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opening extract from

The Case of the Missing Cats

written by

Gareth Jones

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Chapter One



Dirk Dilly reclined with his feet resting on his desk, watching the smoke curl up from his mouth and fill the room. It spiralled up and then, as it caught in a breeze coming from the window, swooped back down. Business was slow. If the truth be told, he wasn't sure how long he'd been sat there. Two hours? Three? He could turn his head to look at the clock but it all seemed like so much effort. Anyway, he had never quite got to grips with telling the time. It was such a peculiar method of measuring things. Sixty seconds in a minute. Sixty minutes in an hour. Twenty-four hours in a day. He understood the principle, all right. It just seemed like a funny way to chop up time.

Dirk listened to the traffic passing and closed his eyes. He felt so relaxed that when the phone rang, harshly breaking the trance he was in, he fell backwards, his long, scaly tail lashing out, knocking the clock clean off the wall. It smashed on the floor.

'Rats,' he growled with such force that a small thin line of fire darted from his mouth. The flames caught a pile of yellowing newspapers that Dirk hadn't got round to filing yet, setting them alight.

'Big rats,' he said, springing to his feet. He threw the contents of his glass of neat orange squash at the spreading fire. It was woefully inadequate. The fire reached the curtains. Dirk looked around in panic. In the corner of the room was an old fire extinguisher. He whipped out his tail to grab it, but rather than grabbing it properly his tail caught the pull chord, immediately setting it off. White foam shot across the room and the fire extinguisher spun around, covering everything in sight. Everything, that was, except the fire, which was now blackening the ceiling.

'Big fat rats!'

There was only one thing for it. The painful option. He flapped his wings a couple of times, and lifted himself into the air. Then with a pre-emptive wince he threw himself against the curtains and ceil-

ing. The whole building shook and Dirk landed heavily on his desk. He lifted his head and looked up. The fire was out. There was a moment's pause before the pain registered.

'Owwww!' he groaned.

His scaly, red back was fireproof, but he had landed with some force on his soft, green underbelly, which was now making an alarming ringing noise.

'I must have hurt myself pretty bad,' he muttered worriedly. 'What does a ringing belly mean?'

Tentatively he lifted himself up on his four legs to examine the damage. The ringing grew louder. He took a deep breath and looked down. To his great relief he found he had been lying on the telephone. He climbed off the desk and sat down behind it, catching his breath before answering.

'The Dragon Detective Agency. Dirk Dilly speaking.'

'Hello, are you a detective?'

It was a human child, a girl, by the pitch of the voice.

'How old are you?'

'Eleven. Why?'

'That's too young. Goodbye.'

Dirk put the phone down.

Kids, he thought. *Time wasters.*

And that was that.

Or rather that would have been that had the phone not started ringing again. In actual fact, that was going to be anything but that. By picking up the phone a second time he made sure that that was about as far from that as was humanly – or even dragonly – possible.

'Hello?' said the girl's voice again.

'What do you want, kid?' he said gruffly.

'My cat's gone missing.'

'I don't do animals.'

On the other end of the phone there came a strange gurgling, hiccuping, wailing, noise. She was crying.

'Listen,' said Dirk, a little softness creeping into his voice in spite of himself.

But the noise kept coming.

'Listen,' he said more sternly.

The girl still sobbed.

'All right, I'll find your cat.'

The crying stopped suddenly and the voice said with surprising brightness, 'Great. My address is forty-three Elliot Drive. The cat's name is Willow.'

'And have your parents looked for the cat?' he asked.

'I'm not even sure they know we have a cat,' she replied.

'Why do you think it's been stolen?'

'Because Willow always comes in when I call her, but she didn't tonight.'

'Tonight? When did you last see her?'

'This morning.'

'So she's been missing for how long?'

'I normally call her for tea at about four o'clock.'

Dirk glanced at the space on his wall where the clock should have been, then looked down to where it lay on the floor. He flipped it over with his tail. It had stopped with the big hand pointing at the six, and the smaller halfway between the four and the five. If he wasn't mistaken, it was half past four.

'You're telling me that your cat has been missing for thirty minutes and you've called me?'

'I told you. She always comes when I call her.'

'Hey, kiddo, I'm going to put the phone down. Don't ever phone me again. Don't even think about it. Don't even think about thinking it. If you even think about thinking about thinking about . . . Where was I?'

But the girl didn't answer. Instead the awful noise started again, growing louder and louder like an air-raid siren. Dirk wasn't exactly soft-hearted and he had no love of humans, let alone their small annoying offspring, but the noise was so horrible that he

knew that even if he put the receiver down the memory of it would linger on. And so, against every molecule of common sense in his large, scaly body, he put the phone back to his long pointy ear and said, 'All right. I'll check it out.'

'Great,' said the girl cheerfully. 'My name is Holly, by the way. Holly Bigsby.'

After getting the cat's description, Dirk put the phone down and prepared to leave. It wasn't his usual sort of work. Normally he trailed cheating husbands, found teenagers who had run away from home or took photos of people off work with bad backs that were taking trampolining holidays.

He slipped his notebook behind his wing and peeked though the slatted blinds that hung in front of the window. Satisfied that no one was looking, he pulled up the blinds and pushed open the window. What could be simpler than a missing cat? It was probably stuck up a tree or had found a woman next door with fuller-fat milk or maybe it had been run over. No, this would be an easy case. He spread his wings, flapped them a couple of times and leapt out.