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opening extract from

Weird Street: The Riddle of Dr. Sphinx

written by

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For Andrew and Granny Elspeth with love

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The problem: My old bike. I am growing too big for it, but we can't afford a new one as Dad is off work with a broken leg.

The brainwave: Ask Mr Maini at the corner shop if he has a paper round so I can save up for some new wheels.

The dilemma: There is *a paper round, but it takes in Weir Street and I've heard that the people who live there are* weird.

The hero: Me, of course. Jonny Smith. I'm not scared – it's only a paper round. And just how weird can the people in Weir Street be…?

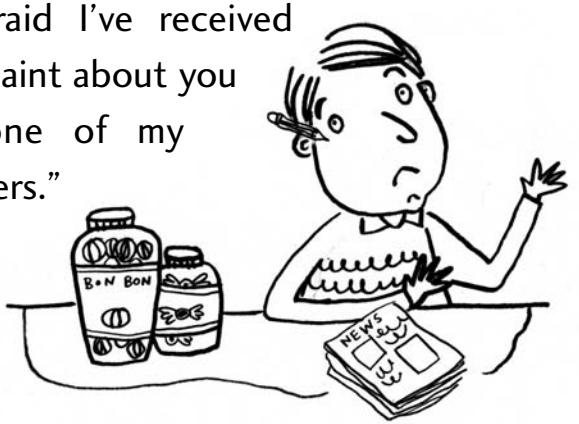
Chapter One



It was Monday morning and I was cycling to Mr Maini's shop to collect the papers for my round. I have to get up early, though not nearly as early as Mr Maini. Even so, he's always smiling and cheerful.

But not today.

"Ah, there you are, Jonny," he said. "I'm afraid I've received a complaint about you from one of my customers."



A complaint? I thought hard. What had I done?

"Er, some of the Weir Street numbers are a bit strange," I said. "Did someone get the wrong paper?"

"No, but there is someone who has to look in his garden every morning for the paper because it doesn't get delivered to his house."

"Oh," I said. "That'll be Dr Sphinx, the archaeologist, at number 36."

Mr Maini nodded. "He doesn't mind in dry weather, but when it's raining his paper is a soggy mess."

"Sorry," I said. "I hadn't thought of that. But don't worry, I'll take it right up to the front door today… If I can find it," I added, under my breath.

"Good," smiled Mr Maini, and handed me my luminous, orange bag.

But it *wasn't* good.

The truth is, I have never actually seen Dr Spinx's house. Never even got close to it. As soon as I open the creaky gate, I start to feel shaky. The garden is so overgrown it's like entering a jungle. Tall grasses brush my ears, and spiky plants tug at my clothes. Enormous spiders swing past and leave webs that cling to my face and hair. I brush them away immediately, but I'm sure I can feel millions of spiderlings scuttle down my neck.



Then there are the strange rustlings. Sounds that say something scary is lurking in the undergrowth, just out of sight, ready to pounce… That's why I always just throw the paper in the direction of the house, and get out of there … fast.



But now Dr Sphinx had complained, so that won't do. Now I will have to open the creaky gate and wade my way through the shoulder-high grass. Now I will have to do my best to ignore the strange rustling

sounds and the spiders' webs. Now I will have to try to find the front door of number 36, deliver the paper, and somehow get back out of there alive…

I slung the orange bag over my shoulder, jumped on my bike and headed for Weird Street. I stopped at number 13 to deliver Captain Cross-eyed's paper. Scarface Jack, his one-eared cat, was sitting on the doorstep, but the huge pirate was nowhere to be seen.

I delivered a few more papers before I got to number 34 and a half. Mr Tipp, the inventor, and his robots live there. His house is built right into the side of the hill and has an oak door that used to belong to a castle. There's no letterbox, so I always leave the paper in the old milk churn on the step. I didn't see Mr Tipp or any of his robots, but I did hear a muffled explosion coming from inside the house.

"Mr Tipp's busy inventing again," I smiled.

Then I stopped smiling. The next house was number 36. The house belonging to Dr Sphinx. The house I had never actually seen. I plucked up my courage and opened the gate. In front of me, the shoulder-high grass moved gently in the breeze. And I could hear rustling sounds. I parted the grass and started to go forwards. The rustling sounds got closer. And closer…

Suddenly, I was aware of eyes watching me. Of ears listening to me. Of whiskers twitching at me.

Suddenly, I was surrounded by cats. Cats of all colours. Some dark, some light, some patchy, some stripy. They came in all sizes, too, including one that had an artificial leg with a tiny wheel on the end. Her name was Inca. I'd met her before, and I knew that Mr Tipp had made her the leg after she'd

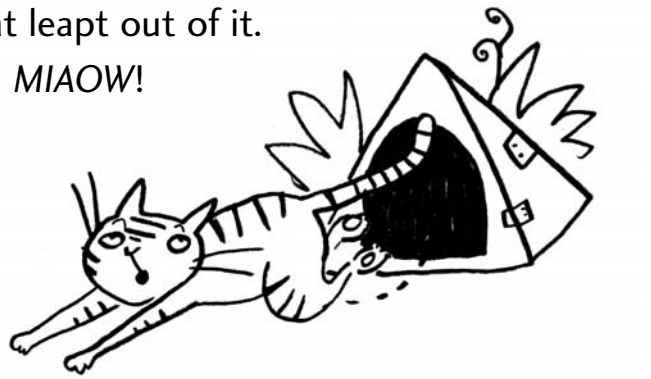
lost her real one in a car accident. But the cats had one thing in common – they were all gazing at me unblinkingly. Except for a big orange one. He arched his back and gave a bad tempered *HISSSSS*.



I hissed right back. "I've got a cat called Noggin and I'm not scared of you," I said. I hoped I sounded braver than I felt.

I crept forwards, with the cats slinking along at my heels, till I came upon a pyramid-shaped, wooden box. A startled cat leapt out of it.

MIAOW!



"Sorry, Tiger," I gasped. I'd met him before, too, and recognised him by his stripy tail.

Tiger gave me a green-eyed stare then scampered off through the long grass. Perhaps he knows where the house is, I thought, and followed him as best I could.

Soon I came to a clearing, and there was the house. At least, I *think* it was a house, but it wasn't like our terraced one. It looked more like a ruined temple, with a grand

entrance and a tall column on either side of the front door. The door had an old-fashioned car horn nailed to it. Above the horn was a notice saying, TOOT and COME IN.

"No way," I muttered, and looked for a letterbox.

But there wasn't one.

"Oh well," I shrugged. A lot of the houses in Weird Street had no letterboxes. I was just about to put the paper into what looked like a big, stone horse trough, when a loud gong sounded.

BONNNNNG!

I got such a fright I stepped back and fell into the trough. The orange cat leapt onto the edge and hissed at me so loudly, I thought he was going to pounce.

"Help! Help!" I yelled, and my voice echoed back. "*Help*! *Help*!"