

The envelope is addressed to Darius Drake, care of the Stonehill Home for Children. He's not the only Stonehill kid in our school, but he's the smartest, and for sure he's the weirdest. There's no name on the return address, just the street number.

"Nobody lives here, but nevertheless someone used this return address," he points out. "Strange, isn't it?"

"I guess."

"Not as strange as this," Darius says, handing me the letter itself. "Read it."

I unfold the letter. There's only one sentence, scrawled in rusty-brown ink.

Who killed Darius Drake?

"Dude," I say. "You're not dead."

"Not yet," he says.

Who Killed Darius Drake?

RODMAN PHILBRICK



To Bonnie Verburg, for always pointing me in the right
direction, and for lending me her service dog.

This edition first published in the UK in 2018 by Usborne Publishing Ltd.,
Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England.
www.usborne.com

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Cover illustration by Federica Frenna.
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781474946728 04832/1 J MAMJJASOND/18

Printed in the UK.

CHAPTER ONE

Bad Things Will Happen

Whatever you've heard about Darius Drake is probably wrong. Dead wrong. Some of the stories are lies, some are mistaken, and the rest were invented by Darius himself, to fool his enemies.

Enemies. Not school bullies, or mean kids that hated him, although there were plenty of those. I'm talking about real, grown-up enemies who wanted to steal the long-lost treasure Darius recovered and erase him from the world.

I know because I was his only friend.

Not that it started out that way. As far as I was concerned he was just another weirdo. This tall, skinny

kid, all arms and legs, shooting up his hand at every opportunity, answering questions before the teacher even thought to ask them. Seemed like maybe he was sneering at those of us who didn't know the answers. Plus he had thick reddish hair that kind of exploded from the top of his head, like an eruption from a hair volcano. Ugh. Girls saw him and rolled their eyes. The boys ignored him, if possible, and dissed him when necessary, to keep their distance. No one wanted to be seen in the vicinity of Darius Drake, and if he wouldn't keep his distance, you persuaded some big, fat, scary-looking dude to back him off.

That would be me. Arthur Bash, thug-for-hire. Hand me a candy bar and point me in the right direction. In this case the end of a crowded cafeteria table where Darius had parked himself for lunch.

"Hey," I say, looming over him. "Beat it."

"Excuse me?"

"Sit somewhere else. This table is taken."

"Ah," he says, raising his chin. "And if I don't?"

"Bad things will happen."

He stands up, slump-shouldered, clutching his tray of gluey mac and cheese. "Any suggestions?"

“Huh?”

“Where I might dine undisturbed.”

I shrug, then point. “Over there. Empty table.”

He nods like a bobblehead doll and heads for the empty table.

I lower my bulk into the seat he’s vacated and inhale the Snickers bar in one fat bite.

Mission accomplished.