

Chapter 1

Cheese again.

It was always cheese.

Didn't the Swiss have anything else to put on their sandwiches?

Sheldon McGlone looked at his lunch and shook his head with the air of someone well used to dealing with life's disappointments.

It wasn't that Sheldon really had anything against cheese, or dairy products, or the Swiss for that matter. He'd often enjoyed a tasty cheese sandwich back in Australia. But lately it seemed that all he'd been getting on his school sandwiches was Swiss cheese, chock full of the completely pointless holes that they were so proud of.

Sheldon couldn't see the point of holes in cheese, or any other food, with the possible exception of the bubbles in fizzy drinks, or the bit in the middle of a doughnut. Why, he wondered, would anyone go to the

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trouble of making cheese when a large chunk of the finished article was going to be thin air?

What made things worse was that this sandwich had been made by his mother! Not a Swiss person, but a fellow true-blue Aussie. True, Sheldon's mother, the former Mrs. Mary McGlone, having married a Swiss person, was now technically half-Swiss, which made Sheldon McGlone about one-quarter Swiss, or five-sixteenths, or something like that (maths not being Sheldon's strong point). He supposed he'd get used to it eventually, in the same way he was getting used to eating fondue and watching Swiss television.

Sheldon shrugged and took a bite of his sandwich. Lunchtime was lunchtime, after all, and, as cheese sandwiches went, this one wasn't too bad. Looking up (with a mouthful of bread and cheese) at the ridiculously beautiful mountains, he had to admit that, from this angle, Switzerland wasn't half bad, either.

It was another effortlessly sensational Alpine day, one of an odd series that had been turning up again and again recently, despite it being officially winter. Probably global warming, thought Sheldon. Most things were, these days. Whatever it was, it felt pretty good. The blue sky stretched itself across the snow-capped mountains and Sheldon snorted up another lungful of air crisper than a jumbo bag of extra-crispy, spearmint-flavored crisps. The air was very different from the slow-moving, chunky sort of air he'd left behind in Farrago Bay. Not that the Aussie air was polluted—it was simply that this Alpine stuff felt like it had been freshly made every morning just for him. It

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was so good that, from time to time, Sheldon even felt the urge to have a bit of a yodel. There was something about the echoing valleys between the Alps and the springy, flower-strewn meadows that lent itself to yodeling. Of course, Sheldon knew he'd never give in to the temptation.

Beside Sheldon at the school lunch table, his step-brother, best friend, and self-styled World's Greatest Detective, Theophilus Nero Hercule Sherlock Wimsey Father Brown Marlowe Spade Christie Edgar Allen Brain, adjusted his battered spectacles, lifted the corner of his identical sandwich with the end of his unlit pipe, and peered suspiciously inside.

"Remarkable," he said.

"I know!" said Sheldon, shaking his head from side to side. "Swiss cheese. Again!"

"Ah," said The Brain. "That wasn't quite what . . . never mind."

The Brain was always doing things like that. Just when you thought you knew what he was thinking, he'd surprise you by revealing that he was, in fact, thinking about something entirely different. Sheldon looked at The Brain—almost everyone called him that—and not for the first time since they'd arrived in Switzerland, Sheldon thought about what a strange, complicated journey it had been to end up here, related to this rather odd-looking individual.

The first thing you noticed about The Brain was the size of his head. It wasn't so big that it made people form a baying mob armed with pitchforks and flaming torches intent on stringing him up from the nearest

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tower, but it was definitely on the sizeable side. And anyone who knew The Brain knew that the reason he needed a head that size, was that a normal-sized head simply would not have been large enough to contain the astonishing amount of fizzing little grey cells that were stuffed in there.

Perched on top of The Brain's head was a thatch of spiky black hair cut with no style. It had no style because The Brain, quite frankly, usually had more important things to think about than hair care. Below his hair, in the place you'd expect to find it, was The Brain's face. Thick-rimmed glasses that enlarged his piercingly intelligent eyes sat on a small nose. When required, he could turn those eyes on someone in a way that made them feel like an insignificant bug. Sheldon had been on the receiving end more than a few times. The Brain wasn't tall but could not be described as short. He was skinny, with a wiry frame that Sheldon's mother (The Brain's new stepmother) was doing her best to pad out.

"There's nothing of you," she'd say, slopping out another gigantic plateful of grey meat and soggy potatoes. "You need some flesh on those bones or you'll fade away!"

The Brain would thank her politely, pretend to eat, and never gain an ounce. Whether this was due to Mrs. McGlone-Schnurrbart's staggeringly revolting cooking, or to The Brain's digestive system, was hard to tell.

Sheldon had almost finished his sandwich.

"You know, *if* this was a book, someone would pop up and explain exactly how we got here."

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“Hmm?” said The Brain absentmindedly. His attention still seemed to be on the contents of the Swiss cheese sandwich.

“I said, if this was a book, someone would tell everyone about us solving the case back in Farrago Bay . . .”

“Yes, old boy,” said The Brain, “if this was a book, that would almost certainly be the case, but I’m afraid real life’s not like that. Fascinating as it is, the story of how we thwarted the evil machinations of the evil Dr. Dirk Unsinn will have to remain our secret. No one will ‘pop up,’ as you say.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Sheldon.

Sheldon concentrated on his sandwich, then realized that The Brain was speaking again. “What? Hmm?” said Sheldon.

“The cheese sandwiches, dear boy.”

“What about the cheese sandwiches?”

Was The Brain still droning on about those cheese sandwiches? Sometimes he was like a dog with a bone.

“Holes,” said The Brain. “That’s what about them.”

Sheldon shrugged. “So what?” he said. “Swiss cheese is full of holes. That’s the whole point of Swiss cheese. Hey? Did you see what I did there? You said ‘holes’ and I said ‘whole’—”

“Yes, very good, Sheldon. Most amusing.”

“Don’t sulk,” said Sheldon. “What were you saying about the holes?”

“They’ve gone,” said The Brain.

“Gone? What do you mean ‘gone’? A hole isn’t really there in the first place, is it? How can it go?”

“Observe,” said The Brain, opening his sandwich

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and thrusting it under Sheldon's nose. "My sandwich has cheese, as you can see. Plenty of cheese, in fact. A positive abundance of the stuff. Rather more than I prefer, to be perfectly honest. But as must be plain, there is a complete absence of holes. An absence of absences, you might say. Of my holes there is no sign. *Rien de holes. Keine Bohrungen.*"

The Brain was right.

The holes had completely disappeared.

Still, they *were* just holes. Sheldon found he couldn't work up very much excitement about their disappearance.

"Holes, shmoles, what does it matter? Probably just a dud batch of cheese Mum used or something. Who cares?"

The Brain paused. "You do not think it is of interest, this lack of holes? In my humble opinion, this is a most singular occurrence and one that I am determined to investigate until I am satisfied with the outcome. As far as this being a 'dud' batch, I can assure you of this: the cheese from which this particular sandwich has been made was placed in the refrigerator yesterday evening. I observed that it had, at that time, a full complement of holes. That, dear boy, is why the current hole-free situation is so deucedly odd."

Sheldon looked at his own sandwich with more interest. If what The Brain said was true, then it *was* a bit odd that the holes had somehow disappeared overnight. He peeled back the top layer of bread and checked his own sandwich.

No holes.

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“Couldn’t it just be a coincidence?” said Sheldon. “Maybe Mum switched cheeses last night after we went to bed?”

The Brain nodded. Sheldon could tell it was the sort of nod that, when translated, meant “I’m nodding, but not because I agree with you, but to suggest that you are, in fact, an idiot.”

Sheldon gave up. Trying to figure out what The Brain was talking about often made his head hurt. He picked up his can of Floop, the repulsive store-brand version of Coke that his mother insisted on buying, and took a slurp.

“Typical,” he said, looking at the can in disgust. “Flat as a pancake.”

The Brain looked up, his eyes bright.

“Flat you say? May I?”

Sheldon reluctantly handed him the Floop. Flat or not, it was still the only one he had.

The Brain took a pull on the can and screwed up his face.

“A truly nauseating concoction. But you are quite correct, it is quite devoid of carbonation.”

Sheldon looked blank.

“No bubbles,” explained The Brain. “Interesting.”

Sheldon grabbed back the can and drained it in one greedy gulp.

“Yeah,” he said, burping. “Very interesting. You got any more Floop? One with bubbles?”

The Brain poured steaming Earl Grey tea from a silver thermos flask into the monogrammed, fine bone-china teacup he brought to school every day.

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“Good grief, no,” he said, stirring the tea with a gleaming silver teaspoon. “One has one’s standards, old boy.”

He sipped his tea thoughtfully, picked up his sandwich once again and inspected it closely.

Sheldon shook his head sadly. The Brain was a certified genius (he had the certificate on his bedroom wall to prove it), but sometimes Sheldon had to wonder if his stepbrother was, perhaps, a few sandwiches short of the full picnic. Even if they were Swiss cheese sandwiches.

Holes or no holes, bubbles or no bubbles, there seemed to be little chance of solving the puzzle this lunchtime. Once that bell sounded for the afternoon, class work started immediately. This was Switzerland after all.

Sheldon grabbed The Brain’s sandwich.

“If you’re not going to eat that, do you mind if I have it? Thanks.” Without waiting for a reply, he crammed it into his mouth.

“Stop!” yelled The Brain. “You’re eating the evidence!”

Too late. The bell sounded and Switzerland sprang back into action.