

The Phantom Thief

Pete Johnson

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Also by Pete Johnson

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About the Book

You are in danger.

The first time Alfie sees the boy, he appears as if from nowhere in the school detention room – the ‘padded cell’. There’s something odd about him and Alfie is definitely not pleased when he realises the boy has nicked his new jacket. But a ghost? His new friend Sarah is convinced – so convinced she is prepared to ghost-watch with him.

That’s when the warning message appears, scratched out on the blackboard by a phantom hand ...

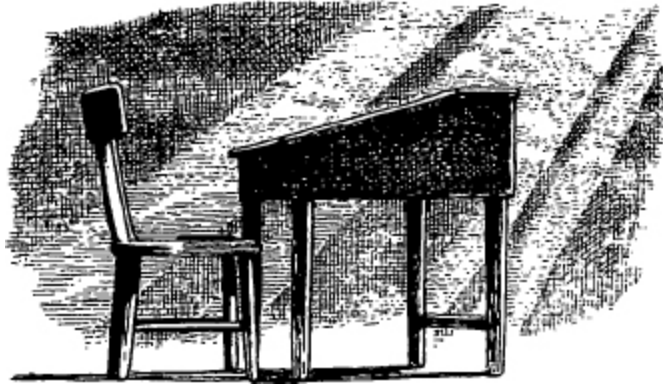
THE PHANTOM THIEF

Pete Johnson

Illustrated by Peter Dennis

CORGI YEARLING BOOKS

*This book is dedicated to:
Jan, Linda, Robin, Harry and Adam; and Anne Everall.*



CHAPTER ONE

I DON'T SCARE easily.

I wanted to tell you that first because, well, lately, something very strange has been happening to me.

And I've been scared out of my wits.

It started just the other day when I was sent to the padded cell.

Mr Crumble (we call him Crumbly) made me walk in front of him. He kept one hand on my shoulder all the way, as if he was afraid I'd try and escape. The padded cell was right at the end of the corridor.

I'd never been in there before. No-one from my class had. I was the first. It was a weeny little room: dark and cold. There were broken chairs stacked up at the back, an ancient blackboard, a window about the size of my thumbnail and a wooden desk and chair for the prisoner.

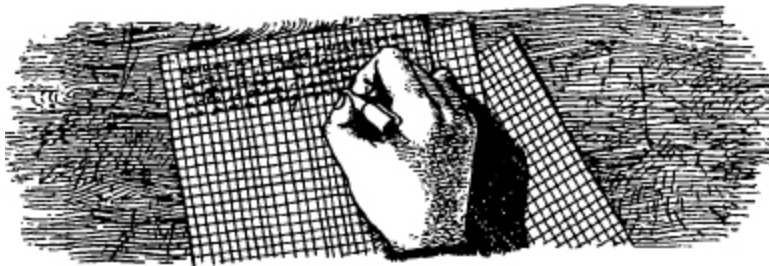
'You can sit down.' Crumbly spoke very quietly. And his lips never moved.

'Now you are here for some training in your own time.' That's what he calls detentions: training. He told us that anyone whose name appears in his black book - 'the naughty book' - three times will have extra training. Since September, five people from my class have got their names in the naughty book once. No-one has been in there twice. And only one name appears three times. Mine.

But he's always watching me: just waiting to pounce. You ask anyone.

Crumble handed me a piece of paper. I had to write I MUST BEHAVE PROPERLY IN CLASS on both sides. That didn't seem too bad until I saw it was graph paper with hundreds of micro lines. If I missed even one line out I would be back here for more training tomorrow.

Crumbly paced around the room while I wrote. Every so often he would lean over my shoulder. I could hear him frowning. He's got a grey moustache which exactly matches his grey suit. And none of his suits fit him properly. They are far too baggy. I'm sure he buys them at jumble sales.



He said: 'I have to go but I shall return very shortly. On no account are you to leave this detention room. Do you understand, Alfred?' (Everyone else in the whole universe calls me Alfie).

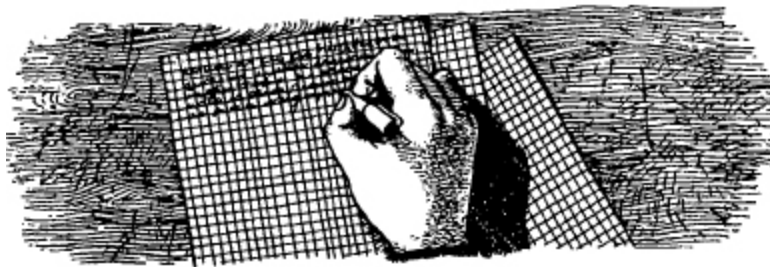
When he says my name he pronounces every syllable. 'Al - f - red.' I can mimic his voice. Once I did an impression in the classroom. It sounded exactly like him. Everyone was in stitches until they spotted him in the doorway. He didn't say anything. But he knew I was taking him off.

The next day I told a joke in his lesson. Mrs Macey, my teacher last year, always used to laugh at my jokes, but he made me stand on my chair and told the class to laugh at me. He was trying to make a show of me. Then he said he was tired of the way I kept turning round to see if I'd got a reaction. So now my place is right at the back. None of my mates sit anywhere near me now.

I should have been writing my lines. Instead I sat staring up at all the cobwebs. There was a little forest of them around the light. And it had turned very quiet. It was as if someone had turned the volume right down. Not a sound. I didn't like it. It was kind of eerie.

It seemed as if everyone else had gone. That I was the only person left in the school. I picked up my pen and started to write. I love making up stuff. I can write stories for hours. I had this idea. I started writing.

A spaceship has landed. And the aliens have sent everyone to sleep, except me. The aliens had forgotten about me in here. But not for long, as they've got supersonic hearing. They can hear a crisp packet being opened from a hundred miles away.



And moments later they burst into the padded cell. Soon it's full of aliens. They all have short spikey haircuts (hedgehog haircuts we call them), goofy-looking noses, jug ears and cheeky grins. In other words, they look exactly like me.

'We've come to take you back,' they said. 'Your real home is actually in another dimension on another planet. You've been trapped down on Earth long enough. Come and join us and be happy for the rest of your life.' I didn't argue. But I decided I'd better leave Crumbly a note.

'Dear Mr Crumble, I am off to my real home up there in the sky, far away from you. If I don't see you again I'll remember the good times.

This will take me no time at all, as there weren't any.'

I stopped writing. I gazed down in horror at what I'd done. I'd filled up both sides of Crumbly's graph paper with

my story. He'd go mad when he read it. What could I say? My pen took my hand hostage. I could never let him see it. I shivered. It was getting cold in here.

I'd have been freezing if I hadn't been wearing my new jacket. A black bomber jacket.

I chose it. It has orange lining which is the best lining you can get. Mum wanted to put my name in it. She had this horrible cotton label all ready. But that would have made me look a right mummy's boy. In the end I let her sew the label inside one of my pockets. No-one would ever see it there, but it kept her happy.

I drew my jacket around me. It was too cold to write. Perhaps that could be my excuse. My fingers had gone numb.

I practised making my fingers look stiff. Then I looked up and nearly jumped out of my skin.

There was someone else in the room

A boy who looked exactly like me.



CHAPTER TWO

I GAPPED AT him in amazement. Had I conjured him up? Had he wandered out of my story?

Now I was being daft. But I hadn't heard the door open. I just looked up, and there he was. Still, sometimes when I'm thinking hard I don't hear things.

The boy didn't move any nearer to me. He just stood by the door looking bewildered, as if he couldn't quite believe he was there. He was wearing our hideous, green uniform. Strange I'd never seen him before.

'Hello,' I said at last. 'What do you want?'

He didn't answer. He just looked very puzzled. Finally I walked over to him. Up close he didn't look so much like me. He was quite a bit smaller. And his hair was much longer. It looked like a bush. And he didn't smile at all. He was very serious.

He must be new. He'd been sent here as a joke.

'Are you new?' I asked.



He opened his eyes wide. But he didn't answer. I wondered suddenly if he was an exchange student from France or Germany. A group came over in the summer. Maybe he was from another one? If so, it was a bit mean directing him in here. Were some boys sniggering outside? I couldn't hear anyone.

'Do you speak English?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said, slowly. 'And I am in Mrs Porter's class.'

'Mrs Porter,' I repeated. 'There's no teacher here called that, I'm afraid. Still, I'm always getting people's names wrong. Perhaps you mean Mrs Macey. She was my teacher last year.'

He shrugged helplessly.

'Don't worry about it,' I said. 'Actually, you're not supposed to be here at all. This is the detention room, the padded cell we call it. I was sent here by this really mean teacher ...'

Suddenly he swayed forward as if he was going to faint. I darted towards him and pushed him on to my chair. For a moment he sat there with his head in his hands. I didn't know what to do. Should I get help?

Then he started muttering something. I couldn't make out what he was saying. I crouched down. He was shivering. His face was deathly pale.

I heard him say: 'Need help.'

'You need help?' I prompted.

He looked up. He had the same large blue eyes as me. He looked so unhappy I felt sorry for him. I wanted to help. He seized hold of my sleeve.

'In danger.' I made out those two words. But I couldn't hear any more. His teeth were chattering too much. I felt uneasy. There was something wrong here. Something bad.

A shudder ran through me.

I got up. 'I'm going to get someone.'

He struggled to speak.