen to watch the news on the portable TV. He was resigned to the household being disrupted by his son’s obsession with newspapers, but sometimes wished he would get another life: football,

skate-boarding, bungee-jumping – perhaps even a girlfriend. Becky shared that thought. Her feelings for Max were becoming more grown-up, but she worried that he saw her only as a computer nerd and wished she were better at being cool and sophisticated.

Suddenly, the door burst open and Ollie bounced in, baseball cap askew and sweatshirt hanging out of his ripped jeans. He traded high fives with Max and flung himself onto a beanbag with a blood-curdling yell.

“Leave it out, Sniff!” complained Becky, who was trying to finish the entertainment section. “It’s ten to six. You’ve made me lose my p..place!”

“What are you like?” said Ollie indignantly, tossing her his camera and opening a packet of M & Ms. “A bloke cycles all over town to get a picture and that’s all the thanks he gets! Have you got any Dr Pepper, Max? I’m dry as a dog biscuit in a microwave!”

Photography and good living ran in Ollie’s family. His father, Trevor, owned a camera shop called Say Cheese and his mother, Eileen, ran the local Weight Watchers’ club. Ollie disapproved of this because he was proud of being a rounder person and saw absolutely no reason why anyone should want to be slim.

“Just chill for a moment, Sniff,” said Max, waiting eagerly for Becky to upload the pictures. “You can have a whole bucketful of Dr Pepper if these shots are any good.”

“Da-Daaaah!” trumpeted Becky as a solitary image appeared on the screen. “The moment we’ve all been kept waiting for!”

Then her voice trailed off and Max’s jaw dropped like a stone.

“What’s this?” he asked in amazement, sweeping the floppy blond fringe out of his eyes and nudging his gold-rimmed glasses up onto his forehead. “We’ve been holding half a page for your ‘sensational picture story’ – and you come back with one shot of a mangy old puss under a bike. What’s sensational about that?”

Ollie was searching his brain for an explanation, but couldn’t find one.

“Maybe it’s a unicycling cat,” offered Max sarcastically. “Or does it mend punctures instead of eating mice...?”

The tubby photographer was becoming more and more uncomfortable, but his friend wouldn’t let it drop.

“... Perhaps it eats bicycles! Now, that *would* be a story...!”

That was the last straw. Ollie had wrecked his bike, ripped his jeans and was in no mood for being humiliated by smart alec newspaper editors – even if this one did happen to be his best mate.

“It’s my birthday, in case you’ve forgotten!” he exploded. “I’ve been freezing my butt off for the last two hours looking for your sensational picture story and the most interesting thing I could find was a man arguing over the price of a tin of beans in Sainsbury’s. What was I meant to do – set fire to the church hall?”

Becky was used to being the calming influence when things got tense. Both she and Ollie respected Max and knew that The Goss couldn’t survive without his leadership and ideas; but he could be headstrong and sometimes needed cutting down to size when he was in one of his bossy moods.

“Lighten up, guys,” she said. “Animal Safety Week’s coming up. Maybe Sniff’s picture could be a reminder to look out for pets near busy roads.”

Max’s mood lifted and he began to scribble headline ideas into a notebook.

“Good thinking, Becky!” he murmured, nibbling thoughtfully at a pen as he scanned the list and chose his favourite. “We’ll call it ‘*THE CAT THAT ‘SPOKE’ UP FOR ROAD SAFETY*’.” Then he winked at Ollie. “I was out of order there, Sniff,” he smiled. “Sorry I gave you a hard time. Happy birthday!”

Ollie’s face lit up as Max presented him with a box of freshly-baked choc-chip cookies.

“Love it!” he said, offering them round. “Cheers, mate. Perhaps you have your good points after all!”

The tension evaporated and the trio returned to the task in hand. Max, Becky and Ollie were only children and their relationship had grown more akin to brothers and sister, weathering spats and fallings-out as though they were part and parcel of ordinary family life.

“Anything for the sports section, Sniff?” asked Becky, holding her cookie between her teeth as she pounded the keyboard. “We’re running out of time.”

Ollie beamed as he pulled a crumpled score sheet from his back pocket. If there was one thing he loved more than chocolate it was football and he’d be in seventh heaven come the summer when England was hosting the World Cup.

“Goss Street Under 15s lost five nil to Chalcroft,” he smirked, knowing the defeat would be one in the eye for the Goss Street coach who had excluded him from team trials for being unfit and overweight. He was

about to say something very rude when Max cut in.

“Do we have anything from Neighbourhood Watch?” he asked, switching back into ‘editor’ mode as he spotted an empty space in the middle of page one.

“Oh, I nearly f..forgot,” cried Becky, riffling through a mountain of press releases. “They want us to put out a warning about some lowlife creep who talks his way into old peoples’ houses by pretending to be a gas man. He stole a hundred pounds from Mrs. Williams last week and she’s given the police a really g..good description. He’s tall with a dark, droopy moustache and brown horn-rimmed glasses.”

“Pity we haven’t got one of those photofits,” mused Ollie. “That would fill the space really well.”

“Who needs a photofit?” exclaimed Max, having one of his brainwaves. “My dad’s got glasses like that – *and* he’s tall and dark. All he needs is a false moustache and you can take a shot. It’ll be just like one of those reconstructions on ‘Crimewatch U.K.!’”

“You’ve got a nerve, Max Taylor!” chided Becky. “The things you do to your poor father!”

“He won’t mind,” chuckled Max. “Not if it jogs a few memories and helps catch the crook. Come on! Time to be creative with a piece of burnt cork!”

“I heard that!” said a suspicious Mr. Taylor, entering the room to collect his brief case. “What’s all this about ‘Crimewatch U.K.’ and burnt cork?”

It wouldn’t be the first time he had fallen victim to his son’s big ideas and some of the memories were still raw. He often nightmares about being strapped to a board at the local circus while Ollie snapped a huge

Hungarian knife-thrower planting razor-sharp blades inches from his head; but before he could protest, Becky had drawn something resembling a black, furry caterpillar over his upper lip and he found himself facing the camera.

“Try to look sly, Mr. T!” directed Ollie, framing Max’s father in the front doorway just as his mum arrived back from a parents’ meeting.

“You’re as bad as the kids!” she scoffed, raising her eyebrows as she squeezed past her husband who was narrowing his eyes like a pantomime villain. Mr. Taylor held the expression, trying to convince himself that anything was worthwhile if it protected defenceless old people from predatory con men with unsightly facial hair; then Ollie pressed the shutter. Moments later, Becky had set the picture into the page under another of Max’s arresting headlines:

‘IF A MOUSTACHE LIKE THIS KNOCKS AT YOUR DOOR, DON’T LET IT IN!’

“Right, guys!” he cried, scrolling through the completed paper. “One quick spell-check and away she goes!”

At two minutes past seven, edition 24 of *The Goss* was e-mailed to every house in the street and it was time for Becky and Ollie to make their way home to the less newsworthy activities of homework, supper and evening TV.

“Night, mum! Night, dad!” called Max, heading for bed as the closing headlines of the Ten O’Clock News faded from the screen. Before long, he was snuggled under the duvet watching the full moon floating across a black, cloudless sky as though it, too,

were searching for stories. A pallid glow dappled the forest of papers that covered his bedroom walls, catching the photograph of Greg Armstrong. He closed his eyes, holding the thought that came to him every night before he fell asleep: “I’m going to be a newsman – one day!”