



## 1. Molly's First Test

At 9 a.m. on Friday, 3 February 2017, just as my assistant, Sam, had settled at her desk, booted up her computer and taken her first sip of espresso, the telephone rang. I was outside on the Bramble Hill Farm driveway, preparing to exercise Molly in the early-morning sun. My cocker spaniel had woken up in a particularly frisky mood – so much so that she'd knocked over my girlfriend Sarah's favourite Lladró vase in the hallway – and she needed to run off some excess energy.

'UK Pet Detectives,' said Sam, picking up the phone. 'Can we help?'

'I really hope so,' replied a glum male voice. 'Our cat, Rusty, has gone missing. We've looked everywhere, but there's no sign of her. We've hit a brick wall, really, so we thought we'd give you guys a call.'

Tim was a graphic designer who lived in the Hertfordshire city of St Albans with his physiotherapist girlfriend, Jasmine. They were saving hard for a deposit for a two-bedroomed house, but in the meantime were renting a modest first-floor apartment in a quiet cul-de-sac. The couple shared a love of cats and had gladly welcomed little Rusty into their lives, a black, white and copper rescue moggy with almond-shaped eyes and a long fluffy tail. Since the flat was pretty cramped – many

of their personal belongings were still boxed up – they often let their cat outdoors; there, she'd mooch around the crescent, lazing on driveways and sitting on doorsteps, neither straying too far nor staying out late.

The previous Friday, however, Rusty had failed to turn up for her weekly treat of steamed haddock – she adored her fresh fish – and her owners were totally flummoxed.

'It's just so out of character,' Tim told Sam. 'We've spent the whole weekend searching in streets and gardens – we've even printed out leaflets and posters – but she's nowhere to be found. We're at a total loss.'

'I'm so sorry to hear that,' said Sam, who – being a cat owner herself – genuinely felt their pain. 'Leave it with me. I'll have a word with my boss and I'll get back to you.'

She promptly bounded over to the large sash window and yanked it up.

'*COLIN!*' she yelled, causing Molly and me to stop dead in our tracks as we strode towards the meadow. 'Make sure you pop in after your training session. Think I might have found Molly's first proper job . . .'

Fast-forward half an hour and I was sitting in the office discussing Rusty's disappearance with Sam while a bushwhacked Molly enjoyed a snooze. I felt my pulse quicken as my colleague reiterated her conversation with Tim and outlined the missing pet's circumstances. If our inaugural cat-seeking assignment was to be a success, the search conditions had to be as favourable as possible and this seemed to tick all the boxes. Firstly, Rusty came from a single-cat household, thus enabling me to obtain a decent hair sample and giving Molly the best chance of

isolating the scent and matching it to the lost cat. Secondly, the puss had been missing for less than a week, which increased the likelihood of finding it alive. Also working in our favour was the fact that the weather was calm and settled, unseasonably so, in fact, for early February. Any excessive winds or any form of precipitation (rain, snow or mist, for example) would dilute the cat scent and would interfere with my dog's ultra-sensitive nose.

Luckily, as a former serviceman, I was well versed in all things meteorological and geographical. Prior to my long career in the police force I'd spent over a decade in the Royal Navy, which had prompted a serious interest in weather, climate and coastal navigation. I had studied all subjects voraciously in my cabin on HMS *Illustrious*, expanding my scientific knowledge of air masses, frontal systems and cartography, for instance, and had become something of an expert. Little did I know then how useful this knowledge would become in the world of pet detection.

In December 2016 Molly had completed an intensive period of scent-recognition training at a Milton Keynes-based charity – Medical Detection Dogs – and since then she and I had staged countless practice scenarios at my Bramble Hill Farm HQ, honing our skills in preparation for our first real-life search for a missing cat. I had been quietly confident that Molly and I had attained the required level of competence, but it was only when I'd sent some video footage of our training to the experts at MDD that we'd finally been given the green light.

‘From what we’ve seen, we think you’re both ready for your first proper search,’ they’d said, causing a tingle to shoot up my spine. ‘Your interaction and teamwork are excellent and, as far as we’re concerned, you’re good to go.’

Now, following Sam’s phone conversation, I finally faced the prospect of solving a live search with Molly by my side. I felt a mixture of exhilaration and trepidation. I had spent so much time and energy developing my innovative cat-detection-dog idea – it had been five years in the making – and, having eventually found my perfect sidekick, I was desperate for that conclusive ‘proof of concept’ to make all our hard work worthwhile.

‘This could be it,’ I said to Sam. ‘This could be Molly’s first test.’

‘Oh my goodness, how exciting!’ grinned my colleague.

That evening I spent an hour or so on the phone to Tim, obtaining as much background information as possible. I asked him whether there’d been any triggers that might have caused Rusty to flee (upheaval in the household, for example, or a marauding feline foe), but Tim was adamant that, as far as he was concerned, nothing had changed.

‘The elderly lady who lives in the opposite flat died last week, which was quite upsetting,’ he said, ‘but other than that, things have been pretty humdrum around here.’

As for sightings, they’d drawn a blank in their own neighbourhood, but that morning had received calls from two separate witnesses in a village located a few miles away who claimed to have seen a cat answering Rusty’s description in their respective gardens.

‘I doubt it’s our cat, because she’s never, ever roamed

that far,' admitted Tim, 'but we'd still like you to investigate, if you don't mind.'

'I'm more than happy to help,' I replied, before casually mentioning that I'd be accompanied by a canine colleague.

'My cocker spaniel, Molly, will be coming, too,' I said. 'She's got a decent sense of smell and she doesn't yap at cats so she might be quite useful. Hope that's okay with you.'

I was purposely downplaying things, so as not to heap any pressure upon Molly, or myself.

'No problem,' said Tim. 'Anything that might help us find Rusty is fine with me.'

I burned the midnight oil that evening, poring over digital maps, plans and photos of the St Albans area as Sarah slept beside me. It was important that I found out as much as possible about the area so as to give Molly and me the best chance of locating the missing cat. When I felt myself beginning to nod off, I shut down my laptop and went to check on Molly, as I did every night. She sensed me peering through the gap in the door, raised her head and drowsily opened one eye.

'We've got a big day ahead, young lady,' I whispered, 'so I'll see you bright and early in the morning.'

*Yeah, I know, Dad, Molly seemed to say, so how's about letting me get some sleep?*

She held my gaze for a couple of seconds before curling up tight and continuing her slumbers.

We both left the house at 5 a.m. The weather forecast had correctly predicted a cool and cloudy day with a

slight underlying breeze: the perfect conditions for our big search, I hoped. Sarah had awoken early to wave us off, fully aware of the magnitude of the next few hours. She had watched me build up to this moment for a long time and knew exactly how much it meant to me.

‘Hope it all goes well, darling.’ She’d smiled, and I almost did a double-take when she gently, yet gingerly, patted my spaniel’s glossy black head before wishing her good luck. Sarah hadn’t quite acclimatized to Molly’s presence in the household – she was no dog-lover, put it that way – and this was indeed a rare display of affection.

My dog quite literally lapped it up, giving my girlfriend’s palm a big, sloppy lick in return for her kind words. I smiled to myself, imagining Sarah darting straight to the antiseptic handwash as soon as she returned indoors.

Following a two-hour drive from West Sussex to Hertfordshire, I was greeted by Tim and Jasmine outside their modern four-storey apartment block. They were young, fair-haired and athletic-looking – I guessed they were in their mid-twenties – but both wore a kind of glazed expression that I recognized only too well. Like many of my clients before them, their precious pet had gone AWOL, and they were sick to their stomachs with worry.

My eye was drawn to a huge poster in their front window. PLEASE HELP, I’M LOST, it declared. CAN YOU HELP ME FIND MY HOME?

Staring out from behind the printed text was a beautiful photograph of the missing moggy. Rusty was a pretty

cat with a friendly face; her white bib and legs, topped with two black splotches above her eyes, made her look like a feline caped crusader.

‘I wish all my clients could produce something so professional-looking,’ I said.

‘Being a graphic designer comes in handy sometimes . . .’ replied Tim with a wan smile.

‘. . . and our Rusty is a dream to photograph,’ added Jasmine wistfully.

I followed the couple indoors, leaving Molly safe and secure in the car (and, as always, in my line of vision) with her favourite toys for company. I knew that she’d experience serious sensory overload if she entered an unfamiliar flat, and I needed her to remain as calm as possible. Not only that, it was imperative that she was able to focus solely on Rusty’s scent, if I was going to be lucky enough to obtain a decent sample.

The three of us then discussed a plan of action. Jasmine had to attend work that morning – her Monday clinic was always busy with sporting injuries – so Tim would be accompanying Molly and me on the search. Our first port of call would be the nearby village in which the two cat sightings had occurred but before we set off I posed a question.

‘I know this may sound a little odd, Tim, but would you mind if I took a sample of Rusty’s cat hair?’ I asked cautiously. ‘Molly’s a trained sniffer dog and – you never know – she might detect some scent.’

I was soft-peddalling, of course, keeping things nicely understated. I needed to manage his expectations, rather



than having him believe that the deployment of a search dog would guarantee Rusty's recovery.

'Yeah, sure, help yourself,' he replied. 'She moults a lot. Her cat bed's full of it.'

Out came my sterilized jam jar, and in went a wad of whitish hair; more than enough for Molly to get her amazing nose into.

The hamlet of Broomfield comprised a smattering of small cottages surrounded by acres of ancient woodland. The grass verges lining the lane were swathed in daffodils and narcissi, their petals and trumpets ranging in colour from vanilla white to egg-yolk yellow. Nest-building blackbirds flitted from hedge to shrub, straw and twigs clamped firmly in their beaks. We parked up in a pub car park, where I strapped on Molly's special harness and zipped up my UKPD fleece. She and I had often practised the transition from pet mode to work mode at Bramble Hill Farm and donning our respective 'uniforms' had always been a vital part of this routine. I was buzzing with excitement but did my utmost to adopt a professional demeanour. Molly picked up on my nervous energy, however, and started whining and spinning around in her crate.

As Tim and I surveyed our surroundings a brisk wind began to whip up, with enough vigour to ruffle our hair. *This wasn't forecast*, I thought to myself. I looked to the horizon and saw the tell-tale signs of a warm front heading our way. I knew this would bring steady winds for the rest of the day, followed by rain. I did a quick calculation

of the wind speed; I figured that we had about six hours before the first band of rain reached us.

‘We really need to get started, Tim,’ I said, looking at my watch.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Let’s go for it.’

Tim and I swiftly identified the two gardens that Rusty had reportedly been sighted in – they were on opposite sides of the road – and, fortunately, both householders allowed us access. Then, with a deep breath, and with my heart racing, I introduced Rusty’s cat-hair sample to Molly for the first time. I could see Tim’s eyes widen with a mixture of surprise and fascination as I unscrewed the jam jar and, following my customary command of *Toma* – the Spanish translation of ‘take’ – I offered it up to Molly’s snout. This distinctive word had been carefully selected by Molly’s trainers at MDD, since she’d never hear it spoken around the house or within any other context.

She inhaled the scent, awaited my usual exhortation to ‘Seek, seek,’ and careered off into the first garden, her tail wagging furiously.

‘Oh, wow . . .’ said my client, slowly twigging on to the fact that Molly was not your average dog. ‘Has she . . . has she been trained to do this?’

‘She has.’ I smiled. ‘But, Tim, you need to know that this is her first live search and it would be unfair on you – and Molly – if I was to promise anything. But she’ll do her very best to find Rusty, I can assure you of that.’

Molly searched everywhere for the odour – beneath a holly bush, inside the greenhouse, behind the compost

heap – but to no avail. All the while, she increased her eye contact with me, which, as I knew from our many training searches, meant that she had finished sweeping the area.

*There's no cat here, Dad . . . let's go . . .* was how I deciphered her body language.

It was a similar story in the second garden. Molly failed to locate any scent trails and – such was my faith in her ability – I could only surmise that Rusty had never ventured there. However, as I recalled my dog with a command of ‘Molly, come,’ I suddenly noticed a black, grey and tan cat tiptoeing across the lawn. I squinted as it came closer.

*Oh my goodness, I thought. Is that Rusty walking towards me? Is Molly having an ‘off’ day?*

‘THAT’S HER!’ squawked the homeowner from her kitchen window. ‘That’s the cat I saw!’

Tim nearly jumped out of his skin, but his reaction when he caught sight of the animal was telling. Molly had remained unmoved, too, which should have told me all I needed to know.

‘That’s not her,’ said my client, shaking his head sadly. ‘Same colouring, but different markings. Rusty’s got this really weird half-pink, half-black nose. I’d recognize her anywhere.’

Crestfallen after this case of mistaken identity, we trudged over to the pub for a coffee, while Molly slurped noisily from a large bowl of water. She needed plenty of breaks and drinks when she was on a search, and I took great care to ensure that she was never overworked. I

didn't want her to suffer from scenting fatigue (also known as 'nose blindness'), whereby she'd lose the ability to isolate a particular odour.

Tim also took the opportunity to update his girlfriend.

*No joy yet, Jaz,* he texted. *Will keep u posted xxx*

In an attempt to glean more clues about Rusty's disappearance, I probed a little deeper, quizzing Tim about his local neighbourhood. The subject of the deceased old lady in the apartment block cropped up again so I pressed him for more information. According to Tim, she'd died of natural causes and, within hours, her body had been taken away in an ambulance. This nugget of information got me wondering.

'Do you happen to remember which day your neighbour passed away?' I said.

'Erm, let me think,' he replied, counting back with his fingers. 'Friday. Yeah, it must have been last Friday.'

'The same day that Rusty went missing?'

Tim paused for a moment, furrowing his brow.

'Yes . . . I suppose it would have been. I know what you're thinking, Colin, but Rusty had a fear of cars. She associated them with being taken to the vet's.'

'Private ambulances tend not to be cars, though,' I explained. As a police officer, I'd dealt with many sudden deaths and seen dozens of such vehicles, and most of them were large, roomy minibuses with blacked-out windows and easy-access ramps. 'Right,' I said, as my sleuthing instincts kicked in. 'Can you give me a couple of minutes? I need to make a few phone calls.'

'Yeah, of course,' replied Tim, 'I'll go outside for a

cigarette. I gave up last year, but I've had a relapse since Rusty went.'

I rang the local GP, who informed me that, since the woman had been in her nineties – and had been under his long-term care – her death was deemed 'expected' and he'd been able to certify it on the scene, without any police involvement. The lady's body had then been transported by a private ambulance to the funeral directors' chapel of rest in Stonebridge – about a mile away from my clients' home – and, according to their staff, the vehicle – a large, dark blue minibus – had been parked up outside their offices for the remainder of the day. Slowly but surely, the jigsaw pieces began to slot together.

I headed out to the car park (with a fully refreshed Molly in tow), where we found Tim perched against the car bonnet, deftly aiming his extinguished cigarette butt into a nearby bin.

'Right,' I said briskly. 'I'm starting to think this may be a case of accidental transportation.'

I told him that there was a very real possibility that Rusty had sneaked into the undertaker's ambulance outside the apartment block – perhaps tiptoeing along its ramp – and been driven off as a consequence. The timeline of events definitely tallied, and it would explain the sudden nature of her disappearance.

'Next stop, Stonebridge,' I said, gesturing for Tim to get back into the car.

While the funeral directors' receptionist confirmed the ambulance's route on the day in question, she'd received

no reports of a cat being found inside. She did admit, however, that the vehicle's rear doors would have been opened and closed on numerous occasions, firstly, to transport the deceased woman and, secondly, to facilitate the weekly valet.

'Sorry I can't be more helpful,' she said, 'but you might want to speak to the ladies at the post office next door. If there's any news or gossip flying around, they'll know about it. But beware,' she grinned. 'They'll talk your hind legs off if you let them.'

She wasn't wrong. The ladies behind the counter took a real shine to Molly – as well as the handsome six-footer who'd lost his poor little cat – and, after they'd heard our story, agreed to display one of Tim's posters on the noticeboard. As I securely affixed it with some drawing pins, an elderly gentleman walked in, took one look at Rusty's photo and gasped.

'That cat was sat on our fence this morning, I'm sure of it,' he declared. 'Beautiful creature, lovely bushy tail. Remember my wife saying that she'd never seen it before. Oh, and it had this really strange-looking nose . . .'

Tim grabbed my arm in excitement. Perhaps my ambulance theory was bang on the money.

'Can you possibly take us to your garden now?' I asked.

'Let me collect my pension first, old chum.' He smiled. 'But by all means, follow me over.'

Ten minutes later I was crouching outside old Mr Renshaw's red-brick semi, grasping a jam jar, going through the scent-sniffing routine with Molly for the second time that day. With Rusty's odour coursing through her nostrils, she

sprinted into the back garden and within seconds – wham-bam – did her so-called ‘down’ in the centre of the lawn. Molly’s trademark success signal, this rapid response had been drilled into her at Medical Detection Dogs in order to alert her handler without alarming any cats. The ‘down’ involved her lying flat, still and silent, with her front paws outstretched, her back legs tucked under her body, her head upright and her eyes locked. Her body would quiver with excitement at the thrill of the ‘victory’ and the expectation of a reward for her achievement. My heart began to pound like a drum. We had practised this drill so often at Bramble Hill Farm, but this was the first time that I’d seen her do it for a real-life client.

‘What does that mean?’ whispered Tim as he watched Molly trembling before us.

‘She’s signalling that she’s detected a high concentration of Rusty’s scent,’ I replied, ‘so you can be pretty certain that your cat has been here fairly recently. We just need to work out where she is now.’

While a pepped-up Tim texted Jasmine, I rewarded Molly for doing her job; she’d made a scent match, when all was said and done, despite the cat herself not being present. Her favourite black-pudding treats were munched in a millisecond.

Using my meteorological know-how, I tried to figure out why Molly had ‘downed’ in the dead centre of the garden and why the scent had accumulated at that specific point. I stood at the precise spot where Molly had lain and turned to face the wind. The breeze was coming directly across the fence and I knew that this would

have forced the air upwards, causing it to roll across the lawn like a wave, washing the scent to the exact place where Molly had indicated.

*What a good girl, Molly,* I thought to myself. *She's absolutely spot on.*

With Rusty very likely to be in the immediate area, it was now vital that I invested all my faith in Molly and employed a strategic and methodical approach. First and foremost, we had to narrow down the search area as best we could. There were about thirty houses on Mr Renshaw's side of the road, and beyond their long, sixty-foot gardens lay a huge stretch of arable farmland. We needed to pinpoint the properties that seemed most promising – we'd already lost half a day looking in the wrong village – so I decided to run Molly along a gravel footpath that divided the residents' gardens from the farmers' fields. As we passed a couple of adjoining semis, I noticed her becoming very focused and performing a number of 180-degree turns. I felt a sudden rush of blood to the head, since this was often a sure sign that she'd detected something significant.

'Tim, could you do me a favour and knock on the owners' front doors?' I asked. 'Molly's desperate to get in and we'll need their say-so.'

The first house – number 36 – was occupied by two octogenarian sisters who, despite being somewhat bewildered by the hullabaloo – were more than happy for us to search their grounds.

*These poor old dears might live to regret this,* I thought, as Molly shot through the back gate like an arrow from a



bow and darted into one of the most pristine gardens I'd ever seen.

'My god, it looks like a Chelsea Flower Show exhibit,' whispered Tim.

'It won't be by the time Molly's finished with it,' I replied.

My keyed-up dog slalomed around ornamental bird-baths and Japanese plant pots, churning up the manicured lawn as she went. She then scrambled up an alpine rockery, her swishing tail scything the heads off the paper-thin cyclamen.

'I'm really sorry about this,' I told the sisters. 'I can put her on a lead, if you prefer.'

'Absolutely not!' one replied. 'This is *fascinating* . . .'

Molly then slammed on her brakes and executed another 180-degree turn, before veering off towards their freshly painted garden fence, scraping her sharp claws down the dark green panels. Her intensity levels were increasing, and I just needed to know why.

*What are you trying to tell me, Molls?* I wondered, feeling a bit like Sherlock Holmes quizzing Dr Watson.

*I wanna go next door, I wanna go next door,* she seemed to be saying, her eyes searching mine for some guidance.  
*Let. Me. Go. Next. Door.*

*Bear with me, Molly,* I whispered.

I peered over the fence. A middle-aged woman and a teenage boy – mother and son, I presumed – were standing on their patio and craning their necks, clearly alarmed by all the noise and commotion coming from the sisters' house. 'Their garden wasn't as ornate as their neighbour's,' I noted, although it boasted an impressive,

glass-fronted summer house and a large area of wooden decking.

‘Can we come over, please?’ I yelled, giving them a potted version of events, then dashing to their front gate with Molly and Tim in tow. Meanwhile, a small group of people, including one of the post-office ladies, had congregated on the pavement outside; news of the Missing Cat and the Detection Dog had clearly travelled.

I gave my dog the signal to proceed. With Tim and I trailing behind her, an all-guns-blazing Molly charged across number 38’s lawn, her stride unbroken as she gobbled up some bacon rind that had been left for the birds. She sprang up on to the decking, whirled around to face me, locked her eyes with mine, and – a slither of bacon rind drooping from her mouth – gave me the most emphatic ‘down’ I’d ever seen.

‘Oh my god, she’s doing that trembly thing again,’ whispered Tim, his voice shaking. ‘Has she found her?’

‘One moment . . .’ I said, before creeping stealthily towards the summer house and peering through the slightly ajar glass door. Sitting in a dark corner, atop a blue cushion, was a cat. A white, black and copper cat. An almond-eyed, bushy-tailed cat. A pink-and-black-nosed cat.

‘RUSTY!’ cried Tim, unable to control his emotions. ‘My cat!!! Molly’s found my cat!!!’

‘A *cat*? No *waaaay* . . .’ drawled the teenage son, clearly unaware that they’d had a feline lodger in their summer house.

‘That’s what happens when your dad doesn’t lock the door properly,’ tutted his mother. ‘Poor little thing.’

Within seconds, however, calamity had struck. Perhaps spooked by her owner's hooting and hollering, Rusty suddenly shot out of the summer house, then bombed up the driveway and scampered through a succession of front gardens. Tim sprinted after her, clearing the privet hedges like an Olympic hurdler and eventually scooping her up from beneath a hazel bush. I hurried over, with Molly on a lead, to find him standing on the pavement, cradling his cat in his arms, tears of joy streaming down his cheeks.

'I don't know what to say,' he sobbed. 'I just can't believe you've found her. Thank you, Colin. Thank you, Molly. Thank you *so, so* much.'

A spontaneous ripple of applause rang out from the assembled neighbours.

'Most exciting thing that's happened in the village for years,' said one, laughing.

'Better than *Mission Impossible*, that,' chuckled another.

The sisters at number 36 kindly allowed Tim to take Rusty indoors for a while, where she glugged a bowlful of water and devoured a pouch of cat food that had been donated by a neighbour. As he sat at the kitchen table, Tim relayed the happy news to Jasmine (she'd received the call on the train home and had dissolved into tears), then gave her a low-down of the day's events.

He told her how Rusty had almost certainly taken a ride to Stonebridge in the undertakers' ambulance and crept out at some stage. Then, in search of shelter, warmth, food and water – every cat's basic needs – she'd roamed around the village then migrated to number 38.

It had been a very smart decision on her part. The summer house had acted as a sanctuary, and the protein-rich bacon rind (as well the water in next-door's birdbaths) had given her vital sustenance.

'She's a smart little cookie, according to Colin,' said Tim, half laughing, half crying.

After Tim finished his call I stood up and said my good-byes, then headed off to the green fields beyond the back gardens. The sky was now dark, with heavy clouds all around us but, in my head and my heart, it felt like a beautiful summer's day. As I let everything sink in, my eyes began to mist over. Four years previously I'd first set out to find and train a cat-detection dog, and had figured that it would take me just six months. I'd spent hundreds of hours researching canine cognition, travelled thousands of miles to meet the country's top experts in this field and overcome a great deal of resistance and hostility. So many people had told me that it couldn't be done and had implied that I was foolish and delusional.

Now, however, in this tiny corner of Hertfordshire, I finally had my proof of concept and, by using our Holmes and Watson-type sleuthing skills, Molly and I had solved the case and reunited a pet with its owner. I had adopted the strategic and analytical role, drawing upon my raft of detecting experience to assess the probabilities and possibilities regarding Rusty's whereabouts and to establish the credibility and reliability of witnesses. My partner, Molly, had turned out to be my perfect foil – energetic,

determined and blessed with an amazing natural talent – and, by working as a team, we’d done our job proficiently and professionally.

I knelt down and gently brushed my hand against the side of Molly’s face, knowing how much she liked to bond with me through touch.

‘Can you believe it, Molly?’ I smiled as she gently nibbled the inside of my palm. ‘We’ve only gone and found our first missing cat!’

Stealing a quick look over my shoulder to make sure we were alone, I jumped into the air and yelled ‘*YES!*’ as loudly as I possibly could. Molly was taken by surprise at first, but then she, too, leapt up high and started to bark her very own ‘*YES!*’ response. We both cavorted around the field like a pair of mad March hares, totally oblivious to the heavy rain that had just begun to fall.

## 2. Scenting Success

My pet-detecting skills can probably be traced back to the summer of 1989, when I first joined Surrey Police as a constable. In my early days as a beat officer I'd become accustomed to dealing with all manner of crime. From assault to arson, and from poaching to pick-pocketing, I'd faced plenty of menacing situations and unsavoury characters. Being a rookie, however, meant that I was also assigned to some of the more commonplace incidents.

'You like your pets, PC Butcher, so this one will be right down your street,' said my patrol sergeant, grinning, as he handed over the report slip one autumn morning.

'An old dear with a missing cat in Farnham. Nutty as a fruit cake. Thinks her neighbour's half-inched it.'

He was right, I did love animals – since childhood I'd kept a succession of dogs, cats, birds and rodents – but, even so, I found myself questioning whether this case was a priority for the resource-starved, time-stretched 'C' Watch.

'Isn't this a bit, er, trivial?' I asked.

'On the contrary,' replied my superior. 'It's important that we're visible in the community, whether it's a lost cat or a runaway dog. Gets the locals on side. Off you trot, then.'

I didn't realize it at the time, but dealing with these

apparently trifling issues would help me enormously further down the line. Getting to know the neighbourhood – and securing the confidence of residents – was often vital when investigating a serious crime.

Irene, a grey-haired lady in her late seventies, answered her front door wearing a friendly smile on her face and a frilly apron over her dress. As I followed her into the lounge, I couldn't help but notice all the plastic and ceramic ornaments, predominantly cat-shaped, that were crammed on to every shelf, mantelpiece and window ledge. The cushions on the sofas sported embroidered kitties and above her fireplace was a photo-gallery featuring felines of varying breeds and vintages, presumably those that she had owned through the years. Herein lived a devoted cat-lover, that was for sure.

'These have come straight out of the oven,' she said, placing a tin of banana muffins on the coffee table. 'Do help yourself, dear.'

In between mouthfuls of cake, I questioned Irene about her missing moggy, who, I gathered, had been absent for over two days. I gleaned that she'd had regular bust-ups with her next-door neighbour, Cliff, a fellow pensioner and a champion gardener who'd taken exception to little Polly using his vegetable patch as drop-and-go cat litter. He would regularly hurl abuse – and the offending matter, as it happened – over the fence, and relations between the two had become decidedly tetchy.

'That filthy cat of yours has dug up my onions AGAIN!' he'd hollered one morning, brandishing his spade in anger.

‘She’s only doing what comes naturally, you old goat,’ she’d retorted. ‘Isn’t it supposed to be good for your soil, anyway?’

When her darling Polly had gone unexpectedly AWOL, Irene had immediately assumed foul play, pointed the finger of blame in Cliff’s direction and reignited their feud.

‘D’you want to see what Polly looks like?’ asked Irene, sliding a small, silver picture frame across her coffee table. Staring out from the photo was a well-fed, round-faced ginger and black cat with fierce lime-green eyes.

‘Gosh, that looks like a cat who can take care of herself,’ I said.

‘Yes, she gives as good as she gets,’ grinned Irene, ‘but she’s got a soft nature, too, and is ever so friendly. She often sits on my front wall, miaowing at the kids as they walk to school.’

As she pictured Polly in her mind, the lady’s smile faded and she stared blankly at the floor. I noted how frail and vulnerable she looked and felt a pang of guilt as I recalled my earlier conversation with my desk sergeant. To Irene, this was no trivial matter.

‘I’m ever so concerned about her, Officer,’ she said, looking up at me forlornly.

‘Don’t worry,’ I replied. ‘I’m sure you’ll find her. But I need you to tell me why you think your neighbour might be responsible.’

This question perked her up a bit and she recounted an incident that had taken place earlier that week. She and Cliff had embarked upon another cross-fence ding-dong. She’d objected to his liberal dosage of slug pellets – ‘You’re



trying to poison my Polly,' she'd complained – and the situation had become so volatile that she'd called the police.

I polished off my second banana muffin – some days I'd go a whole eight-hour shift without a break, so snacks were always welcome – before agreeing to pay her nemesis a visit. I needed to obtain his side of the story.

Cliff clearly hadn't expected to find a police officer on his doorstep. His face turned a deep shade of puce when I explained the reason for my call and he pulled out a handkerchief to dab the globules of sweat off his forehead.

Indoors, he chronicled a conflicting story, claiming that Irene was 'over-bloody-reacting' and that, while he was far from impressed with Polly's toilet habits, he'd threatened neither pet nor owner.

'The woman is obsessed with her bloomin' cat, Officer,' he said. 'Only the other day she accused me of trying to poison it, but all I was doing was sprinkling a few slug pellets.'

Then, with some gentle cajoling, he allowed me to search his back garden, more than half of which was taken up with his cherished vegetable patch. I took the opportunity to thoroughly explore Cliff's garage, greenhouse and potting shed, while Farnham's answer to Alan Titchmarsh raved about his prize-winning artichokes. Disappointingly, the only living things I encountered were beetles, spiders and woodlice.

His cheeks reddened again, however, when I requested access to his basement, the door to which backed directly on to the garden.

‘Have you got a legal right to search?’ he blustered.

‘No, I haven’t,’ I replied, ‘but if I arrested you on suspicion of cat theft, I’d have the power to search anywhere I wanted. So can I have a quick look, please?’

‘Very well,’ he sighed, realizing that this rookie PC wasn’t going to be deterred. ‘Be my guest.’

I unbolted the cellar door and – *hey presto!* – out of the darkness padded an angry-looking, dirt-encrusted tortoiseshell cat. It sprang over a tray of cat litter, shot out of the door and scaled the fence before, no doubt, jumping into the arms of its ecstatic owner.

I stared at the crafty cat-napper, who scratched his head and shuffled from one foot to the other.

‘Care to explain, Cliff?’

‘It piddled on my parsnips, Officer,’ he said. ‘It was the final straw, and that cat needed to be taught a lesson.’

The old man went on to explain that he’d only intended to keep Polly in the basement for a couple of days and was at pains to tell me that he’d provided her with ample food and water.

‘I’m not going to get into any trouble, am I?’ he asked anxiously.

‘On this occasion, probably not,’ I replied, ‘but I do think you could have handled that better, Cliff. I’ll do my best to smooth things over with Irene, but if the station receives one more call from her – just one – I’ll be knocking on your door again, mark my words.’

‘I understand,’ he mumbled. ‘There’ll be no repeat, I promise.’

I unlatched the garden gate and bade him farewell.

Within moments, I heard a voice bellowing down the drive after me.

‘Just wondering, Officer . . . would you and your colleagues like a box of King Edwards?’ shouted Cliff. ‘Fresh from the ground this morning.’

‘Thanks for the offer,’ I said, ‘but perhaps your neighbour might appreciate them instead. Call it a peace offering . . .’

Within just three years I’d climbed to the rank of sergeant and, as my responsibilities increased, I was able to assign my own staff to specific cases and incidents. This, I was pleased to discover, involved close liaison with the force’s police-dog section. Much of the time, I enlisted the help of German shepherds, probably the most traditional and recognizable of all police dogs. These versatile and resilient ‘general purpose’ canines were trained to operate under a variety of conditions, whether it was tracking and confining suspects (their intimidating bark often did the trick), controlling large crowds or searching for missing persons. Some of the smaller, more agile German shepherds would be deployed in other specialist roles, too: cadaver search dogs were trained to detect the odour of decomposing bodies, for example, and firearms dogs were trained to find hidden guns and ammunition.

One of my favourite police canines was a long-haired hulk of a dog nicknamed Wolf who’d built up an excellent reputation during his five years’ service. Incredibly strong and ridiculously powerful, he exuded an air of menace that could terrify the toughest of reprobates.

‘Never get in between Wolf and his quarry,’ a fellow sergeant had once warned me, ‘because he’ll gladly take a chunk out of your backside. His bite’s worse than his bark, and that’s saying something.’

One Friday night in 1992 he’d helped me to apprehend a group of paratroopers who’d made the short trip from Aldershot to Farnham for a stag night. Following a beery pub crawl, they’d had an altercation with a fast-food-van owner – a dispute about the quality of his burgers, apparently – which had resulted in the tanked-up squaddies upending the vehicle with the poor guy still inside. They had then fled into the darkness, hooting with laughter at this rather cruel and cowardly deed. A witness to the incident had called 999, and I’d arrived first on the scene, along with Wolf and his handler, Barry.

The van owner – a small, squat Greek Cypriot – had somehow managed to crawl out of the hatch. He emerged, dazed and confused, his curly hair matted with boiled onions and his white coat covered in Jackson Pollock-style sauce splats. A convoy of soft-drinks cans rolled down the high street, most of which were gleefully scooped up and cracked open by passers-by.

Some onlookers might well have found this whole sight a tad comical, but I was in no mood for laughing. To me, this was an extremely serious matter. Had this chap failed to dodge an airborne chip pan, he could well have suffered horrific, life-changing burns to his body. His thuggish tormentors needed to be caught, and quickly.

‘They try to kill me,’ he murmured, clearly shocked and shaken, as I radioed for an ambulance. ‘Those soldiers, they try to *kill* me.’

‘Which direction did they go in, sir?’ I asked, prompting him to wearily point towards nearby West Street. Wolf, Barry and I went in hot pursuit, arriving just in time to see half a dozen males, all with similar lean physiques and short buzz cuts, athletically scrambling over a twelve-foot-high brick wall. No doubt they’d practised this on the army’s assault course but, unfortunately for them, this time they found themselves landing in an enclosed courtyard. It was a case of nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

‘POLICE!’ I yelled as we approached the wall. ‘You lot are in serious trouble. Do yourselves a favour and give yourselves up.’

I heard some feverish whispering from the other side, coupled with a few drunken snorts and sniggers.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘You need to get back over this wall and hand yourselves in immediately, otherwise I’ll be putting a police dog over.’

Wolf reared up and growled at the mere mention of ‘dog’, causing Barry to tug hard on his leash in order to restrain this giant canine.

Suddenly, one of the squaddies hurled a brick over the wall, which whizzed within inches of my left ear before thudding on to the pavement. It was high time to play my trump card. I gave Barry a solemn nod and, as I so often did on these occasions, stood back and studied the interaction between dog and handler. Wolf’s leash was loosened

and he was given a specific signal which prompted him to bark madly.

‘Jump up,’ came the next command and, as Wolf nimbly scabbled up the wall, Barry gave his rear end a shove so that he could drop down into the courtyard.

What followed was a blood-curdling, wince-inducing cacophony of human shrieks and canine snarls as Wolf terrorized the suspects in his own inimitable fashion. One by one, the petrified soldiers – most sporting ripped clothing and bite marks – tumbled over the wall and straight into the handcuffs of the back-up officers who’d arrived on scene. Their stag night had come to an abrupt and sobering end, thankfully, and a stay in police custody beckoned. More pertinently, the hapless van owner was likely to see some form of justice down the line. All in a night’s work, as the saying goes.

As the police vehicle sped off, Barry instructed Wolf to jump back over the wall to rejoin us, which he did with his customary compliance. His reward was a ten-minute play session in a car park with a thick rubber Frisbee, and I couldn’t help but smile as I watched him effortlessly switch from a slavering, teeth-baring brute to a playful, doe-eyed pooch.

Once he’d finished his well-earned run-around, I gave this incredible dog a hefty pat on his rump. This highly trained animal had done his job and had helped us to collar and confine these idiots.

‘No way could we have done that without you, buddy,’ I said, smiling. ‘No way.’

Working with the peerless Wolf was both an honour