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Opening extract from

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AND THE PHONEY MACARONI

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Chapter One

The dinosaur didn't move.

It hadn't moved for a hundred and fifty million years.

For most of that time it had been buried underground, but now it was standing in the main entrance hall of the Natural History Museum, staring at visitors through its empty eye holes.

Timothy Malt stared back.

Imagine being a dinosaur, he thought. How would that feel?

Actually, you wouldn't be able to feel very much at all. If you were dead. And had been for a hundred and fifty million years.

But imagine being a real dinosaur, thought Tim. A living, breathing dinosaur, knocking over trees and shaking the earth with every step. Would you realise that you were the biggest, meanest creature on the planet? Or would you go around feeling a bit nervous, always worrying that you were just about to bump into someone even bigger and meaner than yourself?

'Ah, there you are!' said a loud voice.

Tim turned round to see his mother marching across the museum's shiny floor to meet him. 'I've been looking for you everywhere. I thought we said we'd meet by the diplodocus.'

'This is the diplodocus,' said Tim.

‘Is it?’ Mrs Malt stared suspiciously at the dinosaur as if she suspected it of trying to trick her in some way. Then she looked around the hall. ‘Where are Max and Natascha?’

‘They’re outside,’ Tim told her. ‘Max said he needed some fresh air and Natascha went with him. I told them I’d stay here and wait for you.’

That wasn’t actually what Max had said. In fact, he’d said that museums were boring and if he had to look at one more stuffed bear or another lump of meteorite, he’d go completely nuts. But Tim couldn’t see any reason to repeat that. He knew his mum wouldn’t want to hear it. She’d immediately start complaining that she’d made such an effort to bring them all the way to the museum and didn’t anyone appreciate all the work that she did on their behalf and no one understood how difficult it is to be a mother these days and how about saying ‘thank you’ for once rather than complaining all the time. Tim had already heard the same speech a million times from his mum and he really didn’t want to hear it again, so he thought it was better just to say Max and Natascha wanted some fresh air.

It was half term and Mrs Malt had taken the day off work. This afternoon, she had brought the three children to the Natural History Museum and let them wander about all by themselves, looking at the exhibits. While they were seeing the museum, she sat in the café, checking her emails on her phone and catching up on some work. For Mrs Malt, that was the greatest miracle of modern technology: you could work even when you weren’t working.

‘Shall we go and find Grk?’ said Tim. ‘He must be going crazy.’

‘Grk will be fine,’ replied Mrs Malt. ‘He doesn’t mind spending a little time alone.’

‘A little time? He’s been there for hours!’

‘He’s been there less than an hour, actually,’ said Mrs Malt. ‘And the window is open, so he’ll be absolutely fine. But you don’t have to worry, we’ll go and get him right away. Now, where are the others?’

‘This way,’ said Tim.

He and his mother walked out of the museum.

Just outside the main entrance Natascha Raffifi was sitting on a bench, scribbling in her journal. No one knew what she was writing. It might have been a diary or a novel or some poetry. She was very secretive about her writing. She never let anyone read her journal, and promised to inflict horrible punishments on anyone she caught sneaking a peek at the pages.

Max Raffifi was standing a little distance away, juggling with three stones that he’d picked up from the path. He noticed Tim and Mrs Malt walking towards him but he didn’t acknowledge them. He didn’t want to break his concentration.

As you probably know, Max and Natascha Raffifi were originally from Stanislavia, a small country in eastern Europe, not far from Russia. When their parents were murdered, they and their dog Grk came to live with the Malts. If you want to find out the full story you should read *A Dog Called Grk*.

‘That’s brilliant!’ said Mrs Malt, clapping her hands.

‘You’ve been practising, haven’t you?’

‘A bit.’ Max didn’t take his eyes from the stones.

In fact, he’d been juggling for several hours every day. Last weekend he’d twisted his ankle playing tennis, and the doctor had told him not to pick up a racket for at least the next fortnight. Nor was he allowed to run anywhere. Without tennis or jogging to keep him occupied Max had been going crazy. Until he discovered a set of three juggling balls that Tim had been given for Christmas and never opened.

‘Let’s go back to the car,’ said Mrs Malt. ‘We’ll take Grk for a quick walk in the park. And then we’ll be home in time for tea.’

Natascha closed her journal. She, Tim and Mrs Malt walked down the curving pathway that led to the exit on Cromwell Road. Max followed a few paces behind them, trying to juggle while he walked. He managed to keep it going for a few paces then he missed one of the stones, made a wild grab for it and ended up dropping all three on the ground. He left them there. Back in the car, he had his juggling balls, which worked much better than stones.

The four of them waited till the traffic lights turned red then crossed Exhibition Road and walked through a small, leafy square where Mrs Malt had parked on a meter.

There were two men standing beside the car. They appeared to be looking through the back window.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Malt. ‘I hope they’re not traffic wardens.’

‘They don’t look like traffic wardens,’ said Natascha.

She was right. Traffic wardens usually wear smart uniforms covered with shiny little buttons. These two strangers looked more like ordinary businessmen; they were wearing black suits and white shirts.

‘What time is it?’ Mrs Malt glanced at her watch. ‘Even if they are traffic wardens, the ticket shouldn’t have run out yet.’

She quickened her pace.

Tim, Natascha and Max hurried after her.

As Tim came closer to the two men he noticed something odd about them. Not their clothes. Or their shoes. Or their haircuts. All of which looked entirely ordinary. No, it was their faces which were odd: both men looked exactly the same. They must have been twins.

One of the men looked up and saw the Malts and the Raffifis walking towards him. He muttered to his companion. They stood there for a moment, deciding what to do, then turned and walked briskly in the opposite direction.

By the time that Tim, Natascha, Max and Mrs Malt had reached the car, the men had disappeared round the corner.

Inside the car Grk was standing on the back seat, wagging his tail, overjoyed to see them all. He threw himself at the window, his paws scrabbling against the glass, and barked desperately, begging to be let out.

‘We’re back!’ called Natascha, waving through the window.

Tim said, ‘Will you open the door, Mum? He must be suffocating in there.’

While Mrs Malt was opening the car, Max walked down to the end of the street and looked for the two men, but they seemed to have disappeared. He frowned. Who were they? Why were they looking in the car? Had they been planning to break in? But why would anyone be silly enough to break the window of a car that had a dog inside?

'Hey, Max! Come on!'

Tim beckoned. Grk was already out of the car, the lead clipped to his collar. The others were ready to go.

Max took one final look up and down the street but couldn't see any sign of the two men. He walked over to the others and they headed towards the park. Grk led the way, his tail wagging and his nose in the air.

None of them looked back the way that they had come.

Which was why none of them noticed two men about fifty metres behind them, darting from car to car and corner to corner, keeping out of sight while following them to the park.

Chapter Two

Earlier that day, not very far away, a small man had been speaking in a loud voice.

'Our country needs a new prime minister,' he said.

He might have been small, but he spoke with great authority.

'Our new prime minister must be strong,' he continued. 'He must be determined. And, more than anything, he must have courage. My friends, there is only one man in Italy who is fit to be our new prime minister, and this man is . . . Me!'

Giovanni Mascarpone, the thirteenth Duke of Macaroni, paused for a moment, waiting for the inevitable applause.

None came.

No one clapped. No one shouted. No one cheered. In fact, no one made any noise at all.

That was because no one could hear him.

The Duke of Macaroni was talking to himself.

He was standing in a lift, heading towards the top floor of one of the smartest hotels in London. While he was speaking, he had been looking at his own reflection in the mirror on the wall.

He liked what he saw.

The Duke of Macaroni was extremely short, but you only noticed that when you saw him standing next to

someone else. When he was alone – in a photograph, for instance, or on TV – your eyes were immediately drawn to his handsome face. He had a strong chin, gleaming white teeth and a mane of thick, black hair. He was wearing a neatly tailored black suit, a white silk shirt and a blue tie. If you walked past him in the street, you would know immediately that you were looking at someone important, someone famous, someone who mattered.

He had been practising this speech again and again for the past few days, taking advantage of every spare moment to go over his words.

Tomorrow he would be back in Rome, standing in front of a thousand people, giving the most important speech of his life, and he didn't want to make any mistakes.

Cameras would broadcast his speech all around the country. Millions of Italians would hear his words. Millions of Italians would nod their heads. Millions of Italians would stamp their feet. Millions of Italians would wave their fists. Millions of Italians would join his party and vote for him.

That was his plan, anyway.

And that was why his speech needed to be perfect.

The lift pinged. The doors slid open. The Duke of Macaroni stepped out and walked briskly down the corridor towards the penthouse.

His bodyguards saw him coming and stepped aside.

The duke always posted two bodyguards outside his suite. He didn't like taking any risks. In this hotel, the

security was impeccable, but it was always better to be safe than sorry.

Inside the penthouse, the duke found Maria, his wife's maid, and Peppi, his wife's little black and white dog, but there was no sign of Carla herself.

'Where is my wife?' he asked the maid.

'The duchess is getting ready, Your Excellency,' replied Maria. 'She just has to—'

'Getting ready?' interrupted the duke. 'But we're meeting some of the most important people in Great Britain. We can't be late! Where is she?'

'In the bathroom, sir. But she doesn't want to be disturbed.'

The Duke of Macaroni didn't care. He marched across the heavy carpet and rattled the bathroom door.

It was locked.

He hammered his fist on the door and shouted, 'Carla?'

There was no answer.

The duke shouted louder and hammered harder. 'Carla! What are you doing in there?'

His wife called back: 'I'll be out in a minute!'

'A minute isn't good enough! Come out now!'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm not ready yet.'

'We're late,' shouted the duke through the wooden door. 'Can you hurry up?!'

'Relax, sweetie-poppet,' Carla shouted back. 'I told you already, I'll be out in a minute.'

The duke fumed.

Sweetie-poppet? Sweetie-poppet? What did she mean, sweetie-poppet?

Sometimes the duke was very glad that no one could hear his wife talking to him. At other times he wondered why he had ever married her. Yes, of course, she was one of the most beautiful women in the world, and he loved her, and, even more importantly, so did the Italian public. Even if they didn't want to vote for him as prime minister, they would vote for her to be the prime minister's wife. But why did she have to call him sweetie-poppet? And, even worse, why was she always so late?

The duke was Italian, so he was used to people being late, but his wife was later than anyone he had ever met. She was late for everything! Even the most important appointments. Didn't she understand that they were meeting some of the most powerful men and women in Great Britain? Didn't she care about her husband's ambitions? Didn't she want him to become Prime Minister of Italy? Didn't she want to be the prime minister's wife?

The Duke of Macaroni stomped back into the sitting room.

Maria had gone. She must be fussing around in her mistress's bedroom. But Peppi was there. And, as usual, as soon as Peppi saw the duke, he started growling.

Grrrr!

'Oh, shut up,' snapped the duke.

That was a mistake. At least Peppi thought so. He leapt down from the sofa and growled even louder.

Grrrrrrrrrr!

'Don't you dare growl at me!' yelled the duke.

Peppi growled again, baring his teeth.

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

The Duke of Macaroni wasn't in the mood to be growled at. Especially not by his wife's stupid little mutt.

They had never liked one another. From the moment that they met the duke and Peppi had been competing for Carla's affections. Each of them wanted to have her entirely for himself.

Of course, neither of them had any choice. Carla wouldn't give up Peppi for anything in the world, and the Duke of Macaroni wasn't going to change his choice of wife just because she had a dumb little dog, so the two of them had to put up with one another. In front of her, they even pretended to like one another. But when she wasn't looking, they showed their real feelings. Peppi bit the duke whenever he got the chance and the duke kicked Peppi as often as he could.

Like now, for instance.

No one was watching. Carla was in the bathroom and Maria was in the bedroom. It was the perfect opportunity for a little kick. The duke was wearing a pair of pointed, polished, black brogues, and he aimed one of them at the mutt, kicking him squarely in the ribs.

Peppi rolled across the carpet, waving his little legs in the air and squealing in agony.

The duke grinned. He felt better already. One little kick wiped away all his troubles. He had forgotten his wife and her infuriating lateness. He had even forgotten

that the Prime Minister of Great Britain would be waiting in 10 Downing Street, wondering why the future Prime Minister of Italy was keeping him waiting.

I should kick Peppi more often, he thought to himself.

He got his chance right away.

Peppi picked himself up and threw himself across the room, determined to get his revenge on his mistress's husband.

Peppi's mouth was open. His teeth were barred. He nipped at the duke's ankle.

'Ow!' squeaked the duke.

If Peppi was human, he would have laughed. Instead he cheerfully waggled his tail and came back for another bite.

The duke tried to kick him.

Peppi dodged out of the way, then lunged back.

'Get off!' snapped the duke and tried to kick him again.

Peppi was too quick. He nipped the duke's other ankle.

Now the Duke of Macaroni was dancing around the room, trying to get out of the way. He jumped backwards. Then sideways. And lifted his leg out of harm's reach.

Peppi darted after him.

The duke swung around and gave the dog a vicious kick in its middle.

The tip of the duke's boot struck Peppi right in the ribs, lifting him off the ground.

The little black and white dog soared through the air and slammed headfirst into the middle of the marble fireplace.