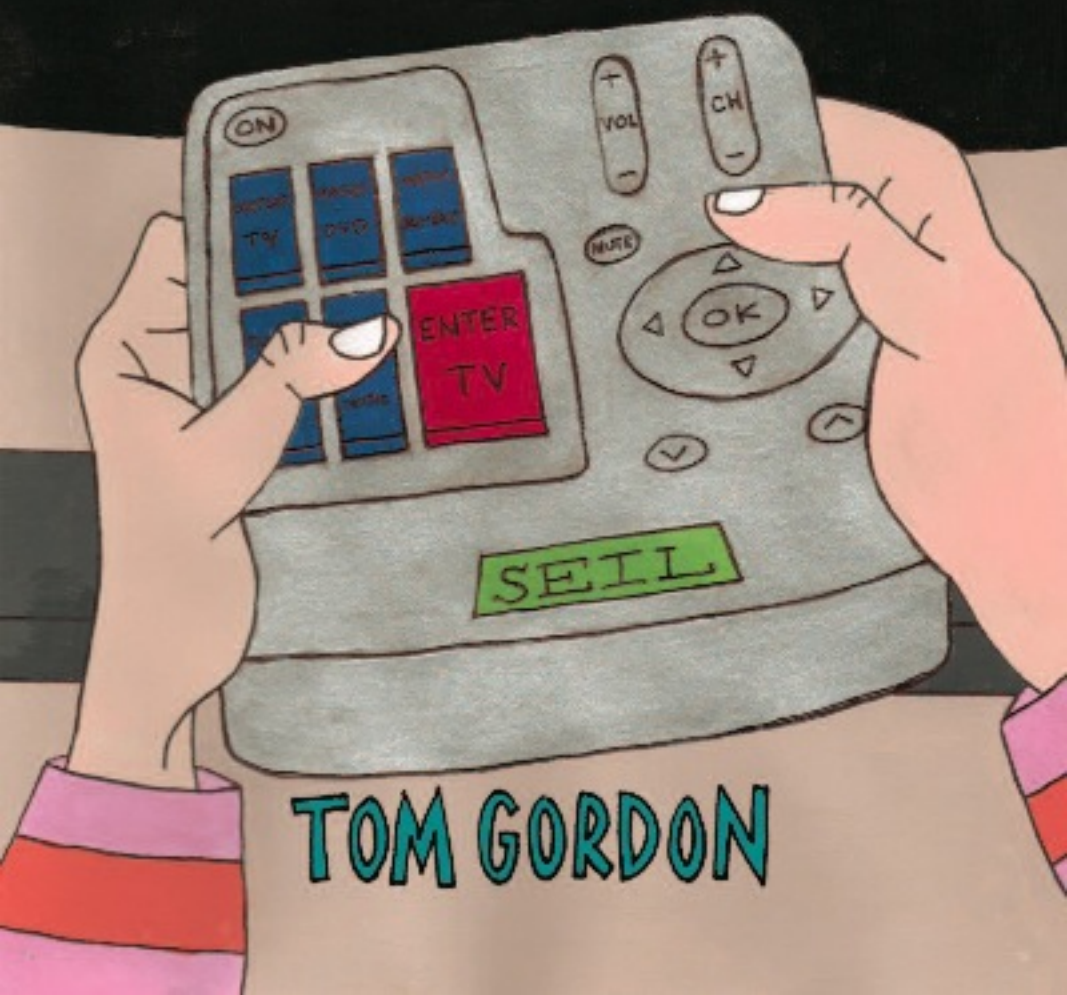


DELIA QUEEN

&

CHANNEL 16



TOM GORDON



When the heroine of her favorite TV show mysteriously disappears moments before solving her biggest case yet, 12-year-old Delia Queen, the world's number one "Sara Slater SuperFan," is called upon to help. Del and her cousin AJ soon find themselves in the familiar worlds of the characters of Channel 16: The Imagination Station, in the middle of their own investigation to find Sara, and through doing so, help her solve the case.

Delia Queen & Channel 16

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DELIA QUEEN & CHANNEL 16

Tom Gordon

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THE WORST LIFE EVER

Del looked down at the birthday present her mother had just handed her. *Doesn't look like what I asked for*, she thought. She smiled politely and began to unwrap it as her mother's friends Connie and Sherilynn looked on.

The *Sir Thanksalot* board game. In the center of the box was a picture of the solemn knight errant astride his horse. "Fun for the whole family!" the right side boldly announced. On the left, in equally bold lettering, was a reminder to "Mind Your Manners To Make Your Move!"

Definitely *not* what she'd asked for.

She marched into the kitchen, stomped on the pedal of the garbage can to open the lid and stuffed the game inside.

"This is the worst birthday *ever!*" she screamed at her mother, then stormed upstairs to her bedroom.

She flopped down on her bed, snatched the remote control from her nightstand and pressed the POWER button. The little TV in the corner of her room was set, as always, to Channel 16: The Imagination Station. It lit up with the image of the masked superhero The Blue Macaw.

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“Uggh!” she exclaimed. “Boy show!”

She sat up, clutched her knees and looked up at the giant Sara Slater poster which covered most of her wall opposite her bed. It wasn't the poster everyone had, but the limited edition Sara Slater SuperFan Club poster, with Sara smiling and waving from the SlaterCopter. Del imagined leaving the tiny two-bedroom townhouse she shared with her mother on Sunnyside Road and flying with Sara to faraway lands to solve mysteries. She thought of where she'd like to go. *Maybe to Ancient Greece.* Her cousin AJ had told her that the Olympics had started there. *Or maybe Costa Rica.* Her third-grade teacher, Miss Lewis, had been there and shown the class pictures of birds and butterflies that Del had never seen. *Or maybe even the moon. That would be cool!*

“You're so *lucky!*” she said to the poster-Sara.

As she did so, *The Blue Macaw* took a commercial break and Sara Slater's theme song began to play.

“She's the best investigator

There is simply no one greater

Sara—Sara Slater

Sara Slater: Investigator!”

Del absently sang along as images of previous Sara Slater episodes flashed across the screen—Sara in the Rocky

Mountains, Sara in the Amazon Jungle, Sara in the Sahara Desert. Then Sara herself appeared.

“Hey there, SuperFans! Sara here, reminding you to watch the big finale of *Sara Slater: Investigator* Saturday morning at seven sharp, when I’ll reveal the thief of the Ruby of Rum Cay. And don’t forget about Friday night’s *Sarathon*! That’s right! Your favorite Sara Slater episodes all night long! See ya later, SuperFans!”

“See ya later, Sara Slater,” Del responded. Then she heard footsteps on the stairs, followed by a knock on her door.

“Delia Queen, you open this door *now* and explain yourself!”

Del looked back up at Poster-Sara, then slowly pulled herself up and opened the door.

“Just as I thought!” her mother snapped. “In here watching TV when we have visitors!” She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. “Here,” she said, holding out the crumpled *Thanksalot* box. “This is yours.”

Del took it, placed it on her bed and sat back down.

“Del, look at me!” her mother commanded.

Del sighed, put on her bravest face and glared up at her. In her mother’s eyes was a mixture of disappointment and spite, a look Del hadn’t seen before. They didn’t look like her mother’s eyes at all, she thought, but those of a stranger.

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“You should be ashamed of yourself acting like that! And in front of Connie and Sherilynn!” She waited for Del’s reaction, but there was none. From the TV, *The Blue Macaw* end credits began to roll.

“I’m sorry you don’t like what I got you. But it’s all I could—”

“It’s a kids’ show!” Del blurted out. “I don’t watch that anymore!” Then, under her breath, she added, “I asked for *Sara Slater, Season Four*.”

“I know, but that’s a lot of money—”

Del looked up at her and rolled her eyes.

“Your father’s late with his payment again,” her mother continued. “I don’t have much right now. You *know* that!”

Del frowned and blew out her cheeks. She’d heard all this before. She wished her mother would go away now and leave her alone. But her mother wasn’t done.

“I thought you liked *Thanksalot*. That’s one of those Channel 16 shows, right?”

“Kids’ show,” Del repeated. “I just told you that.”

Her mother paused briefly, then said, “You don’t appreciate what you have.” She stretched out her hands in front of her. “All of *this*.”

Del glanced slowly around the room and took inventory: TV, stereo, computer, Wii, her pet rats Chloe and Zoe. *Maybe a lot of kids don't have this much stuff*, she thought. *But it's my birthday. Why shouldn't I get the one thing I asked for?*

“And so,” her mother went on, “there are going to be consequences.”

Del had never heard her use the word before but knew too well what it meant.

Her mother gazed out the window as she spelled it out. “There's to be no TV for the next two weeks. It's summer vacation, Del. You should be outside playing with your friends.” She paused again, looking at Del, who sat transfixed. “Why don't you play with your friends anymore?”

Del sat silent for a long time.

“What I'd like you to do right now,” her mother said, “is turn off that TV and come back outside. We still have a birthday to celebrate.” She smiled a twisted smile and left the room.

Without looking, Del swiped at the *Sir Thanksalot* board game and sent it crashing against the wall and onto the floor. She looked up again at the poster.

“Did I say this was the worst birthday ever?” She smirked, then added, “Just kidding. This is the worst *life* ever.”

She glanced back down at the TV. The *Handyman Dan* show had begun, and Dan's helpers, Timmy and Charles, were

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talking to the pirate Roger Plank, who had arrived early for the big party tomorrow night. “Everyone will be here,” they told him, “including Sir Thanksalot and Sara and Suzy Slater.”

“What?” Del exclaimed. She couldn’t believe it. Her heart sank as she realized it. Sara Slater was going to reveal the thief of the Ruby of Rum Cay Saturday morning at seven sharp. The biggest show *ever*. And she was going to miss it.

“Gee, thanks, Mom,” she muttered. She turned off the TV and got up. Then, as was her custom when leaving her room, she looked back at the poster and said, “See ya later, Sara Slater.”

DELIA QUEEN: INVESTIGATOR

“Delia Queen!” Suzy repeated. Del came to and wiped her eyes, not believing what she was seeing. Her jaw dropped. From the other side of the screen, Suzy’s eyes followed her.

“Hey, you!” she said. “Are you Delia Queen? I need your help!”

Del nodded mechanically, and without taking her eyes off Suzy, reached over and shook AJ.

“What? What do you want?” he mumbled.

“AJ, look!”

AJ rubbed his eyes, turned and looked at the TV.

“Delia Queen. That’s you, right? I need your help. My sister Sara has disappeared!”

Del sat up straight and frowned, trying to make sense of this. “Disappeared? Sara? What? Are you—real?”

Suzy answered back. “Of course I am. I can explain that later. Right now I need you to come with me.”

Del looked at AJ, then back at Suzy. “What do you want me to do?” she asked.

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“Find Sara—and whoever did this.”

“But—why me?”

“You’re the number one Sara Slater SuperFan, aren’t you? Who else would I ask?”

Del looked slowly back at AJ to make sure he was seeing what she was. He sat staring at Suzy with his mouth open. She glanced up at the clock on the TV room wall. It read seven A.M. sharp.

“Okay,” she said cautiously. “Though I have no idea how I’m gonna do that.”

“Great! Thank you!” Suzy replied.

Del looked at Suzy and scratched her head. “How *am* I going to do that?”

“You have the remote, don’t you? Just push ENTER TV.”

Del felt beneath her pillow for the remote. She looked down at the big red button and put her finger over top of it. “Can he come?” she asked Suzy, motioning to AJ.

“Oh, no, Del, I can’t,” AJ protested.

“Sure,” Suzy said. “I need all the help I can get.”

Del turned to AJ. “We have to find her. Didn’t you hear Suzy? We’re the only ones that can.”

“What about Gram?” AJ asked. “What if we—never come back?”

“I’ll get you back,” Suzy assured them. “Don’t worry. I can push pause from this side. You’ll be back before your Gram even wakes up.”

“I’ve got an idea,” AJ said suddenly. “Just in case.” He began scurrying around the room, taking the cushions from the couch that had been placed on the floor and stuffing them underneath their blankets, making two lumps that looked like sleeping children.

“Get your shoes on,” Suzy instructed them. “And bring your coats. And Delia—do you have your notebook? You’ll need it.”

“It’s in my knapsack,” Del replied.

After getting ready, Del sat down in Gram’s chair and pulled open the drawer of the end table. Then she pushed the remote’s ENTER TV button. After a few seconds, the glass of the screen slowly began to slide sideways. It reminded Del of the automatic doors at the mall. She put the remote back in the drawer and closed it. Then, after taking one last look around at the TV room, Delia Queen, dressed in her pink and orange striped pajamas, followed by her cousin AJ Jackson, climbed through the 80-inch *SEIL* superior-quality full-definition super-slim technologically-advanced TV from Channel 16 and into the SlaterCopter.



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