

SLEUTH ON SKATES



**To my very own *Maman chérie*, who
thankfully isn't at all like Sesame's.**

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SLEUTH ON SKATES



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CHRIST'S COLLEGE





I

You're not born a supersleuth on skates; you become one.

And believe me (me's Sesame Seade, as it says on the cover), there are more requirements than you'd think.

What you need is, primo, a pair of roller skates (purple) and secundo, this simple little philosophy of life:

If there are as many connections in your brain as there are stars in the universe, why ask for superpowers? If your feet can run and skate and if your hands can climb and swim, why want to fly?

Oh, yes, you also need a mysterious mission. And let me tell you, there aren't as many of those





as there are roller skates and philosophies of life. Especially not in Cambridge, where I live. It's just a small city with a university in it, and probably the most boringly peaceful place in England, though I haven't been absolutely everywhere.

But one superior Sunday, after eleven years, five months and seventeen days of waiting, a mysterious mission found me—and at last I became Cambridge's number one self-made supersleuth on skates.

It all started very much like a normal Sunday afternoon. A normal Sunday afternoon is when my parents have all the time in the world to



ask each other bizarre questions about me. "I don't know," said Professor Seade (my mother), "whether our daughter's particularly bad manners come from a naturally evil personality or from some neglect on our behalf."

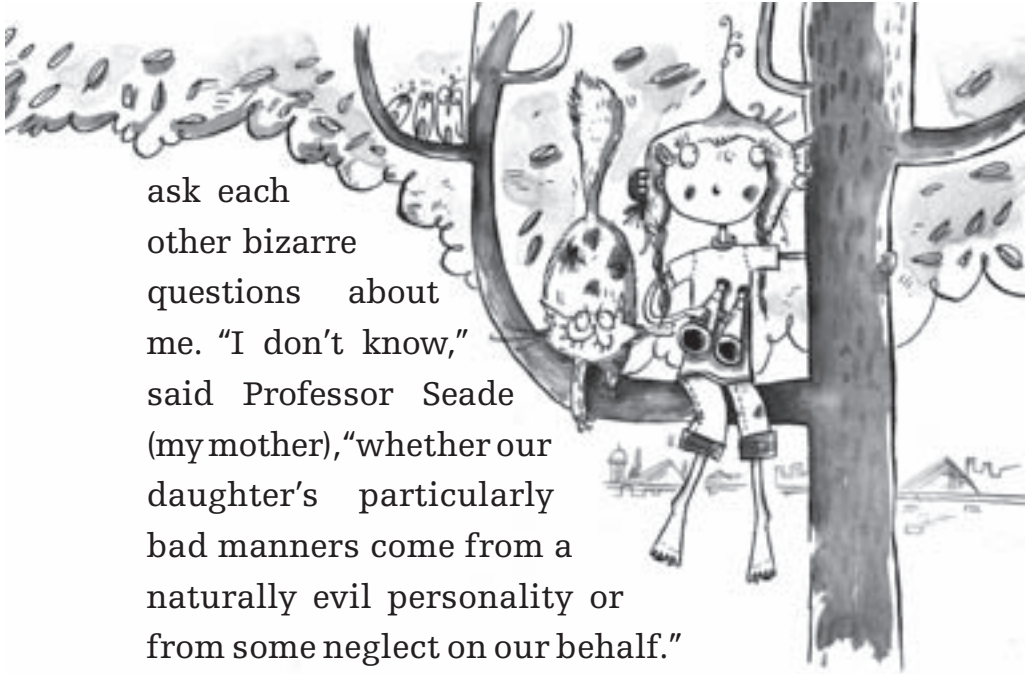
"Children are not naturally evil, darling," said Reverend Seade (my father), "so I'm afraid we must have done something wrong."

They both looked up at me. Up, because I was up a tree.

"What are you doing, Sophie?"

My parents, I'm sorry to say, live under the illusion that their daughter is called Sophie Margaret Catriona Seade, which makes no sense. Call me Sesame.

"I'm playing with Peter Mortimer and my binoculars."



“Don’t look into students rooms: it’s rude.”

“Mother, I never look into students’ rooms. It’s either boring or disgusting.”

Living around students isn’t easy, but I have to endure it because my house is in a college, and colleges are where the university stores its students. They sleep there, eat there, work there, and produce a lot of noises and smells in the process.

I live in a college for parent-related reasons: my mum is the Head of Christ’s College, Cambridge University, Cambridge, United Kingdom, Earth. That makes her the local queen. That makes me the local princess, which means I can cross that off my to-do list: good to get it out of the way. As for Dad, being married to Mum could make him the local prince consort, but he prefers to be the college Chaplain.

“Tree to Earth, Tree to Earth! Warning! Peter Mortimer is getting ready to jump down!”

They didn’t listen to me.

“Earth, do you copy? Peter Mortimer is in jumping down mode, something serious!”



Still didn't listen.

"That's Peter Mortimer, Charlie-Alpha-Tango! Crash expected in three-two-one . . ."

They should have listened, because Peter Mortimer landed on Dad's head, and apparently it hurt.

"That cat!" said Dad. "I'll have his dirty claws removed!"

"I'll have you know that God created every single one of his dirty claws!" I protested.

"The problem with Sophie is that she's a manipulative little Gorgias," sighed Mum.

My parents' favorite sentences follow this simple recipe:



1. *Sigh*
2. *“The problem with Sophie is that she’s a”*
3. *negative word*
4. *“little”*
5. *obscure name.*

Once in a delicious blue moon, I get:

1. *Smile*
2. *“The good thing about Sophie is that she’s a”*
3. *positive word*
4. *“little”*
5. *obscure name.*

“Get out of the way, Chubby! Go back into the house!” said Dad.

My parents, I’m sorry to say, live under the illusion that Peter Mortimer is called Chubby. I don’t think it’s fair to name someone after



a weight problem. Understandably, Peter Mortimer resents Dad and Mum. He brings them dead things to express his violent feelings towards them. Like now.

“Oh, not again! Chubby, can’t you leave the mice alone?”

“Well, Mother, how ironic.”

Mum slaughters twenty mice a day. She’s a Professor of Therapeutics, which means she makes lab mice sick, tries to cure them, and fails most of the time.

“How does she know what ironic means?” asked Dad.

“God knows. She must have heard it from one of the students.”

Not one to blow my own trumpet, but I seem to have a taste for sophisticated terminology, which means difficult words.

“I have a theory to explain Peter Mortimer’s passion for hunting,” I said.

“Let’s hear it then,” Mum muttered.

“It’s all based on a big misunderstanding. When Dad says ‘Let us pray’ six times a day,



Peter Mortimer thinks he means 'Let us prey'."

I had to explain, because they couldn't see the difference like you can.

Dad sighed. "The problem with Sophie is that she's a blasphemous little Thomas Aikenhead."

I wouldn't want you to think that my parents don't really care about me. I could see through my binoculars that Mum was reading an article in *The Sunday Times* called "The Joys and Sorrows of Having an Only Child," and circling things with a pencil.

"Tree to Earth! Tree to Earth! Earth, do you copy?"

"For goodness' sake, what is it now? Can we never have a peaceful Sunday?"

"Porter approaching fast! Collision with garden expected in three-two-one—"

Knock-knock!

Mum got up, folded her newspaper, and crossed the garden to open the tiny green door, behind which stood Tod the Porter. Porters are the sleepless sentinels and guardian angels of the college. They know absolutely everything



about the place
and its students,
and believe me,
there are things
you really don't want
to know about the latter.



"Hello, Tod," said Mum. "Please come in. Everything all right?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Tod, walking into our garden. "You know the student I told you about this morning?"

"Goodness me, she's still missing?"

"We thought she might have gone home unexpectedly, but we've just spoken to her parents—she's not there."

"Who's missing?" I asked.

"Oh, hi, Sesame. I hadn't seen you up there."

"Hi, Tod! Who's missing?" I asked louder, as they'd all suddenly gone a bit hard of hearing. Through my binoculars, I could see Tod looking at Mum, who looked at Dad, who looked at me.

"Don't scream like that," said Mum. "One of our students has disappeared. Tod, I think it's



time to call the police. I'm sure it's nothing, but we can't take any risks. I'll be through in a minute."

"Who is it? Maybe I can spot her with my binoculars. Maybe she's stuck on a roof like the last one."

(Edmund Sutton, last year. He stayed stranded on a roof for a whole Friday in the manner of Robinson Crusoe.)

"She's called Jenna Jenkins," said Tod.

I looked everywhere on the roofs for someone who looked like a Jenna Jenkins, but in vain.

"Roof hypothesis tested and eliminated," I declared.

No reply. Dad had gone to wash the blood off his scalp. Mum and Tod had gone to the Porters' Lodge, at the college's entrance, which is the best place for the Porters to check with their laser-beam eyes that only tourists and students walk in and out of college (as opposed to chainsaw-wielding serial killers). Peter Mortimer was inside, thankfully, because the only living being left in the garden was a pregnant-looking duck



who was eyeing the stream at the bottom of the garden. I climbed down the tree and walked into the house.

"There's a pregnant duck outside."

"Ducks don't get pregnant, darling; they lay eggs."

"She shouldn't stay here. She's going to get ripped to ribbons by Peter Mortimer."

"Don't roller-skate in the house."

"Too late, they're on now. Daddy, did you know Jenna Jenkins?"

"Yes, vaguely. Goodness, be careful, you're going to break something."

"Did she have any known enemies?"

"No, and please don't try and play Sherlock Holmes. The police will do what they need to do. Watch out, that's fragile! Have you done your homework?"

"This is my homework."

"What, bulldozing our living-room carpet?"

"No, learning things about the world. That's what school is for, the Head said. Bye, Reverend!"



“Where are you going?”

“Roller derby.”

First Court in Christ’s College has got one big circular lawn with a stone path around, which makes it an awesome roller derby track. And it echoes like inside a cave. It’s my favorite Sunday activity (I don’t tell Dad that).



“Hi, Sesame! Enjoying your weekend?”

Fiona Lumley is one of my best friends among the students. I try not to get too attached



to them because, like rabbits, they only last three or four years and then they're gone. But Fiona studies medicine so she'll be around a bit longer, therefore I allow myself to be a little bit attached. Being friends with students is like adopting big siblings, I guess, but without being able to sneak into their rooms to read their private diaries. Well, unless you know where to get the keys from.

I braked as if I was about to fall off the white cliffs of Dover, Fiona covered her ears, and when the screeching noise had receded I replied:

"Not really, I don't like Sundays. They have this habit of leading to Mondays. But exciting things can happen: have you heard about the mysterious disappearance of Jenna Jenkins?"

Fiona frowned, and combed her hair with her fingers.

"Yes, I have. I don't know her very well, but I think it's much more worrying than they're making it sound. She's been missing for two days. Everyone assumed she'd just gone home. But she hasn't."



“Unless she did go home, and her parents sold her as a slave.”

“Somehow, I doubt it. And it’s all the more mysterious as she was about to play the leading role in this year’s Ballet Society show—*Swan Lake*. She’d been going on and on about it for weeks.”

“I think,” I said (joking), “a rival probably chopped her up like an aubergine for a ratatouille and drowned the pieces in the river Cam.”

“I think,” said Fiona (not joking), “we may have to consider that something sinister has happened to her.”

“Did she have any known enemies?”

“Plenty,” replied Fiona. “She’s not only a ballet dancer. She’s been Editor-in-Chief of *UniGossip* magazine for two terms, and she hasn’t made many friends in the process.”





II

“Maman chérie, light of my life, can I go out for a walk?”

“No.”

“Papa chéri, fire of my loins, can I go out for a walk?”

“For Heaven’s sake, Sophie, where did you get that terrifying expression from? And no, you may not go out for a walk. It’s nine o’clock. You should be in bed.”

Sophying me around is the best way of getting me to disobey. I was outside in no time at all. My bedroom window is just above a little terrace where the big tree leans on its elbow. I slid down the trunk and landed on a bunch of tulips. The pregnant duck was still there.



“Are you nuts? You shouldn’t stay here. Peter Mortimer’s going to bazooka you to the grave and munch on each little bone of each of your little ducklings.”

The duck shrugged and jumped into the stream, which is not wise. The fish in there are enormous; I hate them all, with their moustaches. Even Peter Mortimer can’t catch them, and they laugh at him.

“Now, to business.”

The Porters’ Lodge was quiet when I reached it on tiptoe. Don, the Porter on duty, was drinking tea and looking at his computer screen. In the stealthy manner of the leopard, I crept up to the desk, and then did a forward roll, because that’s the done thing for a supersleuth.

