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Opening extract from

The Dragon Detective Agency: The Case of the Wayward Professor

Written by

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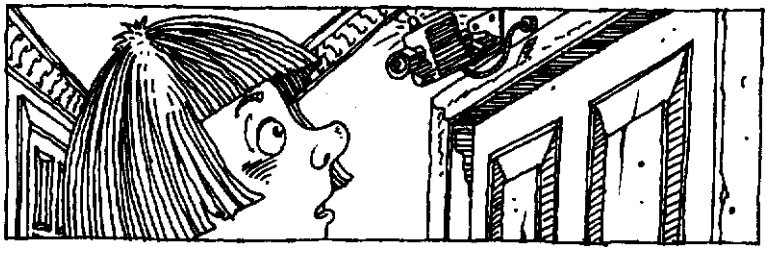
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Chapter One



Holly stopped by the door and, for a fleeting moment, considered making a run for it there and then. The electronic whirring of a security camera brought her to her senses, its automated sensor detecting her movement. This was not the time. *Remember the plan.* Holly looked up at the lens, stuck her tongue out at it and continued down the corridor to the principal's office.

The escape would be tonight, but it wasn't going to be easy. William Scrivener School prided itself on being as inescapable as it was impenetrable. Every corridor was watched by state-of-the-art CCTV cameras, monitored round the clock by a private security

service. The best time for an escape was at night when there were two guards on duty rather than three and it was easier to hide from the cameras. The problem with a night escape was the external doors which were opened using coded electronic wristbands. All pupils were issued with non-removable green wristbands but these were programmed only to open the doors during the day, unlike the teachers' red wristbands that worked round the clock.

But even if you got past the cameras, avoided being seen by the teachers who patrolled the corridors, and somehow got through the door, you still had to make it across the school grounds, without being picked up by security or smelt by the guard dogs, and find a way over, under or through the high wire fence that surrounded the school.

Then you were free to begin the ten-mile walk through the large forest to the nearest village, the aptly named Little Hope.

As the school of choice for the ridiculously rich and phenomenally famous, William Scrivener's security was the most intense Holly had ever encountered, but getting out of school was what Holly did best.

She arrived at the principal's office and approached the desk where a large woman with carrot-red hair and

blue eyeliner was painting her nails purple. Without looking up, she pressed a half-painted nail on the intercom button. 'Holly Bigsby is here for your daily meeting, Principal Palmer,' she said, her voice rich with sarcasm.

'Send her in, Angie,' replied the principal.

Holly entered the dark wood office. In the twenty-seven days she had been at the school this was her twenty-eighth visit to the principal's office, but it was the first time she had got herself sent there on purpose.

'Morning, Holly,' said the principal, adjusting his tie in the reflection of one of the many shiny awards that stood on the mantelpiece.

'Hello, sir,' replied Holly, glancing at the desk where his red wristband lay. On her previous visits she had noticed that, unlike her wristband, the principal's was removable and that he took it off on Fridays so that it didn't clash with his navy blue suit.

'What is it today, disruptive behaviour or insolence?' he asked, a tanned hand neatening his hair.

'Speaking out of turn, sir.'

'Ah.' Principal Palmer nodded understandingly. 'What happened?'

'Miss Whittaker told us about *When Petals Blossom* being on the syllabus.'

'Yes. Terrific news, isn't it? Our stock has gone up three points.'

Holly said nothing.

'It's had a lot of press coverage.' The principal grabbed a newspaper off a pile on his desk and read it out. 'Having already written her autobiography at the tender age of eleven, now pop's most famous offspring, Petal Moses will be studying it at school . . .'

Holly edged nearer to the desk, keeping her eyes fixed on the principal.

'. . . after it was selected for the English curriculum.'

Holly reached out towards the wristband.

'Described by one critic as "a deeply insightful account of what it means to grow up in the full glare of the harsh media spotlight," the book will be studied by year seven students across the country, including Petal herself.'

The principal chuckled at this and looked up. Holly quickly lowered her hand.

He smiled and continued. '"Petal Moses is one of our most talented students, and that's saying something," said Larry Palmer, the self-titled Principal of William Scrivener School."' He beamed at Holly, and placed the paper back on his desk.

Holly needed that wristband.

'Could you read me another one?' she asked.

Principal Palmer raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'Yes, of course,' he said, picking up another paper and reading: '"Studying her own autobiography won't be an unfair advantage for precocious Petal Moses . . ."'

Holly's hand neared the wristband.

'". . . because most critics agree that spoilt pop brat Petal didn't actually write it . . ."'

The principal slammed the paper down and Holly whipped her hand away again.

'Yes, well, there's always some degree of negativity from the cynics,' he said. 'Petal's your room-mate, isn't she? Aren't you pleased for her?'

Holly scowled. Petal Moses was pleased enough for herself. To say that Petal had got everything she had ever wanted was an understatement. She had got much more than that. If she wanted a new party dress, she was flown out by private helicopter to an exclusive department store, where a personal shopper awaited. If she liked a new pop band, they would be brought to the school for a private performance, which only she and her friends could attend. Even some of the teachers pandered to her. Miss Whittaker, their English teacher, had been beside herself when she announced that they would be studying her book, and Petal's fawning

friends had burst into applause.

'What happened when Miss Whittaker told you?' asked the principal.

'I said that I thought the title was stupid because petals don't blossom. I said that flowers blossom. Petals just fall off and die.'

'I see, and you said this in front of the whole class, did you?'

'Yes.'

'Now, Holly, you really must try to make an effort to fit in. William Scrivener is the finest school in the country. Your parents were very lucky to get you in at all. And you should feel honoured to be sharing a room with a student as special as Petal.'

'Special?' said Holly. 'There's nothing special about her?'

Principal Palmer sighed. 'I know that your father is important, too. MPs are important people, even back-benchers.'

'He's not a backbencher. Dad works in the Ministry of Defence,' Holly interrupted. 'He might make the Cabinet this year.'

'Very impressive, I'm sure,' he replied. 'But Petal's mother is known all round the world.' The principal clapped his hands together and, as though it was the

highest compliment anyone could ever be paid, added, 'And she's American.'

'Well, I hate her, and I hate this stupid school,' Holly shouted, lashing out and knocking the pile of newspapers to the floor.

'Holly Bigsby!' barked the principal, diving to pick them up.

Holly seized the opportunity, snatched the wristband and thrust it into her pocket.

The principal placed the papers back on to the table, careful not to crease them.

'I don't know what's wrong with you,' he said sternly, 'but if you think you can get expelled from this school, you can think again. Your parents have paid a lot of money to keep you here.'

This was Holly's sixth school. She was taken out of her last one after only one term when her dad's big-haired wife had decided to send her away. The general election had been called and she didn't want Holly's bad behaviour attracting any negative press attention. Dad hadn't phoned since she had been there, but she guessed he was busy with the campaign.

'Yes, sir, sorry, sir,' said Holly, her voice full of fake remorse.

He smiled kindly and tilted his head. 'You know, this

school can open many doors in life, but only if you let it. Why don't you make some friends?'

Holly didn't want any of these people as friends. They were all the same, spoilt rich kids who rode their ponies on Saturdays and argued over who lived in the biggest house, or whose parents were the most famous.

The only real friend she had made was Little Willow, but she didn't admit to this because Little Willow was a mouse and she didn't want Principal Palmer to think she was a nutcase. She had found her under the bed when she first arrived in her dorm and named her after her cat, Willow, whom she had left behind with a private detective she knew, called Dirk Dilly.

She missed Willow.

She missed Dirk too. She had written to him twice a week since being at the school, but he hadn't replied. She would have phoned but Petal had told her that all outgoing calls were recorded because of the school's paranoia that students might sell stories about each other to the press. Holly couldn't risk them finding out about Dirk. He wasn't just a friend. He wasn't just a private detective. Dirk Dilly was a real genuine, fire-breathing dragon.

Chapter Two



If the commuters had taken a moment to stop, they might have seen two yellow lights flicker on the sloping roof of the bank opposite the station. If they had looked up they might have noticed that the lights were actually two eyes, and that the flicker was, in fact, a blink. If they had peered very carefully, they would have realised that the eyes belonged to the dragon-shaped lump perfectly camouflaged against the rooftop.

But this was Moorgate, the business district of London, and it was a grey rainy Friday morning. No one stopped, or looked up, or paid the slightest bit of attention to the dragon watching them. They traipsed out of the tube station hurrying to get out of the

drizzle into their warm, dry offices, where they could sit down, make a cup of coffee and while away the day staring at their computer screens, counting the hours until they could go home again.

Dirk Dilly's yellow eyes focused on a man in a grey suit, struggling to open an umbrella without dropping his briefcase. A gust of wind caught the umbrella, blowing it inside out. The man cursed and threw it in a bin. The drizzle became rain and landed on the hairless top of his head, running down to the top of his clumps of grey hair that sprouted around his ears and the top of his neck.

He took a right turn down a narrow lane and Dirk sprang into action, his back reverting to its usual red as he flew, spreading his wings and gliding down to another roof. He had to be careful in this part of the city, where bored workers might easily glance down from their tall office blocks and see him.

The consequences of being seen were unthinkable, which was why most dragons avoided cities, preferring to hide in more remote corners of the globe – the bottom of the deepest oceans, the top of the highest mountains, or far down in the belly of the earth itself.

Many years ago, the Dragon Council realised that it would be impossible to share the world with the race

of strange bipedal mammals that called itself mankind. A conference was called high in the Himalayas. All of dragonkind voted on whether to annihilate humans before they created weapons so powerful as to make them impossible to destroy, or whether to go into hiding until mankind went the way of the dinosaurs. The dragons in favour of fighting rose into the air, while those who wanted to hide stayed on the ground, and it was decided by majority vote that mankind would be allowed to run its course. Attacking humans, being seen by a human, or allowing a human to find any evidence of dragon existence were all made punishable by banishment to the earth's Inner Core.

But Dirk was quick and experienced and, like all Mountain Dragons, whenever he was at rest he could blend his skin to match the surface beneath. It was a useful skill in this busy part of the city. Dirk's work had brought him here many times before, following cheating husbands who told their wives they were working late, or taking pictures of disgruntled employees conducting secret meetings with rival companies. London was full of corruption and deception and Dirk had seen it all.

The man turned down an alleyway. Dirk jumped again, grabbed on to a flagpole that stuck out of the

side of a building, swung round twice, catapulting himself into the air and down on to the next building, where he stopped dead. The alleyway led on to another road, where the man entered a large glass-fronted building. He greeted the security guard and took the lift to the sixth floor, where he hung up his coat and settled down at his desk.

Dirk settled too, blending with the office roof, and preparing for another dull day's detective work. This wasn't the most exciting case in the world, but business had been quiet since his last big job, when he had been hired to find a missing cat in South London and ended up foiling the plans of a band of rebel dragons, known as the Kinghorns, intent on destroying mankind. He had also found the cat.

Since then, he had looked out for any dragons in the human world or any signs of what their mysterious leader, Vainclaw Grandin, might be planning next, but hunting Kinghorns wasn't going to pay the rent and he was getting tired of hiding from Mrs Klingerflim, his landlady.

He had received the call five days ago. Dirk conducted all his business over the phone.

'The Dragon Detective Agency,' he said, 'Dirk Dilly speaking.'

'Oh, hello, yes, I need your help,' a female voice replied nervously.

'What can I do for you, madam?' he asked, his feet on the desk, watching Willow jumping up, trying to catch the smoke mice he had been blowing, looking perplexed each time one vanished beneath her paw. Never learning. *Stupid animal*, thought Dirk, stroking her with his tail and wondering why Holly still hadn't been in contact. Maybe she was enjoying her new school and making some human friends for a change.

'My husband has been acting suspiciously,' said the woman. 'I know his work is important to him but he's become increasingly secretive, he gets strange phone calls and comes home and locks himself in his study every night.' She sounded tearful. 'I feel like I'm losing him.'

'OK,' said Dirk. 'I'll find out what he's up to, but are you sure you want to know? In my experience secretive husbands are very rarely organising surprise parties for their wives.'

'I need to know,' she said, 'before it's too late.'

Dirk took down the details.

Professor Karl Rosenfield
Scientist for a company called NAPOW

Wife, Carolyn Rosenfield
Married 23 years

Fast forward four days and Dirk had never followed anyone less suspicious. Every day was the same. He kissed his wife goodbye and walked to the station. He always bought a copy of the *Telegraph* from the newsagent in the station, picking up the newspaper in his right hand and handing over the correct change with his left. He caught the 8:11 train to Liverpool Street, travelled one tube stop to Moorgate, where he exited and walked to work. He took the same route every day, spoke to the same security guard for the same amount of time, took the same lift to the same floor, hung his same coat in the same place and sat at the same desk until lunchtime, when he bought the same sandwich (ham and pickle on brown) from the same sandwich shop.

At half past five every day he did the whole journey in reverse, reaching home at between 18:24 on a good day and 18:38 on a bad one. After dinner, he went upstairs to his study while his wife watched soaps on her own in the living room. He kept a blue roller blind pulled down in the study window, so Dirk couldn't see inside.

Today was Friday and Dirk was expecting the same, so it came as a surprise when at half past five instead of grabbing his coat, the professor remained at his desk, staying there another hour until everyone had left the building and the sun had gone down, then slipping out of a side door. Instead of his usual briefcase, he carried a large silver case, and rather than walking to the station he hailed a black cab.

The sky was dark, the air, cold and moist. Dirk moved to the edge of the building, spread his wings and glided to the next rooftop, landing into a forward roll then springing up again. He followed the taxi to the outskirts of the financial district, where the buildings looked older and grubbier. It stopped by a disused red-brick hospital, which had worn brickwork and smashed and boarded-up windows. Dirk landed on the roof and peered over the edge.

Professor Rosenfield paid the taxi driver and watched him drive away. A man at the other end of the road was selling watermelons outside a nearby mosque. Rosenfield glanced round then slipped inside the old hospital.

Dirk found a door on the roof, shouldered it open and entered, pulling it shut with his tail and following a flight of stairs down.

He moved quickly and silently through the gloomy building, stealthily slipping down the corridors, listening for footsteps. Dirk wasn't easily scared but there was something spooky about the old, dark and deserted hospital corridors.

He heard the professor's voice coming from the floor below.

'Hello?' he said. 'Is there anyone here?'

Dirk noticed a light coming from a hole in the floor. He crouched down and put his eye to it. He could see Professor Rosenfield enter what looked like an old operating theatre, carrying a torch. He looked nervous.

'Hello?' said Rosenfield again. 'Are you . . . Are you there?'

'Do not come any further,' said a deep baritone voice. Dirk couldn't see who it belonged to.

'I can't see you,' said the professor.

'That's the idea,' replied the voice. 'Is that it?'

'Oh yes, yes. This is it.' He held up the silver case.

'And you are sure no one suspects anything?'

'Positive. The AOG project is top secret, but I can't see what use it is to you. I told you, I can enter coordinates, but you can't operate it without . . .'

The deep voice interrupted him. 'This is not your concern, professor.'

'What about your side of the bargain?' asked the professor.

'It's in the parcel,' said the gravelly voice.

The professor walked to the middle of the room, where he picked up a brown parcel.

'Open it,' said the voice.

The professor did so excitedly like a child opening a Christmas present. Dirk couldn't see what was inside, but he saw the professor's face light up and a tear form in the corner of his eye. 'My goodness,' he gasped. 'Is it real?'

'Yes, and there'll be more once you have reprogrammed the machine. The coordinates are also in there.'

The professor looked up vacantly then blinked and said, 'This is very marvellous.'

'Thank you, Professor Rosenfield. Now go home and I will contact you shortly with details of where you should go next,' said the voice. 'Please make sure that no one knows of this.'

'Gosh, no.'

Rosenfield tucked the parcel under his arm, picked up the silver case and left the room.

Dirk kept his eye on the room below, wanting to catch a glimpse of the owner of the deep voice. He

shifted slightly to get a better view, waiting for him to step into sight, but no one appeared. He heard a noise and raised his head, but not quickly enough. A sharp pain shot through his skull and he slumped on the ground, knocked unconscious.