

The Case of the Crooked Footprints

A Maplewood Mini Mystery

*The footprints appeared after midnight.
The rain should have washed them away.
But one set of tracks seemed to bend in the wrong direction.*



Behind The Bakery

It had rained hard most of the night in Maplewood.

Not thunderstorm rain.

Steady rain.

The kind that drummed softly against windows and left every sidewalk shining silver beneath the streetlights.

By morning, most of the puddles had settled into the cracks of the old alleyways behind Main Street.

That was where Bud found the footprints.

Behind Maplewood Bakery.

Mrs. Alder stood near the back delivery door holding a tray towel nervously between both hands.

“I noticed them right after sunrise,” she explained. “And they don’t make a bit of sense.”

Harlene crouched carefully near the muddy alley.

The footprints were deep enough to hold rainwater.

Large boot prints.

They began near the alley fence...

crossed behind the bakery...

then curved strangely toward the rear wall.

But something felt wrong immediately.

Bud sniffed one of the tracks carefully.

Then he sneezed.

Harlene narrowed her eyes.

“What in the actual mystery?”

Something About The Tracks

The bakery alley smelled like wet brick, cinnamon bread, and fresh rainwater.

Morning fog still drifted softly between the buildings while delivery trucks rolled slowly through town several streets away.

Harlene studied the footprints carefully.

Most people looked at where tracks started.

Harlene preferred noticing where they ended.

That was usually more honest.

The muddy prints crossed the alley clearly enough...

until they suddenly turned sideways near the back wall.

Not naturally sideways.

Awkwardly sideways.

Almost like someone had changed direction too quickly.

Or pretended to.

Bud wandered toward the old drainpipe attached to the bakery wall.

Then he stopped again.

Interesting.

Very interesting.

Near the drainpipe, the rainwater mud looked disturbed.

But not by boots.

By something narrower.

Something with wheels.



The Witnesses

Three people had seen the alley before sunrise.

And all three remembered something different.

Mrs. Alder — Bakery Owner

Claimed she heard footsteps around midnight while preparing bread dough.

Tommy Raines — Newspaper Delivery Boy

Said he saw someone wearing dark boots near the alley around dawn.

Mr. Pierce — Town Custodian

Insisted the alley had been completely empty when he checked the storm drains before sunrise.

That should have been impossible.

At least one of them had to be wrong.

Inside the bakery kitchen, warm bread cooled beside the windows while Bud paced slowly across the old tile floor.

Then he stopped beside a wooden rolling cart near the back door.

One wheel was covered in fresh mud.

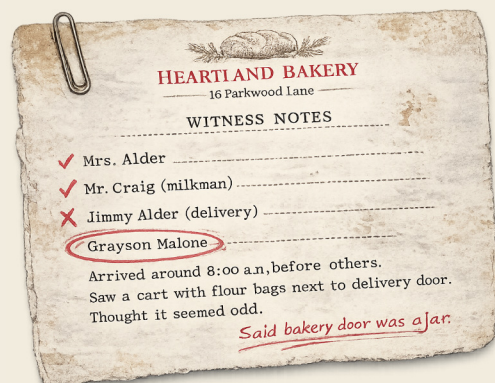
The exact same reddish mud from the alley.

Harlene crouched carefully beside it.

The wheel itself wobbled slightly when touched.

Crooked.

Bud wagged his tail once.



The Crooked Trail

Outside, Harlene returned to the alley with the bakery cart measurements written carefully inside her notebook.

The wheel spacing matched the strange narrow tracks near the drainpipe almost perfectly.

Now the alley looked completely different.

The large boot prints no longer felt important.

In fact...

they almost felt too obvious.

Harlene noticed something else.

The boot tracks remained unusually sharp despite the overnight rain.

Too sharp.

Fresh rain should have softened the edges hours ago.

Unless the footprints were made later.

Much later.

Bud sniffed the muddy ground again.

Then he trotted directly toward the stacked flour sacks beside the bakery wall.

One sack had partially split open.

Fresh flour dust coated the lower corner of the crooked bakery cart.

And suddenly...

everything clicked into place.



A Different Kind of Mystery

Back inside the bakery, Mrs. Alder looked increasingly nervous as Harlene spread the clues across one of the small café tables.

Outside, rainwater dripped steadily from the shop awnings while Maplewood slowly woke around them.

Harlene reviewed the evidence quietly:

- The boot prints were too fresh.
- The wheel tracks matched the crooked bakery cart.
- The flour sack had recently fallen.
- The muddy alley showed signs of movement before sunrise.
- And Bud noticed the wheel tracks long before anyone else noticed the footprints.

That mattered.

A lot.

Because the mystery wasn't about:
who walked through the alley.

It was about:
why someone wanted the footprints to be noticed at all.

Harlene leaned back thoughtfully.

Then she smiled slightly.

"I think somebody tried to hide an accident," she said softly.

Bud wagged his tail once.

Captain Harlene's Findings

Nobody had been sneaking through the bakery alley at all.

The mysterious footprints were fake.

During the storm, Mrs. Alder accidentally tipped over one of the heavy flour sacks while moving supplies using the old bakery cart.

The cart's crooked wheel became stuck in the muddy alley, leaving unusual wheel marks beside the drainpipe.

Worried people might blame her for damaging the alley deliveries, Mrs. Alder tried covering the wheel tracks before sunrise by pressing an old pair of rubber boots into the mud herself.

But she made one important mistake.

The footprints were too fresh.

The overnight rain had stopped hours earlier, meaning the tracks should have appeared softer and partially washed out.

Instead, the sharp edges revealed the prints were made after the storm ended.

Bud noticed the wheel tracks first because they carried the stronger scent of wet flour and bakery wood.

Not outdoor mud.

Mrs. Alder lowered her head sheepishly.

"I didn't want people thinking I'd made a mess of the alley," she admitted quietly.

Harlene smiled gently.

"Sometimes people create bigger mysteries trying to hide smaller accidents."

Bud wagged his tail once in agreement.

Outside, sunlight finally began breaking through the thinning rain clouds above Maplewood.

And behind the bakery windows, the first warm trays of cinnamon bread were ready for the morning crowd.

Case Closed

CASE FILE SUMMARY

Mystery:

Strange boot prints appeared behind Maplewood Bakery after a rainy night.

Key Clue:

The footprints remained too sharp despite the overnight rainstorm.

Detective Observation:

Bud noticed crooked wheel tracks before anyone focused on the footprints.

Final Conclusion:

The tracks were created afterward to hide a bakery cart accident.

Official Status:

CASE CLOSED

Investigators:

Captain Harlene & Bud

Maplewood Gazette Archives

Case File #002