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opening extract from

Olivia Kidney

written by

Ellen Potter

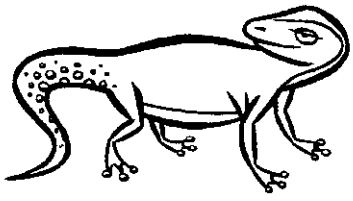
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CHAPTER ONE



Olivia Kidney's new home was an apartment building made of maroon and yellow bricks on New York City's Upper West Side. It was twenty-seven storeys high and it contained some of the most awful people you'd ever want to meet. They crabbed up the elevators with their cold, unfriendly faces. The people who lived above her stomped on the floor if she was talking too loudly and the people below her hit their ceiling with a stick if she was walking too loudly.

'I'm a human being!' Olivia had dropped to her knees, cupped her hands around her mouth and called down through the floor. 'I'm entitled to *move*! I'm not made of stone, you know!'

'Well, you walk like you are!' a muffled voice shouted up through her floor. Olivia's father, George Kidney, thought that was pretty funny. He had just taken the job as the apartment building's new superintendent. A new job for him and a new school for

Olivia. In the past two years, Olivia had changed schools four times. The problem was that George, who was the absolute nicest man in the entire United States, and possibly Canada, too, was a terrible superintendent. If he did manage to fix someone's shower head, you could be sure that the toilet would then overflow. If he installed someone's ceiling fan, it would come crashing down the next day like a crippled helicopter. Each time he was fired, he would have to find a new apartment building for him to superintend, and for him and Olivia to live in.

But this place . . . this place was the worst yet.

It was November and cold as heck. Olivia stood outside the building, fumbling through her rucksack for her keys. Usually she kept her house keys clipped to a hook on the outside of her rucksack. But today they weren't there. She figured she had absent-mindedly tossed them into her rucksack that morning. Now she pulled off her glove so that her fingers could wade through all the garbage – gum wrappers, five exploded pens, a book on seances stolen from her brother's bookshelf, a used Band-Aid, a loose-leaf notebook, and an old door chain that her father had given her and that she thought she might turn into a charm bracelet. Her fingers searched for the jagged shape of keys while an icy wind slapped at her ears and made her head hurt. Even her lips ached from the cold, and she tucked them inside her mouth for

warmth. She dug deeper into her rucksack, pawing around.

Nothing. A woman with a black-furred Russian hat on her head and a face like an irritated ferret came up to the door, jangled her keys loudly as if to make a point, then opened the lobby door.

'Oh, thank you! Just in time!' Olivia said, her breath coming out of her mouth in cold, blue smoke. 'I can't feel my toes any more.' But the woman slipped through the open door then pulled it shut in Olivia's face.

'Strangers need to buzz up,' she called through the door, pointing at the intercom buttons.

'I'm not a stranger!' Olivia called back. But the woman had already turned her back and walked away. 'I'm not a stranger,' Olivia muttered to herself. 'It's just that no one here knows me.' She wished that her brother, Christopher, was here. She never minded things too much as long as he was with her.

Olivia buzzed 12C once, knowing full well that her father wouldn't be home to buzz her in. The building was so large that he was always off fixing something. Hopefully, Olivia thought, he was also messing something up. Then he could get fired, and they could get out of this place as quickly as possible.

When no one buzzed her in, she sighed. In front of the building was a large cement planter with two threadbare saplings in the centre. Olivia sat down on

the low barrier and resumed the search for her keys. On the street in front of her a large group of children were playing freeze tag, a perfect game for the day's weather. They were screaming and laughing. One skinny, freckled girl was sitting on the cement bench watching, bundled in a coat that was too large for her, and screaming with them. They probably all lived in the building. They probably all had keys. Olivia hated them.

She turned her rucksack inside out, let all her stuff fall in a pile on the pavement, and stared at it: no keys. Great, just great. She picked up the seance book and started to put it back in the rucksack.

'They don't work, in general.' The voice came from behind her. She straightened up and turned. It was a boy with no shoes on. He was standing there, on the freezing-cold sidewalk, in his socks. The socks were not very clean, either, and a hole was threatening on his right big toe. He gave off the faint odour of a barnyard.

'Seances . . . you know, trying to contact dead people,' the boy said, pointing to Olivia's book. 'They don't generally work.'

'Do you live in this building?' Olivia asked. The boy nodded.

'I'm in your English class at school,' he said. Olivia was surprised that anyone in her class would know who she was. She had arrived at the new school in

the middle of the term. Everyone had already paired up into best friends or airtight cliques. Story of her life! The only time they seemed to notice Olivia was when she left early to go to her appointment with Ms Dart. Then a few of them would stare or whisper to each other about her.

'My name is Branwell Biffmeyer,' the boy said. 'I sit next to Wayne.'

'Wayne? Oh, you mean that kid with the thing?' Olivia asked, scrunching up her nose.

'It's a boil,' Branwell said defensively. He was a tall, sturdy-looking boy with dark, heavy-lidded eyes and dark brown hair. His hands were rough; the skin on his fingertips had hard, yellow calluses. He looked like he ought to be off playing sports somewhere. She didn't recognize him at all.

'Why don't you go off and play something,' Olivia said, her eyes stinging from the cold.

'I would, but it's my turn to give up my shoes,' he said.

'What?'

'There are eleven kids in my family and only ten pairs of shoes. It was my turn to give up my shoes.' Olivia looked at the group of kids playing tag. They were of all different ages and sizes. They were all fabulously freckled.

'You mean those are all your brothers and sisters?' Olivia cried.

'Um. Yup,' said Branwell. Olivia was moderately in awe. She, herself, had only one brother, Christopher, who was eight years older than her. She squinted. 'How many bathrooms do you have?' she asked.

'Just one,' said Branwell. Olivia nodded knowingly.

'You'll be meeting my father pretty soon, then,' she said, and began to stuff the rest of her things back in her rucksack.

Then she remembered something. Today, when she had been leaving English class to see Ms Dart, one of the boys had yanked her backwards by her rucksack. 'Freak,' he had hissed at her. 'Freaks go down to Ms Dart.' Olivia had heard something drop to the floor. Now she realized that the boy had probably yanked the keys right off their hook. But at the time her face was beet red with anger and embarrassment. She hadn't even turned around. In fact, she didn't even look to see who the boy was – for all she knew, it might have been Branwell Biffmeyer.

'You look cold,' Branwell said.

'Bug off,' Olivia told him.

'Why don't you go inside?'

'Well, I would if I *could*. But my keys are gone, thanks to *somebody*.' She raised her eyebrow at Branwell to see if he reacted with any guilt. But he only smiled and reached into the collar of his

shirt. He pulled out a leather necklace with three keys attached to a ring. She noticed his hands again. She had never seen such rough hands on a person. She wondered if he could feel anything through all the thickened skin. He opened the door for her and followed her into the building.

'All right,' Olivia said. 'Thank you.' She started toward the elevators and heard his socked feet padding behind her. She turned. 'Bye now.'

'How are you going to get into your apartment?' he asked. Good point. She hadn't thought of that. Inside, Branwell's barnyard odour was stronger.

She punched the elevator button. The elevators here took forever to come . . . that was another thing she hated about this place.

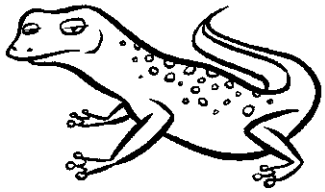
'Don't worry about it,' Olivia said.

'I worry about a lot of things,' said Branwell. 'That's just how I am. You can come to my house and wait.' Olivia could imagine what his house must be like – a crazy whorl of kids and, from the smell of it, sheep.

'No, thanks.' She heard the promising wind of the elevator as it whooshed down the shaft. The elevator door opened and Olivia gratefully slipped inside.

'We live in Six D, if you need us,' Branwell said before the door closed. Olivia didn't imagine that was going to be likely.

CHAPTER TWO



The elevator stopped on three. It made a stomach-clenching bobble before its metallic door hissed open. Two girls walked in, laughing and talking in low, secretive tones. When they saw Olivia they narrowed their eyes at her, as if she had been deliberately spying on them. One of them was very glamorous. She appeared to be about fourteen, just two years older than Olivia, but she looked like a woman already. She had creamy, pale skin, and one of her black eyebrows was plucked so that it arched up higher than the other.

'Push ten for us,' she said to Olivia. Olivia pushed the button for the tenth floor. The other girl had a plump face with dull, stupid eyes and a wide, mean grin. She was grinning when she got on the elevator and she never stopped grinning. She grinned directly at Olivia, and it made Olivia so uncomfortable that she looked away and stared up at the panel of num-

bered lights above the door. The girls whispered to each other again and then burst out laughing. They were staring at Olivia's trousers.

'We're sorry,' the glamorous girl said to Olivia. 'It's just the turn-ups on your trousers. They're so big!' Olivia looked down at her turn-ups. Maybe they were a little large. She had never thought about the size of trouser turn-ups. Now she wished she had. But, still, she tipped her head up defiantly and replied, 'There's nothing wrong with my turn-ups.'

'Nothing except you could carry all your spare change in them,' the glamorous girl said.

'And your school books,' the other one added. The elevator door opened and the girls stepped out.

'And a toaster oven . . .' Olivia heard their voices fade away down the tenth-floor hallway.

Olivia got off on the twelfth floor. It smelt of cooked onions. Over the years, Olivia had noticed that every floor in an apartment building has its own unique odour. In the last building she'd lived in, her floor smelt of old men's feet. Another floor she had lived on smelt like the juniors' department in Macy's.

Apartment 12C was at the far end of the hallway. She pressed the doorbell just in case her father had come home. No one answered. Olivia slid down to the floor. She'd just have to wait. At least it was warm in here. But her stomach was growling something fierce.

Why couldn't her father have a *normal* job and be home at *normal* hours?! The fact that she lost her keys was *his* fault really, when you thought about it. If he wasn't always getting fired from his jobs, Olivia wouldn't have had to go from school to school. And if she wasn't always the new kid in school, people wouldn't do nasty things to her – like swipe her keys. She decided then and there that when he did come home today, she was going to give him the Silent Treatment. He really hated that. 'But Sweetpea,' he would say, 'we used to be pals, didn't we? Don't shut me out. We need each other now more than ever.' He'd get all sad and flustered. Olivia wished he'd just get mad at her, but he never did.

She opened her rucksack and pulled out the book on seances. It was a very old book with a crackly binding. On its cover was an ink drawing of three people sitting around a table holding hands. Floating above them, horizontally over their heads, was a man in a smoking jacket and a bowler hat. No one saw him because they all had their eyes shut. Olivia made a mental note to always keep her eyes open during a seance.

The first chapter of the book was full of warnings. It told of all the bad things that could happen if you didn't conduct your seance properly. It seemed that dead people could be quite ornery about being disturbed. If you didn't summon them in the right way,

they might pinch your leg or tackle you to the floor. Then there were the boring dead people. If you had the misfortune to summon one of these, they could yabber on and on about bathroom towels and how the weather was so terribly changeable, and what sort of plants were best for indoors. And they would not leave, either, even after the seance was over. That was because none of the other dead people would talk to them. So they would float next to you, blathering and blathering without stopping, night and day. There were some instances where boring dead people literally drove living people insane. In fact, the book said, there are many psychiatric hospitals that are forty per cent full of people who have accidentally summoned a boring ghost.

The dead person that Olivia wanted to contact had been anything but boring. She suddenly felt a familiar ache of sadness in her stomach, but she shook it off quickly and returned to reading her book. At the end of the first chapter, on the very bottom of the page, there was a sentence with an asterisk beside it. The sentence said, *Remember, dead people also hold seances to contact living people.*

The door to apartment 12A opened and an old woman stepped out. In her arms she was cradling a tremendous garbage can. She was very tiny and the can was very large, but she had no trouble carrying it over to the incinerator – which was a little room in

the middle of the hallway – opening the door and dumping the contents down the incinerator chute. On her way back, she whistled a little in a melodious fashion. When she spotted Olivia, she stopped. She shook her head sharply.

'This won't do. Up. Up and in. Up and in.' She waved her fingers, shooing Olivia away.

Batty old thing, Olivia thought. She looked away and tried her best to ignore the woman. This became difficult as the batty old thing began to walk directly up to her. The woman's legs were bird-skinny. Her tights were sagging at the kneecaps and all around her ankles. Then Olivia saw that she wasn't wearing tights.

'No debris on the floor.' The woman stared down at Olivia. Olivia looked down at the floor. She had not made a mess. The only thing she'd pulled out of her rucksack was the book.

'There is no debris,' Olivia replied.

'Get up and go inside. Leave our hallway clean. Flat surfaces. Straight lines. Nothing dirty, nothing untoward.'

'I'm locked out, for your information,' Olivia said, suddenly realizing that *she* was the debris the woman was talking about.

'Well, then, sit on another floor. Go down to eleven. They have no shame on eleven.'

'I won't,' Olivia said. 'I live on twelve, not eleven.

I'm waiting right here.' She opened up her book again and pretended to be engrossed in Chapter Two, which was called 'How to Break the Ice with Your Ghost'. The woman stamped her tiny foot. Her feet were so small that Olivia wondered if she found her shoes in the children's department. The shoes she was wearing were shiny, white patent leather. Olivia had once had shoes like that. Christopher had said they made Olivia look like a nurse, so she didn't wear them again.

'Well, aren't you exactly like Principessa Christina Lilli!' the woman said to Olivia. 'Ah, but exactly! Just as stubborn and bad-tempered. Well, I did not suffer it from Her Highness. I will certainly not suffer it from the likes of you. You must come inside. We will have some Cambrian tea and Poor Richard's tarts. It's exactly what you want.' Olivia had no idea what these were but she had the feeling that they *were* exactly what she wanted.

'OK,' Olivia said, reluctant to admit defeat, 'but I'll only stay for a minute.'

'Yes, yes, Miss Full of Pride, whatever you like.' The woman rolled her milky eyes at Olivia and for a second Olivia could see the face of a young woman superimposed on the older, pinched face. It was only for a second and then it vanished. Olivia wondered if that was what it felt like when you saw a ghost.

Olivia snapped her book shut and tucked it back in her rucksack. Then she followed the strange little woman into apartment 12A.