

The Taylor Pennysworth Detective Agency

Book 1: Planet X

by Jamie Harbison

I dedicate this first book to my sons Taylor and Cameron. Their enthusiasm for the stories has been inspirational. I would also like to thank my nephews Michael and Matthew. You boys have all been wonderful! Thanks for your support and encouragement.

Furthermore, I would like to dedicate this to The Ganesh Project for promoting reading and literacy for children around the world.

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Chapter 1

“Oh no!” groaned Nick, looking at his Monday morning timetable. “We’ve got double Hippobottomus first thing!”

“What?” whined Bill. “You sure?”

“Yep,” said Nick, pointing to the slip of card they had been given at the start of term.

Mr. Hipobaum was the Year Five Geography teacher at the St. Thomas School in Kent. He had small beady eyes, buck-teeth and looked rather like a hippopotamus, hence his rather unfortunate nickname.

“Don’t you think he’s been acting a little strangely lately, like he’s about to erupt or something?” Nick asked.

“Volcanic, definitely,” agreed Bill as they made their inevitable way to the worst possible start to anyone’s week of school.

William J. Pennysworth, or just plain Bill, was Nick Taylor’s best friend. They had grown up together and were once next door neighbours. Bill’s father was the county crossword champion and had made him sleep with a dictionary under his pillow as a baby. This was an effort to make his son as brilliant with words as he was. Bill insists it didn’t work but even aged just nine, he was already an expert in words ending with *nic*. He used them at every available opportunity, usually just to annoy Nick.

It was their ambition to become private investigators when they grew up, and they were going to call it The Taylor Pennysworth Detective Agency. The two of them could no more resist a mystery than miss dinner or an episode of Columbo.

As they walked into the classroom, Mr. Hipobaum was frantically rubbing the blackboard clean. His pudgy little fingers were a blur as the duster sent clouds of chalk billowing above his head. The class filed in slowly, none of them seemed particularly happy to be there.

“Right, sit down class.” Mr. Hipobaum said quickly. “Open your books and revise for your end-of-term test.” Which was a strange thing to say, since it was only October. Mr. Hipobaum returned to his desk and picked up a rather heavy looking book, completely forgetting that he was in the middle of cleaning the blackboard. Quite happy to be ignored by their teacher, the children got out comics and reading books and chatted amongst themselves. Nick threw Bill a puzzled look as if to say *What’s up with him?* Nick just shrugged his shoulders and sat down.

After a while, Nick, who had been watching the teacher very carefully, turned to Bill.

“I don’t like this,” he said in a whisper.

“Don’t be so moronic, what’s not to like?” said Bill. “If it goes on like this, we’ve got a double free period first thing every Monday!”

“It’s too good to be true,” said Nick. “Something strange is going on.”

“You are such a cynic!” said Bill with a deep sigh. Nick couldn’t help but smile. Even though it was sometimes annoying, Bill really was amazing with his *nic* words.

When the lesson finally ended, the pupils streamed out of the classroom. Mr. Hipobaum hardly noticed any of them leave. Nick waited until everyone else had left before he tiptoed up to the teacher’s desk, determined to get a peek at what he was up to. Mr. Hipobaum was flicking furiously through what turned out to be an encyclopaedia, unaware that one of his pupils was standing only a few feet away.

“Ahem!” coughed Nick loudly.

Mr. Hipobaum got such a fright that it made him slam his nose in the massive book.

“Yowch!” he squealed, dropping the book onto his desk. A bookmark with the words ‘Operation Nibiru—Planet X’ scrawled across it, fluttered to the floor. Nick peered at it curiously but Mr. Hipobaum snatched it up before Nick could read any more.

“Get out of here, you nosy little menace!” shouted Mr. Hipobaum.

“What’s Planet X, sir?” asked Nick politely.

“None of your business, boy!” came the curt reply.

“But sir,” insisted Nick.

“Get out before I report you to Captain ... er Mr. Vini ... I mean Mr. Winiger!” thundered Mr. Hipobaum, stamping his foot. Nick hurried out of the door and ran after his classmates who were on their way to the next lesson.

Nick caught up to Bill and told him about the encounter. He had his best friend’s full attention now.

“Planet X, how intriguing!” exclaimed Bill.

“Very,” said Nick, his eyes wide with excited curiosity.

“I guess we’ll have to keep a close eye on him then,” said Bill.

And that is exactly what they did.

Chapter 2

During their lunch break that afternoon, Nick and Bill spotted their Geography teacher sneaking off across the playing field, clutching a battered brown briefcase tightly to his chest. He was heading in the direction of the shed, where the school buses were kept. The boys quickly scoffed down their sandwiches and followed him. From a distance, it sounded like Mr. Hipobaum was humming a tune to himself. He was too far away for them to identify it clearly. When they reached the shed, they hid behind a bush just outside the entrance where they saw Mr. Hipobaum trying to open a padlock. His hands were shaking so much with excitement that he was fumbling badly. What he was excited about, the boys could only guess. A little closer to him now, they could make out the words to the rhyme he was singing.

“Is that *When you wish upon a star*?” asked Bill quietly.

“It sure is. The same words over and over,” whispered Nick. “How weird.”

Mr. Hipobaum eventually got the door open and after a cautious glance over his shoulder, slipped through as elegantly as his enormous bulk would allow. Ever curious, the boys crept up to the grimy window that was slightly open and peered in. They could still hear him singing that silly nursery rhyme as they watched him open a small metal box that was fixed to the far wall.

“Isn’t the school shed out of bounds to pupils?” said a deep voice suddenly behind them. They spun around quickly only to see their Headmaster, Mr. Winiger towering above them. “What are you doing here?” he asked sternly.

“Er, nothing sir,” mumbled Nick, looking down at his shoes.

“We um, thought we saw a rabbit and we followed it here?” offered Bill. It was weak but the best he could do for an excuse on such short notice.

“Well, you two best go and join your classmates and don’t ever let me catch you sneaking around here again,” warned the Headmaster.

Nick and Bill hurried off, relieved but somewhat surprised that they didn’t get into more trouble.

“That was close!” said Bill, a little breathless.

“I know,” said Nick “But the question is, what was he doing there?”

“He was opening a metal box,” replied Bill. “Didn’t you see?”

“No, I mean the Headmaster,” said Nick. “Mr. Winiger.”

“I wonder ...” said Bill. “If it involves him, it must be big.”

“Yes, Titanic!” said Nick, very pleased with himself for once in his life beating Bill at his little *nic* game.

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When the final bell of the day dismissed the students, Nick asked Bill if he could sleep over at his house that night.

“Of course you can mate, I’ll just have to ask my Mom. Got something up your sleeve, haven’t you?” asked Bill on the way to the courtyard. It was thronging with chattering parents who had come to fetch their children. Even though Bill lived around the corner from the school, his Mom still came to walk him home every day. It gave her a chance to chat to Audrey, Nick’s mother.

“Of course I have but I’ll tell you later,” Nick whispered when they got there.

Their mothers were used to the two of them sleeping at each other's houses and thankfully didn't mind this time either.

Mrs Pennysworth was making spaghetti bolognaise from the Jamie Oliver recipe book she got for her birthday that year. It had ground nutmeg sprinkled over the top and everything. It was delicious. Mr. Pennysworth described it using very long words like 'superbly palatable' and 'astonishingly delectable'. Bill's little sister Emmy, who was only three, tried to copy her father's words but they came out like 'bubbly bubble-able' and 'polishy bu-lickable' which made everyone at the table laugh. After dinner, the two boys went up to Bill's room to set up the sleeper couch for Nick.

"So, what's your plan Mr. Taylor?" asked Bill.

Nick replied with a question of his own, "You got a torch?"

"Oh boy, we're going back to the school tonight, aren't we?" said Bill with a sigh, knowing perfectly well that they were.

"We have to find out what old Hippobottomus is hiding and I'll bet my Dragon-Master pendent it's in that shed."

They waited for Bill's parents to go to sleep before they snuck out. They both knew that students could get expelled for being in the school grounds at night but the allure of a mystery was too strong. They cautiously approached the shed they had seen Mr. Hipobaum enter earlier that day. Sodium lamps cast a sickly orange-yellow glow over the grounds and they had to be careful to stick to the shadows. Because they did not have a key for the padlock, they wriggled through the open shed window and crouched in the semi-darkness. They waited for a few moments, listening for any sign that they had been seen. Nobody came running, nobody came shouting. They were safe, for now.

Chapter 3

As quietly as they could, Nick and Bill crawled across the dusty shed floor towards the metal box. There was an overwhelming musty smell that, mixed with odours of oil and grease, seemed to make the air as thick as sour custard. They could almost taste the rancid diesel fumes. The floor was made of set concrete and was icy beneath their knees and on the palms of their hands.

Suddenly, a very large spider scurried over Bill's outstretched fingers, and made him shout in fright. He shot up and sent a tin of paint from the shelf next to him clattering to the ground. They both froze. After waiting for nearly a full minute in total silence, Bill let out a sigh of relief. Luckily, the sudden noise had not aroused anyone. They crossed the rest of floor and reached the box on the far wall. The light from outside did not reach that far into the shed so it was safe for them to stand to their full height.

"Pass me the torch," whispered Nick.

Bill handed the torch to Nick who flicked it on but quickly shut it off again. The caretaker only lived about a hundred yards from the shed and Nick did not want to tempt fate again. Having found the box, Nick gently flipped it open and was quite surprised by what he found. Dimly lit buttons were set into a plastic panel that looked like a futuristic telephone keypad. It had the same numbers and letters as a normal telephone but it was very cleverly disguised in the old metal box on the wall. Nick just stared at it, uncertain what to do next.

"What do you think?" he asked.

“It may be some sort of coded entry,” suggested Bill, leaning so close that his nose was almost touching the keys.

“Great! So what is the code then, genius?” asked Nick, not happy about the dead end they had run into.

“Don’t be so sardonic,” said Bill. “There is no such thing as an unsolvable mystery. You taught me that.”

Nick made a mental note to look up ‘sardonic’ in the dictionary when he got home. This was no time for explanations. Suddenly Nick had an idea.

“Can you see which buttons have been pressed?” he asked.

“Well, the 1 and the 3 look a bit dustier than the others,” said Bill. “They obviously haven’t been pressed recently so we can rule them out.”

“Yes,” agreed Nick, looking even closer. “Well spotted. It looks like the only ones that have been pressed are the 2, the 8 and the 9.”

Nick tried a few combinations of those numbers but all he got was a series of three soft beeps after every six buttons he pressed.

“So then, the code has to be six digits long,” noticed Nick, biting his lip and thinking hard.

“Hmnn... and it has to include the numbers 2, 8 and 9,” added Bill.

“The star button also looks much cleaner than the 7 above it,” said Nick and without thinking, started humming the rhyme that Mr. Hipobaum had been singing, *When you wish upon a star.*

Bill’s eyes brightened in the weak glow of the keypad. “That’s it! Mnemonic!” he said excitedly.

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