

OLD LIKE US

*Fowl Play
at
Harvest Moon*

ROD TRENT



Welcome, dear reader.

It is with immense joy and gratitude that I welcome you to this latest installment in the *Old Like Us* series – a heartfelt celebration of the first appearances of our beloved crew from the Starlight Eldercare Facility. One year ago, Eleanor, George, Mabel, and Harold burst onto the scene with their inaugural adventure in a charming Thanksgiving tale called **Old Like Us: The Poltergeist Prank**, capturing hearts with their wit, wisdom, and unbreakable spirit. It feels only fitting, then, to mark this anniversary with another Thanksgiving story, weaving new threads into the tapestry of their lives while honoring the holiday that started it all.

What began as a simple exploration of friendship and mischief in the golden years has blossomed into something truly extraordinary. The series has gained popularity at a pace I could scarcely have imagined, and for that, I extend my deepest thanks to you, the devoted readers. Your enthusiasm, your thoughtful feedback, and your shared stories have fueled this journey, inspiring me to delve deeper into the world of these remarkable characters.

Over the past year, the legend of the Silver Sleuths – our intrepid quartet of elders turned detectives – has grown in ways that continue to astonish me. Their rich depths, layered histories, and relatable quirks have sparked a fandom I never anticipated, one that celebrates not just their escapades but the timeless truths they embody:

that age is no barrier to adventure, laughter, or love.

As we embark on this new chapter, I invite you to join Eleanor, George, Mabel, and Harold once more. May their tales remind us all that the best stories are those lived with courage, camaraderie, and a touch of holiday magic.

And, oh...they'll be back. Soon. Expect a couple more holiday themed stories for 2025.

I began my career writing fiction, a passion that has never dimmed even as I ventured into the world of technology content to pay the bills and drive my career forward. The act of creation is not just a job; it is a therapeutic escape, a return to the roots of my creativity, and I am thrilled to be sharing this passion with you. In a very real way, this book is just for me. Selfish, huh? But for those that know me, I share everything, so, I hope you both excuse and enjoy my attempted intrusion into your world.

- Rod

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Chapter 1

Pumpkins and Suspicions

There was something about the scent of bus seats that always reminded George Alexander Reynolds of school trips and unsolved mysteries, two things he thought he'd left behind when he traded in his badge for a cane. Today, though, the tang of vinyl, the faint musk of hand sanitizer, and the sweet, slightly artificial perfume of butterscotch hard candies were the unmistakable markers of another Starlight Eldercare adventure. The annual Thanksgiving outing to Harvest Moon Pumpkin Farm was, by consensus, the social event of the season.

George sat at the front, as was his habit, facing forward with the unyielding vigilance of a man who still half-expected something to go wrong. To his left, Eleanor—her hair a meticulously coiffed cloud—clutched her purse like it contained state secrets. Across the aisle, Mabel and Harold shared a bench and a box of cookies, the latter already half-crumbled in Mabel's lap. Harold's knees, knobby and inconspicuous beneath tan corduroy, bounced in rhythm with every pothole.

The bus jostled and hummed, carrying its cargo of Starlight's most tenacious residents through a corridor of oaks and maples gone mad with color. Leaves tumbled in their wake, gold and rust and scarlet, and every time the bus slowed, Mabel sighed and declared, "It's like the trees are putting on a fashion show for us." This was her third time making this observation, and each time she said it, she seemed no less enchanted.

"You'd think they'd have paved this stretch by now," Harold said, peering over his glasses at the narrow country road. "Is it too much to ask for a little infrastructure?"

George grunted, half amusement, half agreement. "Wouldn't be a proper field trip if you didn't fear for your vertebrae," he said, checking his watch for the third time since they left Starlight. "We're making good time, at least."

Eleanor turned, her sharp eyes narrowing. "Why are you always so anxious about the clock? It's not as if the pumpkins are going anywhere."

"Not the pumpkins," George said. "The schedule. If we're late, we lose our slot for the hayride. And then it's chaos." He said it with the grim conviction of a man who'd seen what happened when septuagenarians were denied their turn at a hay bale.

Mabel nibbled at a cookie, crumbs dusting her brightly patterned scarf. "Last year, Mr. Becket nearly started a riot when he missed the cider tasting," she reminisced. "I thought he was going to wrestle Mr. Thompson to the ground."

Harold snorted. "He'd have lost. Tom lifts bags of feed all day. Becket can barely lift his own lunch tray."

They all laughed, even Eleanor, though she quickly stifled it. "I do wish Mr. Thompson wouldn't go out of his way to antagonize the residents," she said primly. "Last month he hid my umbrella in the compost heap."

Harold grinned. "It's not personal. He hides everyone's umbrella. He believes they're bad luck." He craned his neck toward the window. "Is that a drone over the cornfield?"

George followed his gaze. Sure enough, a glint of movement above the shorn stalks—a toy-sized quadcopter hovering, then darting out of sight. "Could be pest control," he said. "Or maybe Thompson's upgraded from scarecrows."

Eleanor looked scandalized. "Whatever happened to decency and privacy?"

"They're overrated," Mabel said, and winked at Harold, who looked momentarily flustered.

The road took a sharp curve, and the bus leaned with it, wheels crunching over loose gravel. Ahead, the pumpkin farm came into view: acres of orange globes dotting the fields, a weathered red barn, and – Mabel clapped her hands at the sight – a gaudy inflatable turkey, wobbling in the breeze and announcing the "Harvest Moon Thanksgiving Festival" in letters tall as toddlers.

The bus slowed to a crawl, then stopped beside a chalkboard sign promising hayrides, corn mazes, and "Famous Pumpkin Pie – ALL DAY!" The driver, a man whose name George had never learned but who always wore the same Starlight windbreaker, stood and turned to address his passengers.

"Alright, folks," he said, projecting his voice to the echoey rear of the bus. "You've got two hours before we head back. Please remember your group number, and don't wander past the chicken coops. They've got a mean rooster this year."

"Better than last year's mean tour guide," someone muttered from the back.

Eleanor straightened her cardigan. "Are we ready?" She looked at George, who nodded, then to Mabel and Harold.

Harold produced a tiny notepad from his breast pocket. "I have questions prepared for Mr. Thompson," he announced. "About the pumpkin varieties."

Mabel slipped an arm through Eleanor's. "I want to try the corn maze this time."

George pushed himself upright, leaning on his cane, and watched as the other residents gathered their scarves, hats, and walking sticks. The excitement was palpable – a fizz of

anticipation that reminded him of the first five minutes before a big case broke open. Only instead of clues and suspects, there were cinnamon doughnuts and apple cider.

The bus doors hissed open, and cold air swept in, tinged with the scent of wood smoke and the earthy promise of pumpkin. George led the way down the steps, the rest trailing after him in a parade of sensible shoes and knitted hats.

The farmyard was alive with noise and motion. Children shrieked in delight near the petting zoo, parents negotiated pumpkin sizes with the solemnity of diplomats, and somewhere behind the barn a donkey brayed in protest. A young woman in an orange apron greeted them at the entrance, her cheeks rosy from the cold.

"Welcome to Harvest Moon!" she chirped. "You must be the Starlight group. We've got hot cider by the barn and the pie-eating contest starts in fifteen minutes."

Eleanor sniffed the air with approval. "It smells better than last year."

"Fewer goats," Harold said. "That helps."

Mabel spun in a slow circle, taking in the decorations. Cornstalks tied in bunches, straw bales stacked in festive pyramids, gourds of improbable shapes and sizes lining every fence rail. "I could live here," she sighed. "If only for the autumn."

George was about to point out the impracticality of farm life for most octogenarians, but Mabel's expression stopped him. There was something in the way she watched the world – like she was gathering moments for a story only she could tell.

He checked his watch again, out of habit more than necessity, and relaxed for the first time all morning. For now, the

mysteries were simple: Which pumpkin would win the blue ribbon? Who would finish the corn maze first? And how many slices of pie could Harold consume before being cut off?

He intended to find out.

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Mr. Thompson was not a man given to fuss. For as long as the Starlight regulars had known him, he'd maintained a reputation for stoic cheerfulness, the kind that made even bad weather feel like a minor inconvenience. So when he appeared at the farm's entrance with his cap crushed in his hands, lips pressed to a thin line, it was Mabel who first sensed something amiss.

"There he is," she said, nudging Eleanor and Harold as they approached the hay-bale archway. "Doesn't he look a bit...off?"

George took in the scene with a detective's eye: the telltale lines of fatigue under Mr. Thompson's eyes, the pallor that didn't suit a man who worked outdoors, the nervous twitch in his fingers. He stood at the threshold, half-blocking the path, his usual greeting — an expansive wave and a corny farm pun — conspicuously absent.

"Welcome, friends," Mr. Thompson managed. His voice wobbled, then steadied. "Glad you could make it."

George offered a hand, which the groundskeeper shook with a firmness just shy of convincing. "Everything alright, Tom?"

"Of course, of course." Thompson's smile appeared like a lightbulb at low voltage. "You know how it is, big event, a thousand things to do, never enough hands."

Harold was already scanning the horizon, as if expecting the chaos to present itself in tangible form. "Looks like you've pulled it off, as always," he said. "The place is beautiful."

And it was: banners of red and yellow draped the barn, scarecrows in straw hats lined the walkways, and jack-o-lanterns grinned from every available perch. The scent of spiced cider mixed with the sharper tang of fresh hay, and the laughter of families carried across the patchy grass.

But none of it seemed to touch Mr. Thompson, who lingered at the margin of the party as if allergic to his own celebration.

Eleanor, who could outlast a bad mood longer than most, smiled at him. "You should be proud. It's the talk of the bus."

He tried to chuckle, but it caught somewhere in his chest. "Thank you. Means a lot, coming from you all." He glanced at the rest of the group, then lowered his voice. "Can I borrow you for a minute, George?"

George nodded and fell into step beside the groundskeeper, cane tapping in time with Thompson's shuffled pace. They rounded the corner of the barn, out of sight and earshot of the festivities. Thompson stopped, pinched the bridge of his nose, and exhaled a shudder.

"Something's wrong," he said.

George waited.

"It's the pumpkins," Thompson continued. "And the turkeys. They're being...well, someone's been at them."

"Sabotage?" George asked, keeping his tone light.

Thompson looked up, startled by the word, but nodded. "First it was just a few ruined gourds in the patch. Thought it was kids, maybe raccoons. But last night – half a dozen of my best, just smashed to bits. And then I go to the turkey enclosure this morning, and two birds are missing. No sign, no feathers, nothing."

George's mind ticked through the possibilities: prank, theft, maybe a competitor with more malice than sense. But the worry in Thompson's voice didn't fit any of those.

"Have you called anyone?" George asked. "The police?"

Thompson shook his head. "Wouldn't know what to tell them. Besides, it's Thanksgiving week. They'd laugh me off the phone."

George made a mental note. "You said your best pumpkins were targeted?"

"Every one marked for the competition," Thompson confirmed. "The heritage turkeys, too — ones we'd been raising all year for a farm-to-table contract. If we lose the rest, the farm doesn't survive another season."

George considered this. "Have you noticed anyone new around? Or anyone acting strange?"

Thompson hesitated, then shook his head. "Only the usual staff and volunteers. The senior groups from town. Folks coming to buy pies." He caught himself, embarrassed. "I know it sounds crazy, but —"

George put a hand on the man's shoulder, an anchor against the rising tide of panic. "It doesn't," he said gently. "Let's keep our eyes open, alright? Maybe it's nothing. Or maybe someone's got it out for your blue ribbons."

Thompson exhaled again, this time with a trace of relief. "Thank you," he said. "If anyone can get to the bottom of it, it's you. I just — didn't want to ruin the day."

"Would take more than a few missing birds to ruin our day," George said, then smiled. "Though I hear Harold was looking forward to interrogating you about pumpkin genetics."

Thompson managed a laugh, then straightened his cap and led them back to the main path, where the others waited. The tension in his shoulders had eased, but only by a notch.

When they rejoined the group, Mabel and Eleanor were sampling apple fritters from a tray, their faces sticky with cinnamon sugar. Harold had found a stack of glossy brochures and was quizzing a nearby staff member about “strategic irrigation.” They broke off when George returned, each assessing Mr. Thompson with a new understanding.

“Is everything alright?” Mabel asked, her voice soft.

Thompson looked at them, a rare vulnerability in his eyes. “We’re fine. Just some...unusual problems with the harvest.”

Eleanor gave him a look that suggested she knew better, but she let it pass.

Harold adjusted his glasses, sharp as ever. “If you need any help, you know where to find us.”

Mr. Thompson smiled, grateful and a little sheepish. “Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

The air had shifted. The day’s brightness seemed tempered now, the farm’s cheery trimmings a little less convincing. But as the seniors exchanged glances – Eleanor’s brow furrowed, Harold already plotting, Mabel nodding in silent resolve – George knew they would not let the matter rest.

Not when a friend’s future was at stake.

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“Alright, troops,” George announced as they reached the main thoroughfare, “let’s see if we can’t enjoy the festivities before we’re drafted into active duty.”

The path to the pumpkin patch wound through a gauntlet of games, crafts, and sampling stations, each one more determined than the last to funnel visitors toward the prize attraction. Hayrides trundled past, their passengers waving with mittened hands. Children raced through a miniature maze made of corn stalks, their laughter as sharp as the air. Every few yards, a scarecrow leered from its post, each one clad in thrift-store finery that would have embarrassed even the least fashionable resident of Starlight.

Mabel, her scarf now liberally dusted with powdered sugar, marched with purpose toward the nearest patch. "I want the biggest pumpkin they've got," she declared. "I'm going to make a pie so large they'll have to measure it with a yardstick."

Eleanor arched an eyebrow. "And who's going to carry that monstrosity back to the bus?"

Mabel's solution was to point at George, who grumbled theatrically, but accepted his fate with the resignation of a man who had once hauled evidence lockers for a living.

Harold trailed behind, making careful notes on the pumpkin varieties. "See here," he told anyone within earshot, "they're using both Atlantic Giants and traditional Connecticut Fields. That's unusual. Most farms stick to one or the other." He reached down and thumped a pale green specimen with the gravity of a master sommelier. "You can tell by the density."

"Is that how you pick your pumpkins?" Eleanor asked, lips twitching with amusement.

Harold adjusted his glasses, unoffended. "It's all about the water content. Makes for a better pie."

They wandered the rows, the ground uneven with ridges and divots left by countless feet and the occasional wayward gourd.

Mabel bent down, considering each candidate as though adopting a puppy. Her commentary was relentless:

“Too lumpy.”

“Too squat.”

“This one looks like it’s seen things.”

At last, she found her quarry: a pumpkin of such outrageous proportions it took both arms to hoist it, and even then it wobbled dangerously. “Help,” she squeaked, and George was there, steadying the behemoth while Mabel giggled behind it.

“You’re going to throw out your back,” he warned, but he set the pumpkin upright for her, dusting off his hands with mock ceremony.

Eleanor, meanwhile, hung at the edge of the patch, eyes never resting in one place for long. She watched the hayrides, the movement of the staff, the brief flurry of activity near the petting zoo. When a pair of geese honked overhead, she tracked them until they were just flecks against the sky.

“Everything alright?” Harold asked, catching her off guard.

She blinked. “Just keeping an eye out,” she replied. “Old habits.”

“Something specific, or just general vigilance?” he pressed, lowering his voice.

Eleanor hesitated, as if debating how much to share. “The farmhand by the north fence—he’s been back and forth three times in five minutes. Never actually does anything, just circles and stares.”

Harold looked, but the man had already vanished behind a tangle of sunflowers. "Maybe he's on break," Harold offered, not quite believing it.

"Maybe," Eleanor agreed, but the note of doubt lingered.

They regrouped at a stand where a woman ladled hot cider into Styrofoam cups. The drink was sweet and tart, warmed with cinnamon and nutmeg, and Mabel declared it "almost as good as mine." They found a table made of old barrels and settled in, their breath rising in clouds. Around them, the festival hummed: games of ring toss, couples posing for photos, the ever-present background music of a local folk band.

Mabel sipped her cider with satisfaction. "You know, even with the turkey shortage, this might be my favorite Thanksgiving yet."

George raised his cup in salute. "Here's to traditions," he said, and the others clinked their cups to his.

For a few moments, the mystery of the missing pumpkins and turkeys faded into the background. There was comfort in the rhythm of the day, the rituals of food and company, the simple pleasure of not being needed for anything more than choosing the next snack.

But Eleanor's eyes kept drifting toward the edge of the patch, where a swath of earth was cordoned off with flimsy yellow tape. She watched as children approached, then veered away, drawn by the more cheerful attractions nearby. No one seemed to mind the ruined gourds, the evidence of a midnight rampage.

When the others began debating the merits of the pie contest, Eleanor slipped away. She moved quietly, sidestepping a group of teenagers posing for a selfie, and skirted the edge of the cordoned patch.

The destruction was worse up close: pumpkin flesh splattered across the soil, seeds scattered like confetti, and stems snapped as though by something more deliberate than a clumsy foot. Eleanor crouched, fingers hovering just above the torn vines, and frowned.

She looked up, scanning the horizon. No sign of the wandering farmhand, but now she noticed something else: a set of tracks, deep and wide, pressed into the mud. Not footprints, but something larger – cart wheels, maybe, or a small vehicle. She followed them with her eyes, tracing their path from the wreckage to the edge of the property, where the tracks vanished behind a stack of hay bales.

Eleanor rose, dusted off her knees, and glanced back at the picnic tables. The others were still arguing about whether canned whipped cream was an abomination. She smiled, then turned and headed toward the hay bales.

There was still a mystery to solve, after all.

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Eleanor's shoes were not designed for mud. She picked her way across the churned ground with the delicacy of someone crossing a minefield, but there was no avoiding the slick, cold ooze that oozed over the tops of her sneakers. She focused instead on the tire tracks, tracing their arc around the perimeter of the destroyed patch.

They were deep – almost an inch in some places – and unnaturally wide, far larger than any wheelbarrow or garden cart she'd ever seen. The edges of the tracks were sharp, the lines clean. Whatever had made them, it was heavy, with tires not quite like the battered farm truck parked near the barn.

Eleanor knelt, balancing on the balls of her feet, and pressed a finger against the track's wall. The soil was still damp, the

impression fresh. She looked up, scanning the area for matching prints, and saw a second set running parallel to the first. They veered off, cutting between two rows of splintered pumpkins, then disappeared behind the hay bales where she'd lost sight of the wandering farmhand.

She heard footsteps behind her and tensed, but it was only George, cane in hand, making his way across the patch. He stopped a few feet away, eyeing her with a mixture of approval and concern.

"Lose something?" he asked.

"Found something," Eleanor replied. She gestured to the tracks. "Look at the size of these."

George hunkered down, careful to keep his slacks out of the muck. He examined the tracks, then nodded. "Not a standard farm vehicle. See how clean the tread is? Looks new. And the distance between the wheels—at least five feet. That's industrial."

Eleanor smiled. "I knew you'd notice."

He shrugged, but the compliment pleased him. "Ever see anything like it?"

"Maybe a delivery truck, but not one that belongs here."

Eleanor stood, brushing her hands against her jacket. "And the tracks go right up to where the pumpkins were destroyed. No detours, no hesitation. It's like they knew exactly what they wanted to smash."

George scanned the horizon. "You said there was a staffer hanging around out here?"

Eleanor nodded. "Blond hair, red vest. I thought he was just slacking off, but now I wonder."

Before George could reply, Mabel and Harold appeared at the edge of the patch, Mabel flapping her arms for balance while Harold picked a careful path behind her.

"Are you two looking for buried treasure?" Mabel called out.

"Just clues," Eleanor replied. "Come take a look."

They gathered around the tracks, forming a semi-circle. Harold immediately began measuring with his shoe, then produced a tiny tape measure from his jacket. He stretched it across the track, muttering numbers under his breath.

Mabel squatted, pointed at a heap of orange mush. "Why would anyone do this to a pumpkin? It's like vandalism, but targeted."

George spoke up. "The turkeys, too. Tom thinks someone's stealing them. And now this."

Mabel shook her head, her expression shifting from outrage to concern. "That poor man. No wonder he looked like he'd swallowed a lemon."

Eleanor gestured toward the hay bales. "The tracks lead back there. I think we should check it out before the trail goes cold."

Harold produced his notebook, flipped to a blank page, and began sketching the tracks. "We should document everything," he said, "in case we need to prove this isn't just a prank."

George watched Harold work, then glanced at Mabel and Eleanor. "We're not going to let this go, are we?"

Mabel snorted. "Are you kidding? This is the most excitement I've had since the great jellied salad incident of '19."

Eleanor led the way toward the hay bales, the others in tow. The tracks became harder to follow as they reached drier ground, but she kept her eyes sharp. At the far side, they found a narrow

strip of disturbed earth, as if something heavy had been rolled through and lifted into a vehicle.

“Look here,” Harold said, pointing to a patch of feathers embedded in the mud. “That’s not from the petting zoo birds.”

Mabel crouched, inspecting the feathers with a practiced hand. “These are from the heritage turkeys. See the iridescent tips?” She looked up, face grim. “Someone’s poaching.”

Eleanor nodded, not surprised. “It’s not random. Whoever did this came prepared, knew exactly what to take and how to cover their tracks.”

George pursed his lips. “We should keep an eye out for that red-vested staffer. If he’s involved, he might make another move.”

They stood for a moment in the cold wind, the scent of crushed pumpkin thick around them. The laughter and music from the festival seemed distant now, muffled by the urgency of their discovery.

Harold snapped his notebook shut. “Should we split up, or stay together?”

George looked to Eleanor. “You’re the one with the instincts. What do you think?”

Eleanor surveyed the landscape, calculating. “Let’s regroup at the cider stand in fifteen minutes. If anyone sees something, we meet back there. And keep your eyes open for the truck. I have a feeling it’ll be back.”

The others nodded, already slipping into their old roles: observer, skeptic, heart, and leader.

They parted ways, each drawn in a different direction by curiosity and the need to set things right.

In the middle of the ruined patch, the wind whistled over the empty stems, carrying with it the promise of more secrets waiting to be unearthed.

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Eleanor was the first to spot the opportunity. A pair of farmhands stood on the far side of a display of prize-winning squash, their voices low but urgent. One of them, the red-vested worker she'd noticed earlier, gestured animatedly with a battered clipboard.

"They're talking about Thompson," Eleanor whispered, nudging Mabel and Harold into the cover of a nearby gourd pyramid.

Mabel pretended to be deeply interested in a warty pumpkin, while Harold hovered nearby, picking at the label on a spaghetti squash. George, who had returned from a quick recon around the cider stand, lingered on the periphery, keeping watch.

The farmhands' conversation floated over the produce.

"I'm telling you, it's worse than last week," said Clipboard. "Another turkey gone, and now the big ones in the patch — smashed to bits. Thompson's beside himself."

The other worker, a woman with a bandana tied over wild curls, shook her head. "He can't take another hit. The bank's already on his case, and without those blue ribbons or the Thanksgiving flock, we're sunk."

Clipboard's voice dropped even lower, but Eleanor could still make out the words. "If we don't have something to show for the festival, we'll be out of work by Christmas. No one's going to buy from a place with nothing left to sell."

Bandana snorted. "Assuming we make it to Christmas."

They wandered off, leaving the four retirees in an uneasy silence, broken only by the thud of Mabel's hand as she patted the lumpy pumpkin. "Poor Tom," she said, voice barely above a whisper.

Harold tucked his notepad away. "If this keeps up, he'll lose everything. All because someone wants to ruin a holiday for everyone else."

George frowned, weighing the next step. "We don't know that for sure. Could be bad luck, animals, even a prank gone too far."

Eleanor shot him a look. "You saw those tracks. No prankster's hauling off turkeys in broad daylight without being seen."

Mabel's eyes sparkled. "That means we just need to catch them in the act, right? How hard can it be?"

Harold grinned. "With all the security cameras these days, probably easier than we think." He pulled out his phone, fingers dancing over the screen. "I bet there's a Wi-Fi network for the farm. Maybe even an open feed to the pumpkin patch for remote viewing."

George made a skeptical noise, but Mabel shushed him with a wave of her hand. "Let's meet somewhere private. I have ideas."

They circled back to a seldom-used picnic area behind the main barn, far from the crowds and the prying eyes of staff. Eleanor set her bag on the table and took charge.

"Here's what we know," she began. "Someone is targeting only the pumpkins marked for competition, and the heritage turkeys. They're using a vehicle – probably not from the farm, and probably not authorized. We've got staff nervous, Thompson desperate, and a saboteur who's likely to strike again."

Mabel chimed in, “And we have exactly...” she checked her watch, “one and a half hours before we’re herded back onto the bus.”

Harold finished his quick search and reported, “There’s a guest Wi-Fi. I can probably tap into the security cameras if I get the login.”

George leaned back, arms crossed. “Let’s say you do. What then? We confront the thief? We don’t even have jurisdiction.”

Eleanor gave him a wry smile. “You sound like you miss having it.”

He huffed, but didn’t deny it. “I just don’t want us getting in over our heads.”

Mabel reached across the table, patted George’s hand. “We’ve survived worse. Remember the time you caught the bingo hall embezzler with nothing but a pencil and a cup of lukewarm coffee?”

George tried not to smile, and failed.

Eleanor pressed on. “We’re not looking to make an arrest. Just find out who’s doing this and tell Thompson before it’s too late. Maybe tip off the sheriff’s office, if need be.”

Harold nodded. “I’ll see what digital breadcrumbs I can find. If they’re using the network, I’ll spot them.”

“Meanwhile,” Mabel said, “Eleanor and I will keep eyes on the patch and the turkey enclosure. George, you coordinate – if you see anything, signal us.”

The group fell into a comfortable hush, the kind that precedes a plan well-laid. Outside their little conclave, the farm hummed with business as usual: families posing for photos, kids tossing beanbags, vendors hawking pie and cider. But inside the circle

of four, a different energy simmered — a mix of mischief, determination, and the thrill of a fresh puzzle.

Mabel was the first to break the mood, hoisting her monstrous pumpkin and declaring, “We should blend in. No one suspects a senior citizen with a trophy pumpkin.”

Harold offered his arm to Eleanor, and George took up the rear, scanning the horizon for any sign of the red-vested farmhand.

As they re-entered the swirl of festival activity, their secret mission cast a new light on every face and every shadow. The saboteur was still out there, lurking in plain sight. But so were they — the most unlikely detectives the farm had ever seen, determined to save Thanksgiving, one clue at a time.

Chapter 2

Turkey Trouble

Mabel had a long-standing belief that any place worth its salt in the autumn needed to have a gift shop. She didn't mean those sad afterthoughts tacked onto tourist traps, with their dusty shelves and faded T-shirts, but a proper mercantile — one overflowing with the possibility of impulse purchases and irresistible scents. The Harvest Moon Pumpkin Farm Gift Emporium delivered in spades.

The shop greeted her with a blast of spiced air and a symphony of orange, gold, and deep crimson. Cornhusk dolls grinned from every corner, garlands of dried apples and cinnamon sticks hung from the ceiling, and the shelves creaked under the weight of hand-poured candles, jars of jam, and novelty mugs emblazoned with grinning jack-o-lanterns. If the world were ending, Mabel decided, she would not mind if it smelled like this.

She paused at the entrance to shed her scarf, smoothing it around her neck as she took stock of the terrain. The counter was manned — well, womanned — by a young woman in a Harvest Moon apron, hunched over a battered laptop. Her expression suggested either intense focus or utter boredom. Beyond her, a few other shoppers drifted in and out, but none looked as if they intended to stick around.

Mabel floated over, plucking up a miniature pumpkin from a display as she went. "Excuse me, dear," she said, arranging her face in its friendliest configuration. "Do you happen to know if these are real, or are they just for show?"

The attendant glanced up, blinking as if emerging from a trance. She was younger than Mabel had first thought — college-age, maybe, with an eyebrow piercing and hair the color of a ripe persimmon. “They’re real. We shellac them so they last through the holidays, but you can eat them if you really want.” Her tone suggested this was not the recommended use.

“Marvelous!” Mabel held the pumpkin to her nose, inhaled, and put it down again. “My daughter-in-law once made a centerpiece of nothing but tiny gourds. Looked like a vegetable convention, if you ask me, but the cat enjoyed it.” She leaned conspiratorially on the counter. “Have you worked here long?”

The girl seemed to weigh the question, then shrugged. “Since August. It’s a nice gig. Better than slinging coffee at Bean Barn.”

Mabel nodded. “I bet you’ve seen it all, haven’t you? I was just admiring the display outside. The scarecrows with the... what do you call them? The knitted hats?”

“Those are from the Fiber Arts Guild. They donate them every fall. There’s a contest to see who can make the ugliest hat.” The girl cracked a smile. “There’s some real contenders.”

“I’d vote for the one with googly eyes, personally.” Mabel paused. “You must know the owner. Mr. Thompson? He’s an old friend of ours. Is he as grumpy as he pretends?”

The girl laughed, a sound that seemed to surprise even herself. “He’s not grumpy, he’s just...” She searched for the word. “Stubborn, I guess. Especially about the farm. He wants everything to be just like it was when his parents ran it.”

Mabel made a sympathetic noise. “I know the type. Change is always hardest on the ones who care most.”

The girl’s smile flickered. “Not everyone feels that way.”

“Oh?”

The attendant picked at the edge of a price sticker on the counter, eyes darting to the empty aisle and back. “His nephew helps out here sometimes. Kevin? He’s got... different ideas about what to do with the farm.” She lowered her voice. “He thinks Thompson’s too old-fashioned. Keeps talking about how the land’s worth more to developers than to anyone growing pumpkins.”

“Developers!” Mabel repeated, as if she’d never heard a more scandalous word. “How ghastly. I suppose the world will always need more condos, but what will we do for pie?”

The attendant grinned again, then looked quickly over her shoulder. “Don’t tell anyone I said this, but Kevin’s not exactly the most reliable employee. He shows up when he wants, takes long breaks, and sometimes brings his... friends around. Not the nice sort, either.” Her lips twisted. “Once, I saw him out by the fence, talking to a bunch of guys in suits. They didn’t look like pumpkin buyers.”

Mabel’s eyes sparkled. “I’ve always believed that people in suits should be regarded with suspicion, especially if they’re found lurking near vegetable patches after hours.”

“Exactly!” The girl relaxed, emboldened by the shared joke. “But Mr. Thompson won’t hear a word against him. Family is family, he says.”

“That’s the trouble with family,” Mabel sighed. “You can’t trade them in like you can a car. Or a pie recipe.” She fingered a decorative gourd, then set it back with a click. “Has Kevin been around much today?”

“Not since this morning. He came in, argued with his uncle about something, then left. I think he’s supposed to help with the hayrides, but I haven’t seen him in hours.” She checked her watch, then shrugged. “Honestly, I hope he’s gone for the day. The last thing this place needs right now is more drama.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” Mabel’s gaze softened. “Thank you for indulging an old woman and her love of gossip.”

The girl beamed, color rising in her cheeks. “It’s nice to talk to someone who doesn’t want to complain about the bathroom line or the price of fudge.”

“On the contrary,” Mabel said, selecting a squat jar from the nearest display. “I will be singing the praises of your pumpkin butter to anyone who’ll listen.”

The attendant rang her up, swiping the jar over a scanner with a flourish. “If you like it, come back for the apple cinnamon next week. It’s my favorite.”

“I will,” Mabel promised. She tucked the jar in her purse and offered a sly wink. “And if you ever get tired of this place, there’s always the Fiber Arts Guild. I suspect you’d make a mean hat.”

The girl laughed, the sound bright and genuine. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Mabel lingered a moment longer, committing the details to memory: the name Kevin, the suits by the fence, the resentment over the farm’s future. By the time she stepped back into the bracing autumn air, she felt both lighter and heavier—a head full of new clues, and a faint worry for what might happen if the family feud spilled out into the festival.

She paused just outside the door, fishing the jar of pumpkin butter from her bag and turning it in her hands. "Developers," she muttered, "over my dead body." Then, with a final deep breath of cinnamon and wood smoke, she set off to find the others, already composing the story of her latest adventure.

...

The turkey pens sat at the farthest edge of the property, separated from the cheery main festival by a strip of rough pasture and a low, sagging fence that seemed more decorative than functional. George led the way, cane bobbing in rhythm with his stride, while Harold trailed, craning his neck for signs of activity among the squat sheds and scattered hay bales.

They found the pens deserted except for the occasional drift of feathers and the restless clatter of empty feeding troughs. The air was sharp and still, muffling the distant laughter and music from the center of the farm. It was, George reflected, the sort of setting that practically demanded a mystery.

"Well," Harold said, peering through the chicken wire, "if I were a turkey, this is exactly the sort of place I'd try to escape from."

George shot him a sidelong look. "You think they made a run for it?"

"Not unless they learned to operate a door latch." Harold pointed at the padlock, which hung unfastened from a rusted loop. "Either someone let them out, or they never made it back after being moved."

George bent at the knees, lowering himself to inspect the ground around the gate. The mud was deep, churned by dozens of clawed feet, but what caught his eye were the boot prints: deep, broad, and with a tread so distinct he could almost read the brand. He brushed a finger along the edge of the impression, careful not to disturb it.

“Look at this, Harold. Not a farm boot. That’s new – maybe a work boot, maybe hiking.”

Harold leaned in, pulled a notebook from his jacket, and sketched the outline with quick, sure strokes. “Size eleven, maybe twelve,” he said, comparing the print to his own shoe. “Heavy set, too. Whoever it was, they weren’t light on their feet.”

“They came from outside the fence.” George followed the prints, which looped around the pen and then struck off toward a gap in the scrubby hedge. “And they left in a hurry.”

Harold flipped to a new page and jotted down a time, then trailed after George, eyes locked on the ground. “You know, this is almost fun. Like the scavenger hunts my grandkids drag me to every summer. Only with more mud and fewer plastic dinosaurs.”

“You sure about that?” George asked, grinning. “It’s early yet.”

The path wound into a thicket of birch and sumac, the ground here softer and streaked with recent rain. The footprints grew clearer – two sets now, one heavy and plodding, the other lighter, with a lopsided gait. George noted the difference with a hum.

“Two people. One leading, one following.”

Harold stopped beside a low branch, plucked a feather from where it fluttered in the breeze. "One of the turkeys made it this far, at least. But the feather's still damp – couldn't have been more than an hour or two."

"Fresh trail," George agreed. He straightened, brushing dirt from his knee, and looked to the edge of the woodlot. Beyond it, the world dropped away into a shallow ravine, a perfect spot to stash something – or someone – out of sight.

They pressed on, following the twin lines of prints until they vanished into a patch of standing water. George hesitated, then circled the puddle, searching for the next sign. He found it not on the ground, but above: a tangle of feathers caught in the bark of a fallen log, as though something large and struggling had been dragged over it.

"Not exactly subtle," Harold murmured.

"Saboteurs rarely are," George replied. "Not when they're in a hurry."

They circled the log, and there, in the half-frozen mud, was the smoking gun: a partial tire track, narrow and deep, running perpendicular to the footpath. George knelt again, examining the tread.

"Cart or small ATV. Maybe one of the utility vehicles from the barn."

Harold squinted, then shaded his eyes. "There's another track, over here. It goes toward the back service road."

George followed, adrenaline sharpening his focus. The woods were silent except for the rustle of wind in the branches and their own steady breathing. The tire tracks meandered, occasionally lost in the tall grass, then reappeared in clearer detail as the land sloped upward.

At the top of the rise, the prints vanished into the gravel drive, blending with older tracks and ruts. George scanned the horizon – nothing but open fields and, far in the distance, a cluster of maintenance sheds.

“So,” Harold said, tapping his pencil against his notebook, “either someone’s running a bootleg turkey operation out of the woods, or they’re moving them in bulk to a vehicle.”

“My money’s on the latter,” George replied. “And if they’ve got access to the service road, it’s not a random poacher. It’s someone who knows the layout.”

Harold tucked away his notebook, brow furrowed in concentration. “Do you think Thompson’s nephew is involved?”

George hesitated. He’d learned long ago not to jump to conclusions, but the timing, the motive, the presence of multiple conspirators – all of it pointed in that direction. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. But we should get back to the others before the trail gets any colder.”

They retraced their steps, Harold stopping once more to collect a feather and, for reasons known only to himself, a sprig of wild mint growing near the log. When they reached the edge of the festival again, George checked his watch, committing the time to memory.

“Seventeen minutes,” he announced. “Record time for two old men.”

Harold grinned. “We make a good team. Better than most TV detectives, I’d say.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.” George’s voice was gruff, but his eyes twinkled. “Let’s regroup and see what the others have dug up.”

As they passed the empty pens again, George paused to snap a photo of the boot print with his phone. He wasn't sure what use it would be — maybe none at all — but old habits, like old turkeys, had a way of resurfacing when least expected.

They walked back in silence, each turning over the facts, piecing together the story one muddy footprint at a time. The wind picked up, rattling the wire on the empty cages, and somewhere in the distance a tractor backfired. George thought, not for the first time, that sometimes the best part of a mystery was the company you kept while solving it.

...

Eleanor preferred the unvarnished truth, and she'd found over the years that the best place to find it was never the kitchen table or the pastor's office, but out by the places where real work got done. On a farm, that meant the maintenance barn, with its smells of diesel, rubber, and the tang of fertilizer that never quite left your nostrils. It was a place where secrets, like grease, stuck to everything.

She found her first subject under the shade of the open tractor bay: a farmhand of indeterminate age, beard the texture of steel wool and skin browned by decades of sun. He worked a wrench over the tractor's axle with a rhythm that suggested a private grudge, the kind only machinery could inspire.

Eleanor cleared her throat, not to startle but to announce. "You mind if I ask you a question about the turkey pens?"

The man didn't pause, but his eyes flickered her way. "Depends on the question."

She liked that — no fuss, no feigned politeness. "Anything unusual out there lately?"

He shrugged, set the wrench down, and wiped his hands on a rag already ruined by a hundred such jobs. "Always something unusual, this time of year. Pumpkins rot faster, kids sneak in at night for a dare. But that's not what you mean."

"No," Eleanor agreed. "I'm more interested in the adults. Anyone come around who doesn't belong?"

The farmhand sniffed, studied the horizon as if the answer might be written there. "Saw a black truck, couple nights running. Not one of ours. Pulled up behind the loading dock after closing. I thought maybe it was a delivery, but no one said anything about it."

She filed the detail away. "See who was driving?"

"Not up close. But there were two, maybe three. Heavy set, moved like they were in a hurry. Didn't come toward the barn, just hung around by the fence. Then gone before I could finish my smoke."

He looked her dead in the eye, as if daring her to accuse him of making it up. Eleanor nodded instead. "Thank you. That's helpful."

"Don't see how," the farmhand said, picking up his wrench again, but there was relief in the way he turned back to his work. Like he'd exorcised something.

She left him to his bolts and bearings and moved around to the side of the barn, where a woman sat on a wooden crate, sorting carrots into bins by size and color. She had headphones draped around her neck and a tattoo of a sunflower running up one arm. Eleanor considered her approach: with some, you needed to talk; with others, you just needed to listen.

"Nice system," Eleanor said, nodding to the bins.

The woman flashed a smile that was all teeth. "Otherwise they put me on pumpkin detail, and I've had enough orange under my fingernails for a lifetime."

"Can't blame you." Eleanor crouched beside her, knees popping. "I'm asking around about the turkey pens. Hear anything weird at night?"

The woman laughed, then sobered at Eleanor's steady look. "Well, now that you mention it... last week I heard something like — well, I thought it was raccoons, but it was too loud. Kind of a thumping and some weird squawks. When I went out to check, there was nothing there. But the next morning, couple of the birds were missing, and there was a big dent in the fence."

Eleanor nodded. "You tell anyone?"

The woman shrugged. "Figured it was just bad luck, or maybe coyotes. But the farm manager checked it out and told me to keep it quiet. Said we didn't need another 'incident' before the festival."

"Another?"

"Yeah," the carrot sorter whispered. "Last year, someone tried to break into the storeroom. Never caught them."

Eleanor patted her on the shoulder. "Thank you. You've been very helpful."

The woman smiled, this time with a touch of pride, and returned to her carrots, humming a tune Eleanor didn't recognize.

The third conversation took more effort. The manager was a tall, narrow man in a plaid shirt that looked pressed despite the dust. He paced the length of the barn office, clipboard in hand, frown lines deep enough to plant seeds in.

Eleanor waited until he finished a phone call — one that left his jaw clenched and his ears red — then introduced herself.

“I’ve been a customer for years,” she said, letting him decide if that was true. “Just wanted to ask about the turkeys.”

He nodded, guarded. “It’s been a rough season.”

“Birds going missing isn’t normal, I take it.”

“Not at these numbers,” he admitted. “We lost two in the spring, but this month — six already, and Thanksgiving is our biggest weekend. If we don’t meet our contract, the buyers go elsewhere. And you know what that means for the bottom line.”

Eleanor watched his hands, how they kept smoothing the paper on his clipboard. “How’s the farm doing?”

He hesitated. “We’re behind. Thompson says it’s just a rough patch, but it’s been rough for a while. Property taxes, insurance, drought last summer. He’s trying to keep it together, but...” The manager’s eyes darted to the window, toward the big house at the crest of the hill. “Some people want to sell. Others want to fight. You can guess which camp I’m in.”

Eleanor softened her tone. “We’re trying to help. Any info could make a difference.”

The manager straightened, a trace of the old-school farm pride returning to his face. “Appreciate that. Just — if you find anything, let me know first. I’d rather not see the sheriff sniffing around unless he has to.”

She agreed, offered her hand, and shook on it. His grip was firm, a final word.

On her way out, Eleanor took a slow lap around the barn, letting the wind clear her thoughts. She replayed each conversation, the overlap striking her: every worker watched the main house when they spoke of trouble, as if the walls had ears. The pattern was clear: late-night visits from unfamiliar trucks, odd noises, a persistent financial shadow hanging over everything.

The pieces fit, but the picture they formed was bleak. Eleanor set her jaw, resolved not to let the farm go down without a fight. She made for the café, steps brisk, ready to see what her teammates had dug up.

...

The Harvest Moon café was exactly what Mabel had hoped it would be: knotty pine walls, oilcloth tablecloths, and a display case that groaned with more desserts than could possibly be consumed in a single autumn. The place buzzed with families fortifying themselves for the corn maze or thawing out after a hayride, but in the far corner by the window, four old friends settled in with the focus of a jury and the appetite of teenagers.

George claimed the end seat, back to the wall and facing the door. Eleanor took the other end, fixing her gaze on the world outside. Harold and Mabel squeezed together, each with a mug of cider so hot it steamed up their glasses.

"I'll start," Mabel said, not waiting for permission. "The girl at the gift shop practically tripped over herself to tell me about Thompson's nephew. Kevin, she called him. Works here, sort of, when he feels like it." She tore off a chunk of piecrust and dunked it in her cider. "Apparently, he's got ambitions far above pumpkins. Been seen chatting with developers — real estate types — about what they'd do if they got their hands on the land."

Eleanor made a low, approving noise. “That matches what I heard at the maintenance barn. Every worker there’s scared stiff about the farm’s future. They’ve seen trucks – black, new, out-of-place – lurking by the service road after dark. And there’s been talk of break-ins, people on the property with no reason to be here.”

George folded his hands, considering. “Harold and I found fresh tracks by the turkey pens. Two sets of footprints – one heavy, one lighter – and tire marks. Someone’s been moving the birds, and it’s not kids playing a prank. They knew the route, the timing, everything.”

Harold, who had been silent up to now, produced his notebook. “I measured the boot prints. They’re almost identical to the ones near the loading dock, but the treads are pristine. Whoever’s doing this isn’t using farm equipment. It’s their own.”

“So,” Mabel concluded, “someone inside’s helping someone outside. And the only person with a foot in both camps is –”

“Kevin,” Eleanor finished.

George’s brow furrowed. “We can’t just accuse the man. We need more than coincidence.”

Mabel smiled, catlike. “Of course. But it never hurts to prepare a few pointed questions.”

They sipped and nibbled, letting the information settle. The conversation drifted, as it always did, to smaller matters: which flavor of pie was best (pumpkin, obviously, but Harold made a strong case for apple crumb), the odd behavior of festival staff, and who would win the annual “Gourd of the Year” contest.

It was Harold who noticed the commotion first. Through the window, he spotted a cluster of staff gathered around a small enclosure just behind the café. In the center, as regal as a lord, stood a turkey the size of a small dog, tail feathers fanned and head cocked in haughty defiance.

"That's Cornelius," Harold murmured, a trace of awe in his voice.

Mabel pressed her face to the glass, smudging it. "He's magnificent. You think he knows he's the last of his kind?"

Eleanor watched the staffers secure the latch with a padlock and then double-check it. "They're worried someone's coming for him," she said.

"Wouldn't you be?" Mabel replied. "I'd sleep with one eye open if I was that handsome."

Just then, Mr. Thompson shuffled in, looking ten years older than when they'd last seen him. His cap was askew, and his hands twisted a napkin into a thin, desperate rope.

"Do you have a moment?" he asked, voice soft enough to be lost in the clatter.

George motioned him to sit, and Mabel nudged a chair out with her foot.

Thompson took it, staring at the table before lifting his eyes to meet theirs. "I'm not one for speeches," he began, "but I wanted you all to know how much it means—the help, the concern." He stopped, words failing.

Harold leaned forward. "What's happened?"

“Cornelius,” Thompson whispered, as if the name alone could summon disaster. “He’s the last of the heritage line. If anything happens to him – if we lose him – the buyers walk. There’s no future for the turkey program, not here or anywhere. He’s worth more than this whole café, and everyone knows it. I’ve tried to keep him safe, but... I’m afraid it’s not enough.”

Mabel reached over, covering his hand with hers. “You’re not alone, Tom. We’ll see this through.”

Eleanor’s gaze flicked outside again, to the bird in his pen, strutting with the vanity of someone who knows the cameras are rolling.

“We think we know who’s behind it,” she said. “And we think it’s going to happen tonight.”

Thompson sat up straighter, a flicker of hope brightening his face. “You have proof?”

“Not yet,” George said, gentle but firm. “But we’re close.”

Mabel squeezed Thompson’s hand, then released it. “We just need a bit more time. And maybe another slice of pie.”

Thompson managed a smile, the weight on his shoulders briefly lightened. “You’re a good bunch. Better detectives than you let on.”

As he left, the friends sat in silence, the stakes now fully apparent. They finished their pie in thoughtful bites, each lost in their own strand of the puzzle.

When they rose to leave, Eleanor paused at the window, watching Cornelius fluff his feathers against the wind.

“He’ll be alright,” she said, but she said it more to herself than to the others.

As they walked out, the sharp crack of an argument broke the evening calm. Voices — two, maybe three — rose from behind the café, words blurred by distance but thick with anger.

George exchanged a look with the others. “Time to see if our theory holds water,” he said.

They hurried toward the sound, ready to confront the ghosts of Thanksgiving past and, if necessary, the saboteurs of the present.

...

They circled the café with the caution of people who had once known how to be sneaky but were now held back by stiff joints and creaky knees. The argument was coming from just beyond the outdoor seating area, in the shadow of a stack of hay bales that looked less festive and more like cover in a low-budget stakeout.

Mabel motioned them to duck behind a display of ornamental gourds. “If anyone asks, we’re evaluating the competition,” she whispered.

On the other side of the hay, the voices rang clear and hot.

“You don’t get it, Uncle Tom!” This must have been Kevin — young, loud, and already red-faced with frustration. “This place is bleeding money! Those developers are offering enough to set you up for life. You can’t keep doing this forever.”

Mr. Thompson’s reply was flat but unyielding. “This land has been in our family for a hundred years. It’s not mine to sell to the highest bidder just because you can’t wait to get out.”

"You're living in the past!" Kevin shot back. "You won't even consider a new crop, or online sales, or anything that might actually pay the bills. One more season like this and it's over. You'll be lucky if you have enough left for a moving truck."

There was a pause—long and thick enough that George, for a moment, feared someone might throw a punch. But then Thompson spoke again, softer this time, the anger gone but the resolve still hard as bedrock. "Maybe I am living in the past. Maybe that's all that's left, once you sell out your future."

Kevin cursed under his breath. "You're impossible," he said. "I'm done arguing." He turned, stomping away with a scuff of gravel and a muttered threat that could have been anything from "good luck" to "see you in court."

Thompson stayed put, shoulders slumped as if the argument had deflated him. He didn't notice the four retirees watching from behind their makeshift bunker, or the way Mabel squeezed Eleanor's hand in silent solidarity.

"Did you hear that?" Harold whispered. "He's practically confessed to wanting the place gone."

Eleanor nodded, voice crisp. "And if he's willing to sabotage the farm to force a sale, he won't stop at pumpkins and turkeys. Next time, it could be the barn. Or worse."

George didn't say anything. He was staring at Thompson, the defeated curve of his back, the way his hands shook as he stuffed them in his pockets.

After a minute, Thompson shuffled off toward the main house, leaving the yard empty except for the faint echo of the fight.

They broke cover and made their way toward the bus, the evening settling around them with a bite of frost. The hayrides were winding down, the last of the festival-goers making their way past stalls and scarecrows to the parking lot.

Harold was the first to speak, notebook in hand. "We have motive, method, and opportunity. All we're missing is catching him in the act."

"Which means," Mabel said, "we're coming back tomorrow."

Eleanor shot her a glance. "You just want another go at the pie contest."

"I contain multitudes," Mabel replied.

George stopped at the edge of the road, looking back at the darkening farm. "We'll need to tell Tom," he said. "He deserves to know what's coming."

Harold nodded. "And if Kevin tries anything tonight, we'll be ready. I can set up a camera. Nothing fancy, just enough to catch movement by the turkey pen."

Eleanor grinned. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

Harold looked sheepish, but not enough to deny it. "A little. Makes the world seem manageable, when you can solve a problem with a pencil and a plan."

They reached the bus, where the other Starlight residents were already boarding, trading stories and pumpkin bread like party favors. Mabel paused at the steps, looking at her friends, their faces flushed from the cold and the chase.

"I know we're not the Hardy Boys," she said. "But for what it's worth, I wouldn't want to solve a mystery with anyone else."

George raised his cane in salute. "To the next clue," he said.

They climbed aboard, the warmth of the bus and the promise of another day on the trail waiting for them.

Outside, the last light faded over Harvest Moon Pumpkin Farm, but inside the bus, the old friends plotted, schemed, and hoped — against all odds — that they could save Thanksgiving, and the farm, before it was too late.

Chapter 3

Stakeout at Sundown

Eleanor had faced down school board presidents, feuding cousins, and an actual bear in her time, but she found nothing quite so formidable as the director of Starlight Eldercare Facility. Ms. Livingston commanded her office from behind a desk as vast and polished as a skating rink, her posture flawless, her eyes a shade more shrewd than humanly necessary.

Eleanor perched on the edge of a visitors' chair, back straight, ankles crossed, hands folded over the folder labeled "Pumpkin Farm Volunteer Initiative." There was a vase of carnations at the end of the desk. Eleanor respected the flowers—cheap, cheerful, impossible to kill.

"So let me get this straight," Ms. Livingston said, tapping a pen against the arm of her glasses. "You're asking to take a group outing back to Harvest Moon Farm, barely forty-eight hours after we've already sent half the facility's ambulatory residents there."

Eleanor nodded, serene. "It's for a project. We'd like to document the operation of a local agritourism business for our community newsletter. A few interviews, a photo spread, maybe a feature on the—" she checked her notes, "—heritage poultry preservation efforts."

The director's eyes narrowed fractionally. "And you require Harold, Mabel, and Mr. Reynolds as part of this, ah, press corps?"

"George is our photographer," Eleanor said. "Harold has technical expertise with... recording equipment. Mabel has the, ah, knack for interviewing."

Ms. Livingston's mouth twitched in a way that suggested she had not missed a single detail from Eleanor's thirty-year reign as PTA president. "You'll be back by sunset?"

“Before. We’re not as spry as we look.”

“You’ll stay together. No wandering off.”

“Of course,” Eleanor said. “Safety in numbers.”

The director leaned back, weighing the options. “Fine. I’ll have the facility van ready at three. You’ll have exactly four hours. And if you so much as set foot in a restricted area, the next ‘research trip’ will be to the dental hygienist’s office.” She fixed Eleanor with a look.

“Understood?”

Eleanor beamed. “Crystal clear, Ms. Livingston.”

She signed the clipboard with an extra flourish, and as she rose to leave, the director added, “Eleanor? Whatever it is you’re up to, do try not to get caught.”

Eleanor’s smile widened. “That’s the plan.”

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The Starlight common room was a marvel of institutional design—vinyl armchairs arranged for maximum visibility, a sideboard of tepid tea and instant coffee, and a television tuned permanently to home improvement shows. At 2:50, Eleanor found her team gathered around a battered table, the surface covered with a map so detailed it would have impressed a city planner.

George hunched over the map, tracing lines with the tip of his cane. “Hayloft gives a clear line of sight to the pumpkin patch, here and here. Corn maze is a dead end, but the barn backs up to the service road. If they’re moving birds or pumpkins at night, they’ll use this route.” He tapped twice, then adjusted his glasses.

Harold hovered beside him, fingers already smeared with graphite from the tiny notebook he used for “logs.” A heap of gadgets sat at his elbow—a desk lamp with extra wires sprouting from its base, a set of binoculars held together with electrical tape, and a walkie-talkie the size of a paperback novel. “If we set up here,” he said, pointing to a shaded corner of the barn, “we can intercept wireless signals. The walkies run on the same frequency as the farm radios.”

Mabel perched on the edge of her seat, legs swinging, scarf ablaze with cartoon turkeys. “And what do I get to do?”

Eleanor set down her purse and opened the folder. “Mabel, you are our face. You distract the staff, especially anyone who looks like they might be related to Kevin. Share your best stories, dig for dirt, and keep them busy while the rest of us work.”

Mabel’s smile was pure mischief. “I’ve already got three versions of my niece’s ‘champion pumpkin pie’ story lined up, each more tragic than the last.”

“Perfect,” said George, suppressing a grin. He spread the map further, using a salt shaker to pin down the corner. “Here’s the plan: Harold and I will stake out the barn and the service road. Eleanor, you monitor the main entrance and the turkey enclosure. Mabel, you make yourself at home in the gift shop, and if you can, get eyes on the family. If anyone gets in trouble, use the walkie. We’ll call out by codename only.”

Harold cleared his throat. “Do we have codenames?”

Eleanor shrugged. “Might as well. It worked for the Girl Scouts.”

“Dibs on ‘Hawkeye’,” said George.

Mabel swept a hand dramatically. “I shall be ‘Pumpkin Queen’.”

“Harold,” said Eleanor, “you’re ‘MacGyver’.”

Harold’s cheeks pinked with pride. “What about you, Eleanor?”

She considered. “Call me ‘Maestro’.”

They all nodded, the titles feeling just right.

George rolled up the map. “Alright, Maestro. You got us in—let’s see if we can save Thanksgiving.”

Harold packed the gadgets in a canvas tote. “If anyone asks, we’re on a field trip. I even signed the log at the front desk.”

Mabel practiced her story on them, spinning a wild yarn about her “niece’s” genetically modified squash and the year the entire crop turned blue after a laboratory mishap. George snorted coffee through his nose at the punchline; even Eleanor had to dab at her eyes.

As the clock struck three, they assembled by the facility’s side entrance, coats buttoned and scarves tied tight. The van awaited them, driver already briefed and looking mildly nervous.

Mabel clapped her hands as they piled in. “To the rescue, my friends!”

Eleanor settled in the front seat, her fingers already itching for the folder of notes in her lap. There was a farm to save, a saboteur to catch, and—she allowed herself a sly smile—perhaps a Thanksgiving memory or two yet to be made.

The van lurched forward, carrying them toward destiny, or at least the best stakeout they’d had since the time they hid in the church bell tower to catch the “Midnight Pie Bandit.” Either way, Eleanor thought, it was going to be one for the scrapbook.

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Harvest Moon Farm looked almost deserted by the time the Starlight van rolled up the rutted drive. The main lot was empty except for a battered Subaru, a faded minivan with a cracked window, and a golf cart that listed to one side as if exhausted from a long day’s labor. The sun hung low behind the red barn, striping the fields with gold and shadow; the chill in the air carried the scent of cider and brittle leaves, underscored by distant clucks and the faint, melancholy gobble of a turkey.

Eleanor was the first out, boots crunching on gravel. She scanned the yard, eyes narrowed against the glare. Mabel exited next, scarf ablaze, waving her “Pumpkin Queen” notebook as if to summon an audience. George emerged stiffly, cane in one hand, the map folded with military precision in the other. Harold, last as always, struggled with his canvas tote, the walkie-talkies and lamp cord spilling from its mouth like a magician’s scarf.

“Alright, team,” Eleanor said, voice just above a whisper, “let’s stick to the plan. Mabel, you’re up. Try the gift shop first.”

Mabel saluted with two fingers. “Queen to the front,” she declared, and sashayed toward the gift shop’s porch, where a teenage employee in a too-big Harvest Moon hoodie was stacking crates for tomorrow’s restock.

Inside the van, the driver—a college student moonlighting as Starlight’s transport coordinator—slouched over a paperback, oblivious to the brewing caper.

“Five-minute intervals,” George murmured, checking his watch. “Harold, on my six. Eleanor, you cover the approach.”

They moved like a parade of retired spies: George striding with purpose, Harold half-trotting to keep up, Eleanor trailing just far enough behind to seem unconnected. No one paid them any mind. The day’s last hayride trundled off in the distance, families scattering to their cars, the echoes of children’s laughter fading with the light.

Mabel hit her mark. She launched into conversation before the young man could even set down his crate. “Excuse me, dear! Do you have any of those maple pumpkin candies left? My niece is simply obsessed with them, and if I go home empty-handed, I’ll be disowned.”

The staffer, startled but game, retrieved a tray of fudge from behind the counter. “This is all we have until next delivery. Sorry.”

“Oh, I’ll take the lot,” Mabel said, “and I must get your advice. You see, in my youth I was a champion pumpkin-grower. Blue ribbon at the county fair, three years running. But the climate in Vermont is nothing like it is here, and I simply can’t get my *Cucurbita maxima* to reach their full potential. Do you know, I once grew a squash so large we named it after a state senator? Poor man, never lived it down.”

The teenager nodded along, face locked in a polite rictus. “Uh, that’s... impressive.”

“Not as impressive as the year it rained for three straight weeks and half the patch got moldy. Let me tell you, the smell of rotting squash in July—” Mabel fanned her face dramatically, “—could drop a moose at fifty yards.”

She rambled on, expertly steering the conversation from hybrid seeds to the ethics of GMO labeling, all while the young man counted out fudge and snuck glances at his watch. Mabel's performance was so dazzling that he never noticed George, Harold, and Eleanor slip behind the outbuildings toward the barn.

The barn was bigger up close, its paint weathered to the color of faded soup cans, with a corrugated roof that pinged softly as it cooled. The sliding door hung slightly off its track, opening with a groan that sent a flurry of pigeons from the rafters. Eleanor went in first, holding the door just wide enough for the others.

The inside was all wood and dust, the air alive with the scent of hay, old fuel, and a tangy undercurrent of animal musk. Tools hung in neat rows on one wall, and in the center, a tractor sat in semi-retirement, ringed by barrels and overturned milk crates.

George scanned the perimeter, then pointed up. "Loft's the best vantage. I'll go." He took the stairs one slow step at a time, every joint protesting, but once on the landing, he moved with the grace of a man in his element. He settled behind a stack of burlap sacks and trained his binoculars on the pumpkin fields beyond.

Harold chose a window facing the turkey pen, setting his lamp and walkie on a crate. He unscrewed the lamp's base to reveal a rat's nest of copper wire, then plugged in his earpiece and adjusted the dial. The walkie-talkies chirped to life, and Harold nodded in satisfaction. "Should pick up chatter if they're using farm radios," he whispered.

Eleanor took position by the barn's side door, peering through a knothole at the main drive. She could just see the loading dock, the outline of the turkey enclosure, and the field where the last of the pumpkins glowed like beacons in the dusk.

They worked in silence, communicating with a series of soft clicks and hand signals. The only sound was the shifting of the barn, the lowing of distant cattle, and the periodic squawk of a very unhappy rooster.

It was half an hour before Mabel appeared, floating into the barn with the easy grace of a seasoned sneak. She closed the door behind her and tiptoed to Eleanor, eyes shining with glee.

“That poor boy thinks I’m coming back tomorrow with my pumpkin scrapbooks,” she hissed, almost dancing in place. “He even offered to order special seeds for me. I may have invented a cousin named Lars who breeds heirloom gourds in Manitoba.”

Eleanor suppressed a laugh. “Did you see anything?”

“Gift shop’s clear, but the loading dock had lights on. I think someone’s still in the back office.” Mabel handed her the fudge, “For morale.”

They crept to Harold’s post, where he had a notepad covered in times and codes. “All quiet, so far,” he reported. “But there was a burst of radio static around five minutes ago. I’m triangulating.”

George signaled from above. Eleanor joined him, careful up the stairs. “What do you see?” she whispered.

He gestured to the field. “There’s a car parked just past the north fence. Been there twenty minutes. Someone’s sitting in it. Not farm staff.”

She watched through the binoculars. Sure enough, a sedan, black or navy, idled with the lights off. Inside, a driver with a phone pressed to his face, waiting. George’s instincts had been right—something was brewing.

Down below, Harold and Mabel started prepping for a longer stay. Mabel lined up snacks and water bottles. Harold tested the walkie’s volume, then showed off the “infrared” feature—really just a red LED flashlight glued to the side, but it made him feel like James Bond.

By sunset, the temperature in the barn dropped, and the shadows thickened. They bunched together on a hay bale near the window, sharing fudge and stories in low voices.

“Remember the bank stakeout in ’99?” Mabel murmured. “You brought an entire thermos of clam chowder, and then we had to take turns running to the restroom for three hours.”

George grunted. “It was a cold day.”

Eleanor smiled, adjusting her sweater. “We caught the crook, didn’t we?”

Harold piped up, “Yes, and you also knit him a scarf. I think that’s why he confessed.”

They all snickered, the tension melting in the warmth of memory and company.

Outside, the farm slipped into darkness. The only movement came from the turkeys, restless in their pen, and a cat that stalked the edge of the pumpkin patch. The sedan’s engine coughed once, then went silent.

Eleanor checked her watch, counting down to the time they suspected the action would begin. “Everyone ready?”

They answered with small nods and the click of the walkie’s safety. The barn felt like a command center now, the hay bale their war room.

“We’re not getting any younger,” George said, “but we’re still the best at what we do.”

They huddled closer, watching, waiting, hearts pounding with the old familiar thrill. Thanksgiving was on the line, and they weren’t about to let it down.

...

If there was one thing the Harvest Moon barn was good for, besides hosting a thousand splinters and a permanent draft, it was time travel. Not in the literal sense, but in the way that darkness and boredom could pull old stories out of people with a gravity no one bothered to fight.

It started when Harold declared, with some pride, that his hands were too cold to work his notepad. “We should rotate shifts. No sense in all of us freezing at once.”

So they did, trading the high ground, the lookout by the side door, and the warmest hay bale with the rhythm of a seasoned crew. But the barn creaked and sighed, the night stretching long and empty, and soon enough conversation seeped into the cracks.

First, George. He never liked to talk about his years as a detective—not really—but something about being on a stakeout with friends loosened his tongue. “You ever spend Thanksgiving alone?” he asked, voice just above a whisper. “Not by choice, but because you had to?”

The others glanced over. Mabel, chin on her hand, said softly, “Only once.”

“I did, in ’74. Back when I worked robbery detail. There was a guy, name of Vincenzo—jewel thief, world-class liar. We staked out his mother’s apartment for three days straight. He finally slipped in through a laundry chute, thought he was a genius.” George allowed himself a small, proud grin. “Trouble was, he forgot his mom had moved to a condo across town.”

Harold snickered. “Did you catch him?”

“Wife caught him. She invited me in for dinner, said it was the least she could do. He tried to sneak cranberry sauce under the tablecloth. Best Thanksgiving I ever had.”

Even Eleanor smiled at that. She shifted on the hay and shared her own: “I burned my first turkey so badly the smoke alarm shorted out. Fire department came. They stayed for pie. I think they were just happy to be indoors for a change.”

Mabel leaned back, hands behind her head. “That’s nothing. Cranberry sauce, 1982. I was making it from scratch, got distracted by a phone call. Next thing you know, red lava everywhere. Ceiling, floor, dog. My sister still finds little spots when the sun comes in just right.”

Harold, not to be outdone, polished his glasses and began, “Thanksgiving, 1998. I decided to build a smart oven. Supposed to

self-baste and alert you when the bird reached optimal juiciness. What it actually did was trigger every timer in the house and spray hot chicken stock across the kitchen. Eleanor didn't speak to me for a week, but the cat gained three pounds."

They laughed, quietly, the sound more warm than loud. Even the barn seemed to approve, the wind outside going still for a moment as if to listen.

"Funny," Eleanor said after a while. "All those disasters, and I wouldn't trade any of them. Not the smoke, or the stains, or the ruined stuffing."

"Same," said George, voice gruff.

Harold nodded. "We remember the messes, not the perfection."

Mabel tilted her head, looking at each of them in turn. "Maybe that's what makes a good holiday. Surviving the chaos together."

The group went quiet, lost in private memories. Outside, the dark deepened to the point where even the pumpkins lost their glow. A faint light from the farmhouse flickered, but otherwise the world had gone still.

—

Just after midnight, the action started.

George, on the loft, saw it first: a thin, bobbing beam of light making its way through the pumpkin patch. He tensed, the old adrenaline flooding back. "Heads up," he whispered into the walkie. "Movement at ten o'clock."

Harold's "motion sensor"—a repurposed night-light with a piezo buzzer—went off with a high, wounded squeal. Eleanor flicked it off and edged to the window. "I see it," she murmured.

They crowded the window in time to see a tall, skinny shape gliding through the dark, moving with the nervous speed of someone who had memorized every step. The flashlight flicked off as it neared the turkey enclosure, and then a silhouette—male, young, a little hunched—popped the gate and slid inside.

“That’s Kevin,” George said, no doubt in his voice.

Mabel clenched her notebook. “He’s after Cornelius.”

The tension in the barn snapped from cozy to brittle. George clicked his walkie twice—Hawkeye, ready—then made for the stairs. Harold checked his tote, yanking out the jury-rigged lamp and the second walkie. Eleanor watched the field, counting the seconds between flashes of the suspect’s headlamp.

Mabel reached into her bag for the fudge, then thought better of it and braced her hands against the hay. “How do we want to play this?”

Eleanor took charge, her years of boardroom and playground mediation rising to the surface. “We wait until he’s at the pen. Catch him red-handed. Harold, you’re with me at the side entrance. Mabel, stick with George—circle around and block the service road in case he bolts.”

Mabel saluted, scarf trailing behind her as she followed George down the steps.

They moved in unison, practiced and sure. Out the barn’s side door, Harold and Eleanor kept low, circling behind a row of stacked pallets. The world was reduced to breaths, footsteps, and the distant, puzzled muttering of turkeys. Mabel and George took the long way, flanking the field’s edge with a slow, steady pace.

At the enclosure, Kevin crouched by the gate, tools in hand. He fiddled with the lock, cursing softly when it wouldn’t yield. After a minute, he produced a pair of wire cutters and tried the fence.

Harold’s walkie crackled. “He’s cutting the fence. Repeat—cutting the fence.”

Eleanor grinned. “He’s not very good at it.”

“Not the sharpest turkey in the yard,” Harold agreed.

They crept closer, staying behind cover, until they were no more than ten yards from the pen. Eleanor motioned for Harold to stay put, then stepped forward, straightening her jacket and putting on her most imperious voice.

“Having trouble, Kevin?”

He jumped as if electrocuted, dropping the cutters into the mud.
“What—who—?”

Eleanor advanced, arms folded. “It’s past curfew, you know.”

From the other side, George and Mabel emerged, flanking the pen.
Mabel waved. “Nice night for a stroll!”

Kevin’s eyes darted, desperate. “It’s not what it looks like. I—I was just—”

“Poaching turkeys?” George finished for him, stepping between Kevin and the car parked beyond the fence.

“I wasn’t—” Kevin tried, but Mabel talked over him, voice syrupy-sweet. “Don’t worry, dear. I’ve met every kind of turkey-napper in my time. You’re not even the most creative.”

Eleanor closed in. “You could have just asked for help, you know.”

Kevin gaped, then sagged. “You don’t understand. If the buyers don’t get their bird, my uncle loses everything. They’re going to take the farm. The whole thing’s a setup. I was trying to make it look like—” he stopped, realizing too late that the story wouldn’t hold.

George shook his head. “Son, you need to work on your cover stories.”

Harold, who had joined the perimeter, aimed his homemade “infrared” light at Kevin, bathing him in a harmless red glow. “Say cheese,” he said, snapping a picture on his ancient phone.

Kevin wilted. “What now?”

Eleanor softened. “Now we talk to your uncle. Explain what’s been happening. If there’s a way to save the farm, it won’t be by stealing from family.”

Mabel gave the boy a nudge. “You come clean, and we’ll vouch for you. Maybe they’ll even let you run the gift shop after you finish your community service.”

Kevin gave a ghost of a laugh. “I’d take that.”

They herded him back to the farmhouse, where the lights were still on. Eleanor made sure to stand just behind him, a gentle but undeniable presence. George walked with his usual authority. Harold and Mabel lagged, trading glances and savoring their small, sweet victory.

Inside, the farmhouse smelled of coffee and burnt toast. Thompson met them at the door, confusion turning quickly to a kind of sad relief when he saw his nephew in tow.

“Kevin?” he said, voice shaking.

“Uncle Tom, I’m sorry,” Kevin began. “I thought I could fix things, but—”

“You should have come to me,” Thompson interrupted, but the anger was gone, replaced by something older and heavier. “We’d have figured it out. We always do.”

Eleanor spoke up, filling in the blanks. “We’ll help, Mr. Thompson. The heritage program, the festival—there’s a way forward if you want it. You’ve got friends, and you’ve got the best pie in the county.”

Thompson blinked, then smiled. “Maybe I do.”

He offered coffee, and they all sat around the battered kitchen table, sharing what little warmth the night offered. Mabel told her story about the blue squash, and for the first time, Kevin laughed out loud. Harold passed around his fudge, even as he fiddled with the walkie, trying to tune in the local jazz station. George relished the simplicity of the moment, the safety of good company and a job well done.

When the Starlight van came to fetch them at dawn, the sky was the color of ripe pumpkins, and the turkeys in their pen strutted like royalty. The mystery was solved, the farm saved for now, and Thanksgiving—messy, chaotic, and utterly perfect—was back on.

As they climbed into the van, Mabel looked at her friends, each a little rumpled and red-eyed, but all smiling.

“Best stakeout ever,” she said.

Eleanor agreed, and even George allowed himself a rare, unguarded laugh.

They rode home in companionable silence, the new day waiting for them like an unopened pie.

Chapter 4

Caught in the Act

They returned to Starlight as heroes – pie-bellied, windburned, and faintly reeking of pumpkin – but the real adventure waited in the small hours, when most of the world was folded up in sleep. Eleanor’s watch ticked slow and steady as she perched at her window, curtain cracked just wide enough to catch the flicker of headlights in the lot below. The others would be ready, too. She’d seen the resolve in George’s set jaw, in the way Harold fidgeted with the camera, in the nervous flutter of Mabel’s scarf as she’d waved goodnight.

When the agreed-upon moment arrived – precisely twelve forty-seven, when the nursing staff changed shifts – Eleanor moved. Slippers, coat, the folder of notes tucked under her arm. She crept down the corridor, pausing at the corner. George already waited, cane in one hand and a thermos in the other. He offered her a sip; she declined but smiled.

Harold and Mabel joined them outside, breath clouding in the chill. Mabel was first to break the silence. “We look like a gang of night robbers.”

“Technically, we’re on the right side of the law,” Harold said, adjusting the webbing strap of his canvas tote.

“We’re not the law,” George muttered. “We’re the cavalry.” But he looked pleased to be out and about.

They walked the half mile to Harvest Moon with more purpose than speed. The night had a weight to it, heavy with wet leaves and the musty undertone of October’s last gasp. Every footfall

seemed impossibly loud; every distant coyote yelp a warning to mind their business.

By the time they reached the pumpkin patch, the moon had thinned to a sliver, but it was enough. The field stretched before them, shadowy humps of orange and green in ragged rows. At the far end, a pinprick of electric light moved in a slow, predatory zigzag.

George stopped and motioned them to crouch behind a row of withered sunflowers. "He's back," he whispered.

Harold nodded, already fishing the recorder from his pocket. "He's not even pretending to be subtle."

They watched as Kevin worked the field. He moved with the frantic energy of a man trying to finish a dirty job before anyone noticed – one hand gripping a flashlight, the other wielding a long blade that flashed with each quick, downward arc. He'd stomp the nearest pumpkin, then slice the next, leaving a path of wounded gourds in his wake. Occasionally, he'd check his phone, the glow briefly illuminating his thin, haunted face.

Eleanor tracked his progress, making quiet notes. The silhouette matched what she'd seen on their earlier surveillance: tall, skinny, hunched, his stride just a little too long to be natural. She watched the way he flinched at the rustle of every stalk, the way he seemed to double-check each act of destruction, as if answering to a voice behind him.

Mabel's hand found Eleanor's in the dark, fingers cold and tight. "He's heading for the turkey pen," Mabel whispered. "The special one."

Eleanor nodded. "He's got the sack with him."

"Burlap," George confirmed, voice low. "Standard size. Enough for a bird."

Harold nudged his glasses up his nose, eyes never leaving the target. "Do you want me to roll tape now?"

"Wait till he's closer," Eleanor said. "We need him on record."

They trailed Kevin through the field, keeping to the furrows, shoulders bent low. The night was alive with the sound of wind through corn and the distant metallic clangs of the festival teardown. It was hard, dirty work — Mabel snagged her scarf on a dead vine, George cursed when his cane slipped in a rut, Harold's breath wheezed loud enough to scare a flock of starlings from a nearby tree. But they made steady progress, closing the gap one row at a time.

At the edge of the patch, Kevin paused. He glanced over his shoulder, suspicion or guilt painting his face gray in the moonlight. The four retirees melted into the shadows, holding their breath, barely daring to blink.

Then Kevin shrugged, bent to pick up the sack, and headed for Cornelius's enclosure.

It was a small pen, nothing fancy — just a circle of wire mesh and a rickety wooden gate, but the turkey within was magnificent. Cornelius stood in the center, feathers puffed and tail fanned, head cocked as if he understood the gravity of the moment. He did not flinch when Kevin approached, only watched with wary, predatory calm.

Harold pulled out the recorder, flicked the switch with a practiced thumb. The mechanical click was nearly inaudible, but in the heavy silence, it sounded like a starter pistol.

Eleanor gave the signal, the old Girl Scout code: three fingers raised, then a slow, deliberate wave. The others nodded. They'd rehearsed the move in the Starlight rec room — how to fan out, how to block every escape.

George went left, skirting the edge of the pumpkin rows. Mabel circled right, careful to stay out of sight behind a stack of old hay bales. Harold lingered near the pen, hunkered behind a bale and poised to catch every word. Eleanor waited a beat, then moved forward, keeping low, hands balled into fists.

Kevin fumbled with the pen's latch, muttering to himself. He bent to the lock, knife flashing as he cut the wire. Cornelius gobbled, offended, but did not flee.

Eleanor closed the distance, boots crunching the frost. She thought of all the hours spent worrying about this night — of her father's farm, of her mother's warnings, of her own children and the way she'd always believed she could fix things if she just tried hard enough.

Kevin never heard her coming. She was five feet away before he straightened, the sack clutched in one hand, the knife in the other.

The trap snapped shut with the satisfaction of a well-placed domino. George stepped into the moonlight, cane pointed like a conductor's baton. "End of the line, Kevin," he said, voice sharp as the cold.

Mabel emerged from the opposite side, scarf trailing like a banner. "We know everything," she said, a little breathless. "You can't run."

Harold played the ace, clicking the recorder and pointing it at Kevin's face. "Smile," he said, "you're on candid camera."

Kevin spun, wild-eyed. "What are you — ? You're not supposed to —" But the words failed him.

Eleanor straightened, folded her arms, and let the weight of the silence do the rest. "We know, Kevin," she said gently. "We saw you."

For a moment, he looked ready to bolt. But then Cornelius, perhaps sensing victory, let out a peal of laughter so loud and ridiculous that even Kevin had to smile, just a little.

They closed in from four directions, the old detectives and the turkey, forming a ring that no amount of desperation could break. The moonlight shone on the ruined patch, on the glint of the knife, on the face of a man who'd lost the plot but couldn't quite give up the ghost.

Eleanor looked at her friends – at George, steady and sure; at Mabel, already plotting the next move; at Harold, recorder raised like a trophy – and felt a small, fierce pride.

They had him. Now it was time to see what he'd do with his last chance to come clean.

...

Kevin's eyes darted from face to face as the four closed in, his bravado shriveling. For one breathless moment, he looked younger than any of them had ever seen him – barely out of boyhood, clutching the burlap sack like a toddler might a blanket. The flashlight in his hand trembled, then slipped from his fingers and spun, beam wobbling over pumpkin carnage before coming to rest on Cornelius's shimmering feathers.

Eleanor didn't bother with introductions. "It's late for gardening, Kevin," she said, voice calm but edged with steel. "You want to explain why you're out here with a knife and a sack?"

Kevin scrambled for dignity. "I –" He blinked, mouth working without a sound, then spat out the first thing that came. "I was just...checking the birds. Sometimes they get spooked at night. My uncle – he asked me to –"

George snorted, stepping closer. “Funny, I don’t see any scared turkeys. But I do see a field full of slashed pumpkins. Want to explain that, too?”

Kevin’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “I... there’s been raccoons, maybe, or —” He gestured wildly, hands shaking. “Look, I’m just following up. Thompson said to keep an eye out.”

Mabel kept her tone gentle, like coaxing a skittish cat out from under the couch. “That’s an awfully big sack for raccoons, dear. And last I checked, heritage turkeys weren’t nocturnal.”

Behind her, Harold fumbled with the recorder, making sure the little red light blinked. “Everything’s on tape,” he said softly, for Eleanor’s benefit.

The silence that followed pressed in around them, as solid and inescapable as the cold. Cornelius clucked in the background, sounding more amused than alarmed.

Eleanor drew herself up to her full height — impressive even with the years on her back. “We’ve seen the tracks, Kevin. We know about the missing turkeys, and the ruined crops. We even know you’ve met with the men from Riverview. So let’s stop pretending.”

For a moment, Kevin looked ready to bolt. But the ring of retirees was tight, and Cornelius blocked the only open route, wings spread like a sentry.

He let the sack fall. It hit the ground with a soft, pathetic thunk.

“Fine,” he said, defiance leaking out of him with every word. “I did it, alright? I trashed the pumpkins. I moved the birds. I—I did all of it.”

Mabel stepped closer, voice never raising above a hush. “Why, Kevin?”

His shoulders heaved, hands balling into fists at his sides. "Because none of it matters. The farm's done. You think my uncle's got a clue what he's doing? The bank's already called twice this month. The only thing worth anything out here is the land, and the only way to get him to sell is to make it worse."

Eleanor felt the sting of truth in that, old memories surfacing — lean years, impossible choices. She watched the anger in Kevin's face dissolve into something much sadder.

"He wouldn't listen," Kevin went on, voice cracking. "Riverview offered double what anyone else would pay. Said they'd keep the farm name, make it a... a memorial or something. All I had to do was convince my uncle he'd already lost. The developers promised a cut. A big one." He looked up at the sky, blinking back tears. "I could finally move out. Go to school. Start over."

George's tone softened, but only by a hair. "And the turkeys? The ones that went missing?"

Kevin wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I sold them. There's a guy at Riverview — they raise birds for restaurants. Heritage breeds fetch a fortune." He glanced at the pen, guilt twisting his mouth. "I left Cornelius. Couldn't do it. He's... family, I guess."

Harold scribbled furiously in his notebook, then looked up, glasses reflecting the moon. "How did you do it? The locks, the timing —"

Kevin shrugged. "I worked the night shift sometimes. Knew the routines. Most folks out here go to bed early, and once you're past the road, no one pays attention. I just... waited. Did what I had to."

Mabel reached out and gently laid a hand on his arm. "You didn't have to, you know."

He tried to jerk away, but her grip was surprisingly firm.

"I'm not a bad person," Kevin said, and for the first time he sounded like he believed it.

Eleanor nodded, feeling something shift in her chest. "You're not. But you made some bad choices."

George quietly pulled out Harold's phone and began texting — quick, precise, the way he'd once filled out case reports. After a moment, he caught Eleanor's eye and nodded: "Thompson on his way."

They stood together in the moonlit field, the five of them, with the broken pumpkins and the unimpressed turkey as witness. No one spoke for a long time.

Finally, Kevin let out a laugh, hollow and sharp. "Guess you'll call the cops now?"

"We could," Eleanor said. "Or we could start with your uncle. Let him hear it from you."

"That's worse," Kevin muttered.

"Maybe," George said, "but it's the right thing."

They waited. Kevin kicked at the frost, eyes fixed on his shoes. The flashlight beam rolled in lazy circles, sometimes catching his face, sometimes lighting up the pen. Cornelius fluffed his feathers, preening as if he owned the place.

Harold checked the recorder again, then looked up at Kevin. "If you really want to fix things, start by telling Thompson everything. No more secrets."

Mabel squeezed his arm. "We'll stay with you. If you want."

Kevin nodded, finally meeting their eyes. "Thanks," he whispered. "For not... I don't know. For not making it worse."

He slumped to the ground, cross-legged, the sack in his lap like a child's security blanket. The others sat beside him, Mabel first, then Eleanor and Harold. George stayed standing, watching the horizon for headlights.

No one said another word until the distant crunch of gravel signaled Mr. Thompson's approach.

...

The world had gone silent but for the crunch of tires over gravel. Headlights slashed through the field, glancing off ruined pumpkins and catching every flaw in the story Kevin had tried to build. Mr. Thompson's pickup rolled to a stop on the muddy shoulder, engine idling hard against the cold.

He emerged from the cab in a flannel shirt and boots, hair tousled by the wind and worry. The path from truck to pen was short, but it took him a long time to cross. He said nothing as he approached, eyes sweeping the scene – the heap of split gourds, the sack in Kevin's lap, the gathering of Starlight's most notorious busybodies, and at the center of it all, his nephew.

"Kevin?" he said, the single word so raw it seemed to cut the air.

Kevin tried to speak, but no sound came. The sack tumbled from his hands, limp as an abandoned hope.

Thompson stopped just shy of the circle, the distance between uncle and nephew suddenly measured in lifetimes. He looked at the ruined field, at Cornelius (who gobbled in theatrical protest), at the knife and the shame on Kevin's face.

"I told you to stay away from the patch," Thompson said. His voice was hollow, heavy with too many disappointments.

Kevin's jaw worked, his teeth clamped against the sob that threatened to escape. "I'm sorry," he whispered, staring at the ground. "I really am."

Thompson bristled. "You're sorry? That's what you have to say?"

The next words came out in a rush, like water through a cracked dam. "They offered me money," Kevin said. "Not just the developers. Riverview, too. They paid for the birds, and said they'd pay more if I... if I made it look like the farm couldn't make it." He choked on his own guilt. "I thought if I could help you get out, if I could —"

"If you could what, Kevin?" Thompson's face was red, not with anger now, but with grief. "Make me look like a fool?"

Kevin's knees gave out and he landed in the dirt, hands covering his face. "You don't know what it's like, Uncle Tom. The calls, the bills, the feeling that you're letting everybody down. They said you'd be happier without this place. That you could finally have a life."

"And you believed them." Thompson shook his head, voice softening. "Son, I never wanted a different life. This is my life." He looked at the others, searching their faces for judgment and finding only sad, resigned understanding.

George shifted, clearing his throat. "We've all made mistakes, Tom."

Eleanor nodded. "What matters is what you do next."

Thompson knelt, muddying his pants, and faced his nephew eye-to-eye. For a long moment, there was only the sound of

Cornelius clucking in the background, and the soft, embarrassed sniffing of a man who'd thought himself too grown to cry.

"You know what hurts?" Thompson said. "Not the farm. Not the turkeys. Not even the money. It's that you couldn't just come to me."

Kevin looked up, cheeks streaked and raw. "I was scared you'd hate me."

"I couldn't," Thompson said, "not ever." He reached out, not with a hug, but with a rough, tentative pat on Kevin's shoulder. The gesture was awkward, unfinished, but it was a start.

Mabel exhaled, blinking away her own tears. She sidled closer, helping Kevin to his feet while Harold offered a clean handkerchief. "You did the right thing, telling the truth," she whispered. "That's what saves people."

For a long time, they all stood there, the five of them and the turkey, surrounded by the messy aftermath of the night. No one tried to fix it, or make speeches, or promise that tomorrow would be easier.

After a while, Thompson helped Kevin to the truck, guiding him gently. George and Harold collected the tools and recorder, making sure to leave the field as tidy as it could be under the circumstances. Mabel stroked Cornelius's head, murmuring promises of better days to come.

Eleanor lingered, watching the moon set over the broken pumpkins. She felt the ache in her knees and the weight in her chest, but also something lighter – a kind of gratitude for having seen the worst and the best in people, often at the same time.

As the headlights swept back over the field and the truck pulled away, the four of them turned for home. Behind them,

Cornelius stood tall and defiant, his gobble echoing into the thawing dawn.

Eleanor smiled, already composing the headline in her mind: "Thanksgiving Saved by Local Heroes (and One Remarkable Turkey)."

They made their way down the rutted lane, arms linked against the cold, ready to face whatever the next day would bring.

Chapter 5

A Harvest of Gratitude

Sunrise at Harvest Moon Pumpkin Farm didn't so much creep in as it did declare itself, spilling a bright band of light over the low hills and setting the rows of pumpkins ablaze in orange and gold. It was the kind of morning that made you believe in new beginnings, even if your knees ached and your coffee was still cooling on the porch rail.

The Starlight residents, bundled in their autumn best, gathered in a loose semicircle in front of the barn. Hay bales lined the yard like pews, most occupied by the facility's bravest early risers — Eleanor noted at least two in pajamas under their windbreakers, and one who had paired a housecoat with duck boots. Mabel, George, Harold, and Eleanor staked out a spot near the front, all standing, not because they didn't want to sit, but because it felt more respectful somehow, after everything.

At the threshold of the barn, Mr. Thompson straightened his cap and climbed onto an overturned milk crate, a makeshift podium that wobbled but held. His face was ruddy with cold and something else — relief, maybe, or exhaustion. Or both, Eleanor decided.

He cleared his throat, and the rumble of conversation died away. "If you'd told me a week ago that I'd be addressing a crowd before breakfast, I'd have called you crazy." He smiled, the kind of awkward, self-effacing smile that made the wrinkles at his eyes triple. "But, well, sometimes you get lucky, and crazy shows up just when you need it most."

A ripple of laughter moved through the bales, not quite enough to make anyone spill their cider, but enough to break the chill.

Thompson continued, hands gripping the crate for balance. "I want to thank every single one of you. Especially the folks from Starlight. Some of you came out here for a hayride, or a cup of cider, or just to see if the old farm was still standing. Instead, you found a mess – and you helped clean it up, even when you didn't have to."

He hesitated then, a visible tremor running through his frame. His gaze flicked to the edge of the barn where Kevin stood, arms folded tight, shoulders slumped. The boy – no, the man, Eleanor corrected herself – looked like someone who had spent the night digging ditches and was now uncertain if he'd ever be allowed indoors again.

"Some of you have already heard about what happened," Thompson went on, voice catching. "About the missing turkeys, the ruined pumpkins, and all the rest. You've heard that my nephew, Kevin, was involved. That's true. He made mistakes – big ones." He nodded at Kevin, who met his uncle's eyes, flinched, but did not look away.

"But here's what matters," Thompson said, his voice gaining strength. "He owned up to it. He told me the truth, and he's working to fix it. That's more than most people do these days. I'm proud of him for that." He gestured, and Kevin stepped forward, hands buried deep in his jacket. His face was blotchy and raw from a long, tearful night, but his spine had some steel in it now.

"We're not calling the police," Thompson said. "We're not pressing charges. Kevin will stay on the farm, help make things right, and learn the value of honest work. I've made my peace with it, and I hope you can too."

There was a murmur in the crowd — approval, surprise, a little skepticism. Someone near the back said, “Good for you, Tom,” and others echoed it. Eleanor watched the stiffness in Kevin’s posture melt, just a little, as he scanned the faces and found more forgiveness than he expected.

Thompson let the words hang before taking a breath and moving on. “There’s one more thing. You all know about the developers. They wanted this place gone — paved over for condos or a golf course, or who knows what. I almost gave in. But thanks to you, and especially to the folks standing right here —” He gestured at the four sleuths in the front row, and every eye turned their way. Mabel smiled and did a modest little wave.

“ — I realized that it’s not about money, or even about pride. It’s about what this farm means to the people who count on it. So we’re not selling. Not to Riverview, not to anyone. Starting next season, Harvest Moon will be part of a community-supported agriculture program. We’ll deliver fresh produce and eggs and, yes, even pumpkin pie, straight to the doorsteps of folks who need it. We’ll take volunteers, school groups, retirees — anyone who wants to help. This place will belong to all of us, not just my family. And as long as I can put one foot in front of the other, I’ll see it through.”

The wind picked up, carrying the scent of damp hay and distant wood smoke. Eleanor thought the air tasted sweeter than it had the day before.

Thompson stepped down from the crate, wiping at his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. He pulled Kevin into a rough side-hug, the kind that says I’m still mad at you but I’m never letting you go. For a moment, the boy leaned in, his head bent, and then he straightened, looking taller than before.

There was a round of applause, more enthusiastic than Eleanor expected from a group with an average age well above seventy.

Mabel clapped until her palms went pink. Harold even whooped, a sound Eleanor had not heard since the Bicentennial parade in '76.

As the crowd dispersed toward the promise of coffee and pastries, George stepped up beside Eleanor and surveyed the scene. "It's good, what he's doing," George said, keeping his voice low. "Not every man can stand up in front of a crowd and say he forgives. Or that he needs help."

Eleanor nodded. "It takes more courage than most people think."

George smiled, a small, private thing. "Reminds me of someone else I know."

They watched as Thompson and Kevin started greeting residents, shaking hands and exchanging hugs. The two of them seemed different now – not just because the secret was out, but because they had made peace with it.

Mabel and Harold joined George and Eleanor, the four of them forming their own little conclave by the barn.

"Do you think they'll actually pull it off?" Harold asked, eyeing the now-lively patch of pumpkins and the still-sparse turkey enclosure.

"They've got a head start," Mabel said. "And if not, I hear Starlight's kitchen could use some fresh vegetables."

They all laughed, the sound mixing with the rising hum of the morning. Eleanor took a moment to commit the scene to memory: the smell of earth and cider, the sight of friends in their element, the sound of hope returning to a place that almost lost it.

She thought it was a very good way to start a new day.

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The smell of cinnamon and sweet hay lingered in the air as the crowd shuffled closer to the barn's long worktable, now transformed into a stage for the morning's next event. Mr. Thompson, who had exchanged his battered work gloves for a plaid dress shirt, beckoned the Starlight sleuths to the front with a broad, callused hand.

There, lined up with the care of a county fair judge, sat four pumpkins – each different, each carefully chosen. The table groaned under their collective weight and the anticipation of the moment.

Mr. Thompson picked up the first pumpkin and approached Eleanor, whose eyes widened at its symmetry. It was so perfectly round that, for a second, she suspected a trick. But the stem was twisted into a loop, a handle as elegant as a teacup's.

"This one's for you, Eleanor," Thompson said, holding it out with a mixture of pride and apology. "I've never seen a pumpkin so perfectly itself. Sturdy, steady, but with a little something unexpected on top." He winked, and the group chuckled.

Eleanor cradled the pumpkin, feeling the cool, smooth surface. "It's beautiful," she said, sincerely. "I'll never carve it. I might build a shrine."

Mabel pretended to swoon, earning a swat from Eleanor and another ripple of laughter from the hay bales.

Next, Thompson lifted a massive orange specimen with two hands and handed it to George. "For the one who sees everything, even what's buried. Heavy, sure, but solid. Keeps its shape, even under pressure."

George accepted the gift without fanfare but couldn't quite hide the pride in his posture. "My mother would have said it was a good pie pumpkin, but I think I'll just keep it on the windowsill. Reminder that sometimes the best things come with a little extra heft."

Thompson nodded, then turned to Mabel, for whom he had selected a pumpkin so wild with stripes and warts that it looked almost hand-painted. "I thought this one matched your scarf," he said, and the crowd lost itself in the comparison.

Mabel held the gourd aloft, modeling it like a rare purse. "This is the most fabulous pumpkin I've ever seen," she proclaimed. "It's got character. I love character."

Finally, to Harold, Thompson presented the smallest of the four – a squat, deep-orange pumpkin so flawless it resembled a piece of blown glass. "Sometimes the best work gets done without anyone noticing," Thompson said, lowering his voice for just Harold. "This is the pumpkin that outlasted the frost. Made it all the way through the season without a single blemish."

Harold's ears went red. "Thank you, Tom. It's... an honor."

The residents burst into a fresh round of applause, some of it polite, some of it genuine. Thompson waited until the noise died down, then raised his hands for silence.

"One more thing," he said. "Next Thursday, we're hosting a proper Thanksgiving. Everyone's welcome. There'll be pies and cider and, yes, a turkey – but not Cornelius," he added quickly, to scattered cheers. "He's going to be the guest of honor. Not the main course."

The Starlight group exchanged grins. Eleanor couldn't help but notice that, for the first time in days, George's jaw was

unclenched, Harold's notebook remained closed, and Mabel was simply taking it all in, eyes bright and happy.

They lingered by the table as the other residents came up to congratulate them, patting hands and sharing stories of pumpkin recipes past. The air buzzed with the contentment of a job well done and a future secured.

Somewhere behind them, the farm cat leapt onto the table and began sniffing Mabel's gourd. She shooed it away gently. "Not yet, darling. Let me admire it for a little longer."

George leaned in, surveying their haul. "Not bad, huh?"

Mabel grinned. "Best trophy I ever took home. And no risk of it gathering dust."

The wind picked up again, sending a swirl of leaves across the yard and rattling the corn stalks. Eleanor hugged her pumpkin close, warming her hands against its sun-cured rind.

"Ready to go home?" Harold asked.

"Not quite," Eleanor replied, smiling at her friends. "Let's enjoy this a bit longer."

So they did, standing together among pumpkins and cider, surrounded by the laughter of old friends and the hopefulness of a bright new morning.

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They left the farm with arms full and bellies fuller, a sense of accomplishment pressing even warmer against the October chill than the mugs of cider had. The bus driver, who'd spent the morning wolfing doughnuts in the shade of the van, greeted them with a look somewhere between amusement and awe as they approached, pumpkins in tow.

The Starlight regulars settled near the front, pumpkins tucked gently at their feet or, in Mabel's case, cradled like an infant. The rest of the residents trickled in, most too busy chattering about the feast to notice the sleuths' private bubble.

As the bus rumbled to life and lurched onto the two-lane road, the world outside blurred into streaks of scarlet and ochre. The morning sun, climbing fast now, made the fields and trees shimmer like a watercolor left in the rain.

For a while, they rode in contented silence, the only sound the low hum of the engine and Mabel's faint, intermittent humming.

George was the first to break it. "You know," he said, shifting his pumpkin into a more dignified position, "family isn't always what you expect. Sometimes it disappoints you. Sometimes it does the right thing in the end."

Mabel nodded, tracing a finger around the whorls of her pumpkin. "My mother used to say Thanksgiving was less about the turkey and more about putting aside the past, even if just for a day. One year, my cousin Bertram crashed the dinner with a girlfriend no one liked. Mom gave her the biggest slice of pie. Said it was the first step to forgiveness." She smiled. "They're married now, three kids. Never missed a Thanksgiving since."

Harold looked up from his phone, where he was calculating something only he could fathom. "The farm's going to do fine," he said. "Community-supported agriculture is the way of the future. Cuts out the middleman. Plus, the local paper will eat up the story – 'Seniors Save Family Farm, Pumpkin Economy Booms.'"

Eleanor snorted. "You should write headlines."

He grinned, sheepish. "I already did, for the tech newsletter. No one read it, but I enjoyed myself."

George leaned back, watching the landscape flicker by.
“Suppose we made a difference.”

“We did,” Eleanor said, quietly but with finality. “Not a bad way to spend a Thursday.”

The conversation drifted, as good company always does, toward other topics — football scores, rumors of a new dessert chef at Starlight, the peculiar way the bus seats always smelled faintly of dill pickles no matter the season.

It wasn’t until the bus slowed for a red light at the outskirts of town that Eleanor drew out her notepad, the one she used for PTA meetings and, more recently, for keeping track of clues.

She cleared her throat, and the others turned, sensing the shift in her energy.

“Speaking of family matters,” Eleanor said, tapping her pencil on the notepad, “has anyone heard about the strange noises from the east wing at night?”

George raised an eyebrow. “You mean the poltergeist rumor?”

Mabel’s eyes lit up. “Oh, I do love a good haunting.”

Harold perked up, already plotting. “Might be electrical. Or someone sneaking snacks after hours.”

Eleanor smiled at them all, savoring the anticipation. “I think we ought to look into it. Perhaps after the pie contest next week.”

They all nodded, the decision as good as made. Outside, the trees thinned, giving way to the familiar geometry of Starlight’s hedges and walking paths. The building itself looked smaller now, less imposing — maybe because they knew, after everything, that even a place full of ghosts and history and the aches of the past could still feel like home.

The bus pulled to a stop, brakes squealing. The four stood, gathering pumpkins and purses, and made their way to the front. As they stepped into the brisk air, Mabel gave her pumpkin a final, approving pat.

“Onward, my friends,” she said. “To new adventures – and maybe, if we’re lucky, another mystery or two before the frost sets in.”

They walked together up the path, four pumpkins bobbing in rhythm, the last of the autumn sun warming their backs and the promise of another case – however small, however strange – already growing in Eleanor’s notebook.

And if, later that night, a suspicious creak or a spectral wail echoed through the east wing of Starlight, well – there was no shortage of detectives ready to investigate.

After all, as George once said, family isn’t perfect. But sometimes, it gets the job done.

Not the end...

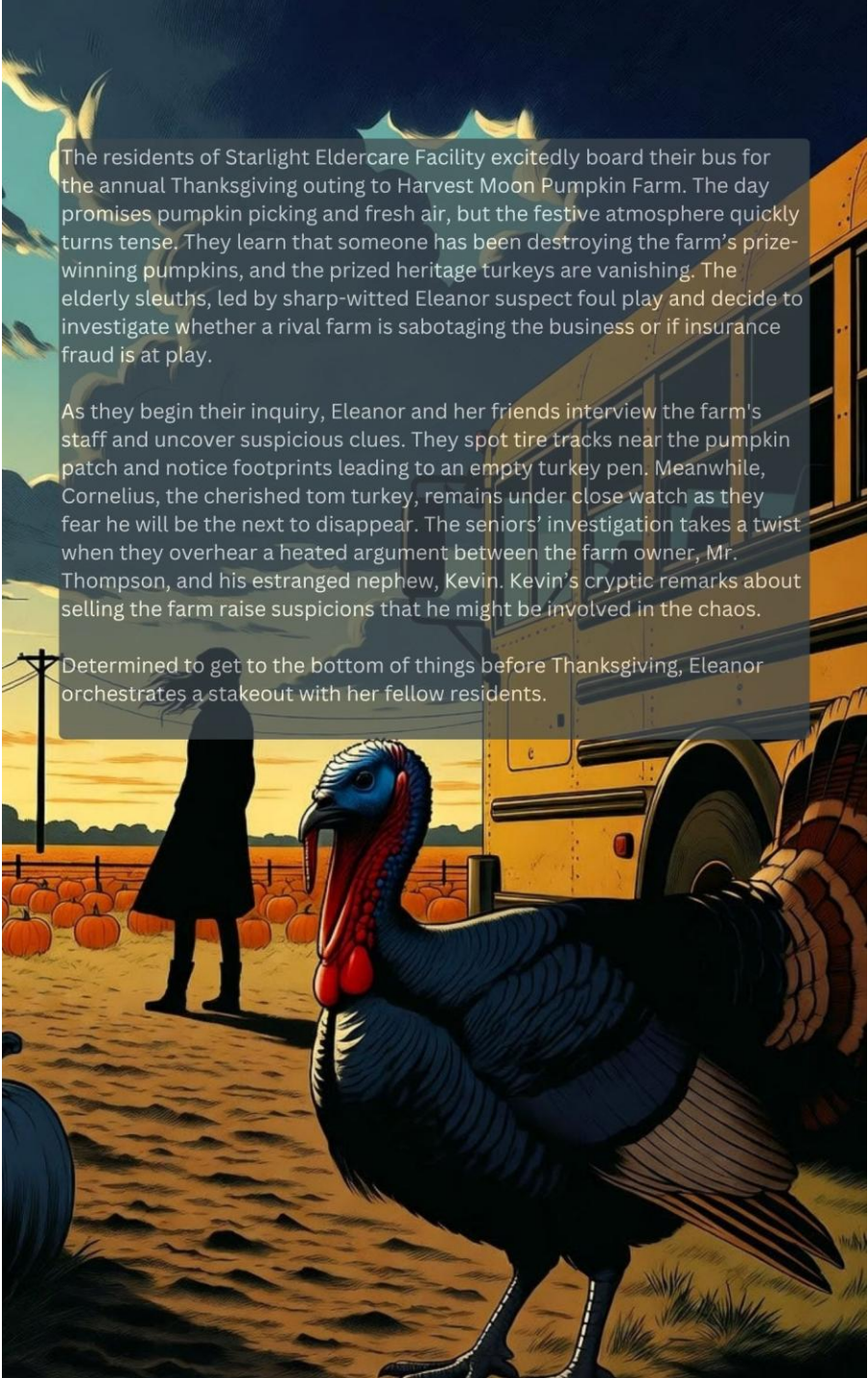
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The residents of Starlight Eldercare Facility excitedly board their bus for the annual Thanksgiving outing to Harvest Moon Pumpkin Farm. The day promises pumpkin picking and fresh air, but the festive atmosphere quickly turns tense. They learn that someone has been destroying the farm's prize-winning pumpkins, and the prized heritage turkeys are vanishing. The elderly sleuths, led by sharp-witted Eleanor suspect foul play and decide to investigate whether a rival farm is sabotaging the business or if insurance fraud is at play.

As they begin their inquiry, Eleanor and her friends interview the farm's staff and uncover suspicious clues. They spot tire tracks near the pumpkin patch and notice footprints leading to an empty turkey pen. Meanwhile, Cornelius, the cherished tom turkey, remains under close watch as they fear he will be the next to disappear. The seniors' investigation takes a twist when they overhear a heated argument between the farm owner, Mr. Thompson, and his estranged nephew, Kevin. Kevin's cryptic remarks about selling the farm raise suspicions that he might be involved in the chaos.

Determined to get to the bottom of things before Thanksgiving, Eleanor orchestrates a stakeout with her fellow residents.