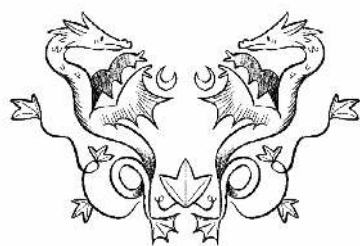




CHRISSIE SAINS
ILLUSTRATED BY **JENNY TAYLOR**

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**For our family furry friends – Cookie,
Marmalade & Blackberry xxx
– C.S.**

**For Hannah
– J.T.**



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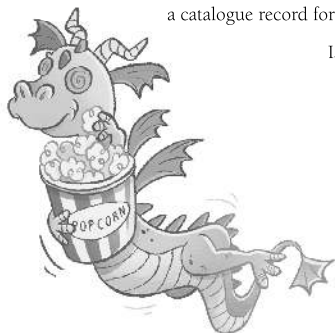
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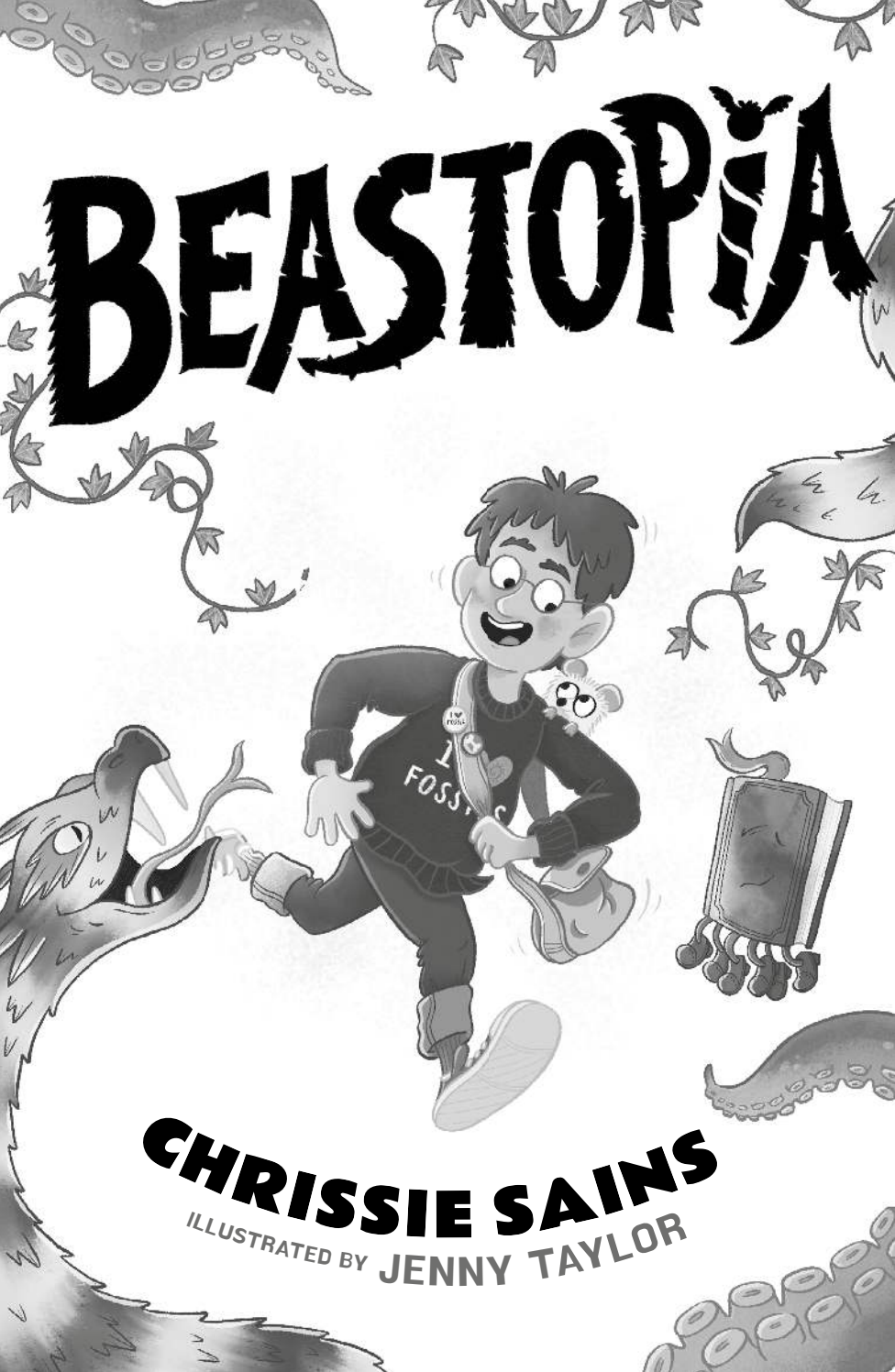
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BEASTOPIA

CHRISSIE SAINS
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A BOY AND HIS MOUSE

If there was one thing you could guarantee about Digby Griffin, it was that wherever you might find him, you would also find his pet mouse, Cheddar.

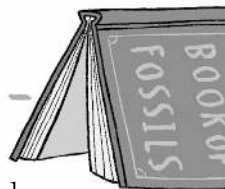
It had been like that ever since the day he'd found her making a nest in his sock drawer. Cheddar was small (even for a mouse) and extremely fluffy. If it hadn't been for her soft round ears and little pink nose, framed by a pair of twitching whiskers, Digby might have mistaken her for a pompom off the top of a bobble hat. Cheddar had peered up at him with intelligent ice-blue eyes, and somehow Digby had just known she was no ordinary mouse.

He was right, as it turned out.

You see, Cheddar was a lot smarter than your average mouse.



She loved it when Digby made obstacle courses in his room, using books and empty toilet rolls to create ramps, bridges and tunnels – her little tail wagging happily as she zipped through with ease.



And when it came to finger football, Cheddar was a tiny dynamo! Her little pink nose would expertly nudge the ball towards the goal, while Digby used his two forefingers as defenders.

But above all, Cheddar loved playing hide-and-seek. Gleefully she would scamper down into the basement, find a cosy spot, then pop out to surprise Digby when he ventured down to seek her.

The fact was, Cheddar was so much more than a pet. She was a tiny, fluffy friend and Digby couldn't imagine life without her. Together they were like roast

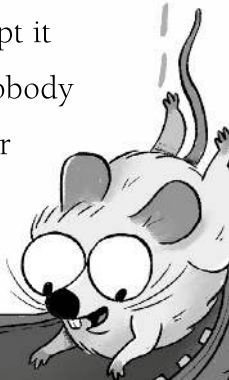
dinner and gravy. You simply didn't have one without the other. And if you did, well, it felt a bit wrong.

If Digby went to the cinema, Cheddar would come along.

If Digby went to his best friend Tai's house, Cheddar would most definitely go too.

If Digby went to the toilet ... well, Cheddar would wait outside. Otherwise that would be weird.

Cheddar even joined him at school. She wasn't meant to go, of course. But every time Digby put on his school shoes, she would dash out from his bedroom and scurry into his trouser pocket, so Digby had no choice but to let her tag along. In the end, he'd found an old zip-up pouch bag belonging to his sister Mog that he could clip around his waist. It made the perfect comfy nook for Cheddar. So long as Digby wore baggy clothes and kept it filled with a never-ending supply of food, nobody ever knew she was there. Well, nobody other than Tai. But Tai thought it was the coolest



thing *ever* to have a pet mouse who never left your side, so that was fine.

And yet, there was a problem. Not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill, average everyday problem.

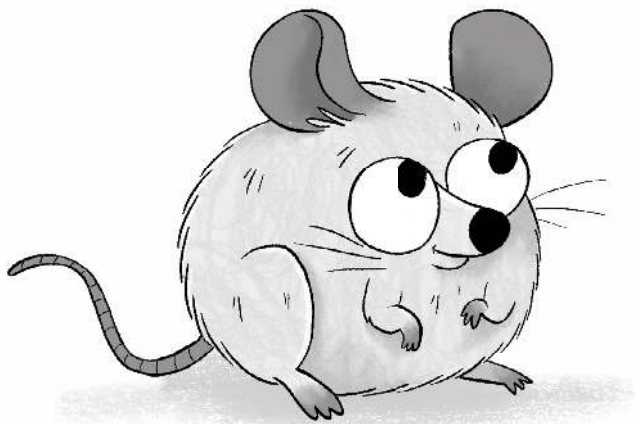
Oh no.

This was something BIG. Something a little bit scary. Something curse-like. In fact, it was precisely that: *The Curse of the Tenth Birthday*.

You see, Digby wasn't the first child in his family to have found an unusual pet in his bedroom.

It had happened *twice* before.

And both of those cute little critters had disappeared, *never to be seen again*.



The Curse of the Tenth Birthday

(pay attention to this, it's important!)

It all started with the house move eight long years ago. The Griffin family had decided to move in with Grandad at Number One Griffin Place. It was a big old house on the outskirts of Great Snoring that had been in the Griffin family for generations. Grandad said the place was too big just for him. And besides, it meant he could be there to look after Digby, Mog and their older brother, Benedict, when Mum and Dad were working, which was especially important considering Mog's type 1 diabetes. Grandad had received all of the diabetes management training, along with everyone else in the family, so it made sense.

The house had a black iron-gated entrance, ivy-covered walls and a creepy basement.

And then there were the animals.

Digby had lost count of the number of times he'd seen unexpected creatures roaming around



the place. A hedgehog scurrying across the kitchen here. A lizard sunning itself on the window sill there. He'd once even seen a hermit crab scuttling into the basement.

Most of the animals vanished just as quickly as they'd appeared.

But, very occasionally, they decided to stay.

The first time it happened was when Digby's older brother, Benedict, discovered a cheerful ice-blue budgie perched in his bedroom. A budgie that he went on to name Flapper.



Two years later, another creature took up residence. This time with Digby's older sister,



Mog, who found a striped snake in her wardrobe. Mog named the snake Snuggles. A surprising choice to Digby, who might have expected something more like *Einstein*, *Newton*, or even *Quadratic*

Equation when it came to his oh-so-perfect sister.

Though Digby had to admit that "Snuggles" suited the friendly little snake perfectly.

But on the night of Benedict's tenth birthday,
Flapper *mysteriously disappeared!*

Then it happened again.

On Mog's tenth birthday, Snuggles *vanished!*

Where did they go? Nobody knew. It was as if
they had both evaporated.

Naturally, everyone said it was just a
coincidence. But Digby knew better.

It was the curse of the tenth birthday.

Digby's tenth birthday just happened to be
tomorrow.

Which meant the curse would strike again
tonight.

And this time it would strike Cheddar.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

Digby paced back and forth in his bedroom, a feeling of dread clinging to him like an itchy jumper on a hot summer's day. Even without this whole curse thing going on, his tenth birthday was turning out to be a total dud.

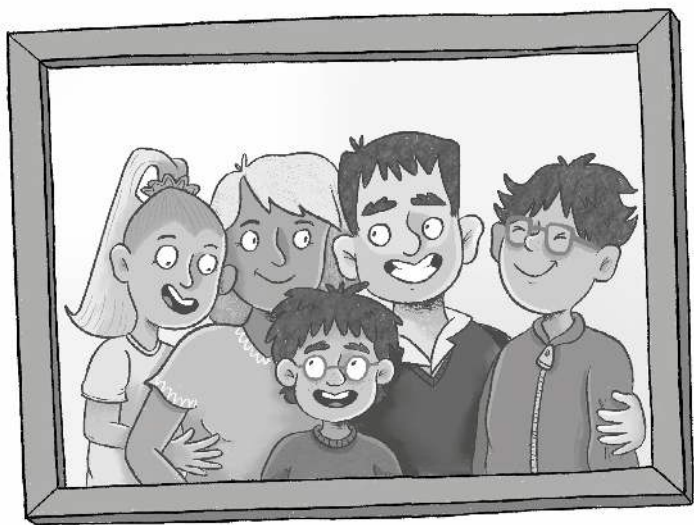
Digby's birthday normally consisted of a family trip to the Fossils Gallery (his favourite place ever), takeaway pizza and Mum's homemade chocolate cake.

But this year, with Dad working overseas, Benedict at university and Mum taking on more

shifts at the hospital to help pay for Benedict's fees ... well, the entire day had been *postponed*.

Digby wasn't completely sure how you could postpone a birthday. He couldn't exactly just stay nine until everyone's schedules cleared.

He glanced at a photo on his bedside table, where Mum, Dad, Benedict and Mog all smiled out at him. He missed Dad and Benedict, of course. But more than anything he missed the feeling of *togetherness* that filled the house when everyone was around. Plus it didn't exactly seem fair to miss



out on the birthday treats when he already had Cheddar to worry about.

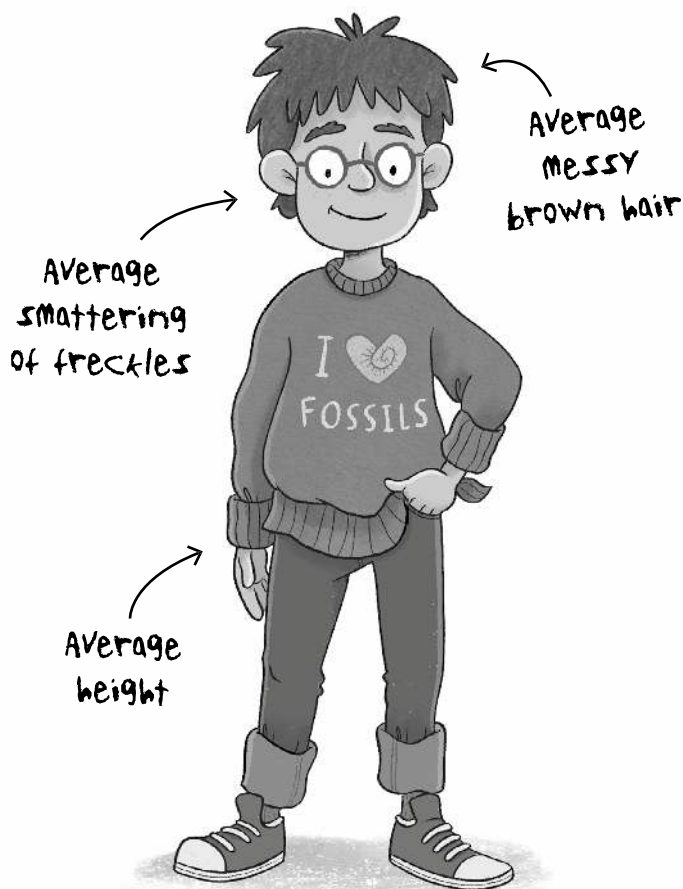
Yet here he was, his birthday postponed, half his family away, and his pet mouse cursed.

Worst. Birthday. Ever.

All the same, if Digby really could have stopped time, he would have done it in a heartbeat.

His gaze shifted towards the top drawer of his bedside table, where, nestled comfortably amongst his socks, Cheddar was curled up in a sleepy ball. Digby watched as her tiny chest rose and fell contentedly, his stomach clenching as he wished for the billionth time that he knew how to stop the curse. The trouble was, he thought to himself as he flopped onto his bed with a long, frustrated sigh, you had to be somebody a bit special to break a curse.

Digby wasn't special. Digby was just, well, ordinary. He stood up, pushed his glasses up his nose with the back of his forefinger, and peered into his bedroom mirror.



Literally nothing interesting to see here!

He didn't exactly look like your heroic "break-a-curse" type. More a "hide-under-the-covers-when-you-hear-a-loud-noise" kind of guy.

And yet, *it had to be him.*

Because he was the only person in his family who even believed the curse was real.

“Don’t worry, Cheddar,” Digby whispered as he stroked the top of Cheddar’s fluffy head with his forefinger. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

He meant it too.

Digby might not know much about stopping curses, but he did know how to look after Cheddar.

So he had decided to stay up all night and stand guard over her. He’d invited Tai for a birthday sleepover (though it was actually a *keep watch on Cheddar* sleepover) and, as far as Digby was concerned, there wasn’t going to be *any* sleeping.

“Digby?!”

He turned towards his bedroom door as Grandad called his name from downstairs. “Can you come down for a minute?! I’ve got a bit of a situation!”

Digby peered down the stairs to see Grandad, sporting bright yellow tweed trousers pulled up

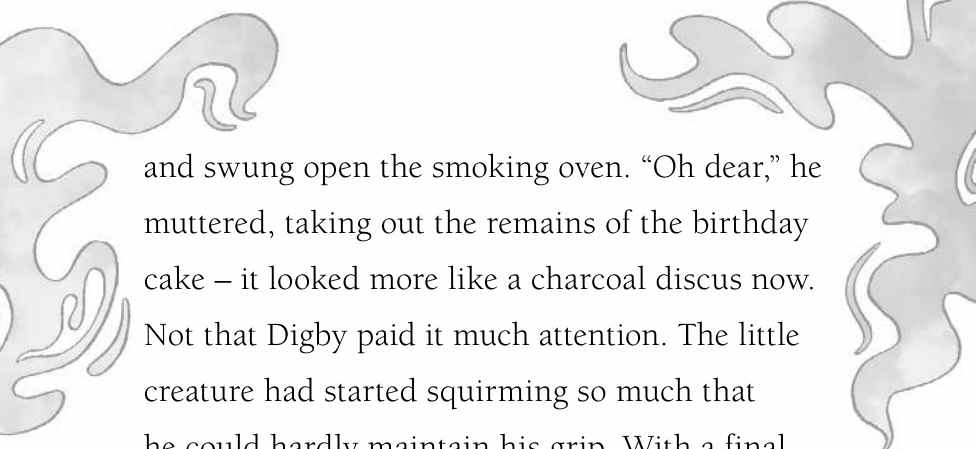
to his waist by a pair of red braces, engaged in a tussle with a small snuffling creature. The animal had soft velvet fur, webbed feet and a broad, flat duck-like beak. It wriggled in Grandad's grasp, seemingly determined to explore the house.

Meanwhile, a cloud of smoke billowed out from the kitchen and the smell of burnt cake wafted up the stairs towards Digby.

With a quick peek over his shoulder to make sure Cheddar was still safely asleep, Digby rushed down to help.


"Take this, will you?" Grandad thrust the little creature into Digby's hands, then dashed into the kitchen. He put on a pair of oven gloves





and swung open the smoking oven. “Oh dear,” he muttered, taking out the remains of the birthday cake – it looked more like a charcoal discus now. Not that Digby paid it much attention. The little creature had started squirming so much that he could hardly maintain his grip. With a final wriggle and a sharp kick, it tumbled out of his hands, then made a break for it.

“Grandad!” Digby yelled as the animal dashed away, making a beeline for the basement. With one last glance backward, it flattened itself, squeezed under the door, then disappeared from view.



“Don’t worry!” Grandad put the burnt cake down on the worktop, then opened a window and tried to flap the smoke out with a tea towel. “He’s out of the kitchen now at least. I’m sure he’ll find his way somewhere else safely enough.”

“But, Grandad, what even *was* that?”

“Ummm...” Grandad busied himself, pressing his foot on the pedal bin and dropping the cake inside. “Looked a bit like a duck-billed platypus to

me.” He shrugged, as though finding a duck-billed platypus in the house was the most ordinary thing in the world.

“Don’t we ... need to catch it? And, I dunno, take it to a zoo or something?” Digby asked, more than a little flummoxed. Didn’t Grandad care?

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Grandad wafted his hand dismissively. “Don’t you worry.”

“But ... why go down *there*?” Digby gave the basement door a long suspicious glare.

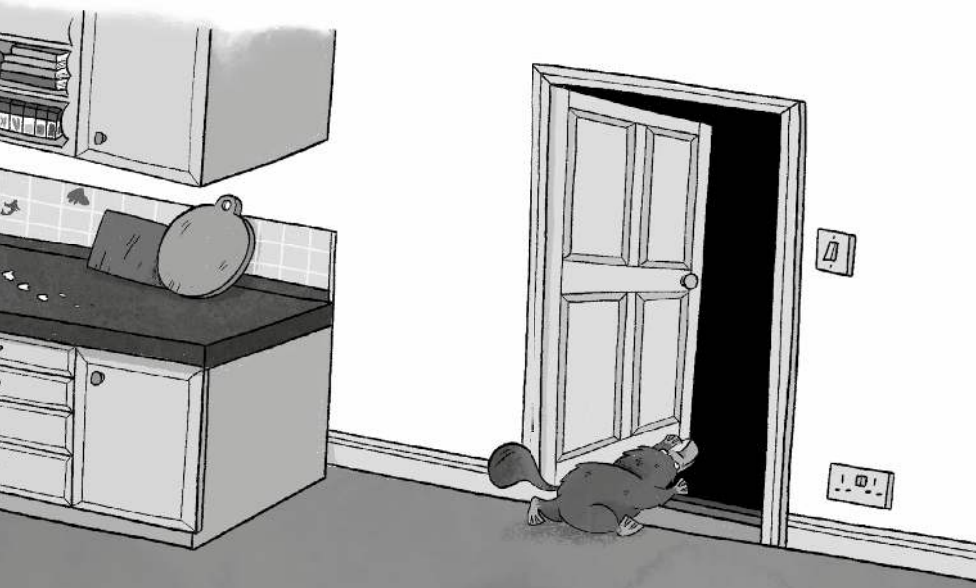
Of all the nooks and crannies in Number One



Griffin Place, it was his least favourite by far.

Cold stone steps, peeling, yellowed paint, and one lonely flickering lightbulb. It was almost as if it *wanted* to look scary. It definitely wasn't the kind of place Digby would scamper to if he were a little creature, that was for sure. His eyes narrowed as he remembered watching the hermit crab scuttle under that very same door.

"You know, Grandad, this isn't the first time I've seen one of the animals go down there." He looked up, his gaze wary. "What do you think happens to them?"



“Hmm?” Grandad started taking out ingredients from the kitchen cupboard to make another cake. “Oh, there must be a way out.” He avoided Digby’s glare. “They can probably smell the fresh air.”

“I guess.” Digby wasn’t convinced. He’d searched the basement loads of times during games of hide-and-seek with Cheddar, and he was sure he’d have noticed if there was some kind of hole in the wall. But the only things down there were an old broken washing machine and a kitchen stove with a chimney connecting to the fireplace in Digby’s bedroom. “I’ve never seen a way out, though,” he pressed, watching as Grandad measured out the butter on a pair of ancient scales. “Don’t you think that’s a bit weird?”

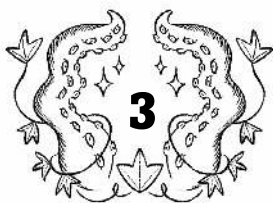
“Not really.” Grandad barely looked up. “You probably just haven’t found it.”

“But—”

“This is an old house, Digby,” Grandad cut him off. “I’m sure there are plenty of cubbies that

you haven't explored yet. *Anyway*" – he finally met Digby's eyes, his smile gentle – "thanks for the help, but I must make another cake or we won't be ready for the big birthday sleepover. There's only an hour until Tai arrives!"

Digby let out a sigh of frustration. Why wasn't Grandad *listening*? He clomped back to his bedroom to await Tai's arrival, making a mental note to keep Cheddar away from the basement until he'd investigated further.



THE SLEEPOVER

“Ready for the best night of our entire lives?!”

Digby’s bedroom door burst wide open to reveal a short, wiry boy with spiky black hair and a mischievous grin. “I know this is a bit weird,” Tai continued as he bounded inside. “And obviously I don’t want anything to happen to Cheddar. But I kind of can’t wait to finally find out what this curse is all about.” He plonked a sleeping bag, pillow and bulging backpack onto Digby’s bed, then began rummaging through, scattering packets of biscuits, sweets, crisps and comics everywhere.

“I mean...” He peered sideways at Cheddar,



who was already scurrying out of Digby's sock drawer to investigate the goodies, then cupped his mouth and whispered theatrically, "What if it's theory four: alien abduction? We might make extraterrestrial first contact tonight."

He opened the front pocket of his backpack and pulled out the small voice recorder that he took with him everywhere. Tai always had some scheme or other to get famous. The latest was to make a True Mysteries podcast about the curse of the tenth birthday. So far it had just been Digby and Tai coming up with a load of wild theories.



He pressed the *Record* button on the little machine and spoke into it. "Theory seventy-six: Cheddar is actually a robot from the future and must return to her own timeline tomorrow."

"Ha, yeah!" Digby giggled. "Or Theory seventy-seven: Cheddar is an animal spy, sent to monitor all activities at Number One Griffin Place." They both dissolved into laughter, then turned in unison towards Cheddar.

The little mouse had stopped sniffing the goodies on the bed. Her gaze was fixed on the two boys, her ears pricked.

"Do you ever feel like Cheddar understands everything we say?" Tai murmured under his breath.

"Sometimes." Digby nodded as the little mouse chattered with amusement. "But weird stuff's always happening here. Grandad found a duck-billed platypus in the kitchen earlier."

"A duck-billed platypus?" Tai burst out laughing. "Naaaah, you're pulling my leg! That's not even a real thing, is it?" He tore open a packet





of jam tarts, pulled one out and took a large bite.

“Felt pretty real when I was holding it,” Digby retorted, the corners of his mouth twitching.

“You never held it!”

“I did!”

“What’s it look like then?”

“Uh, small, black, furry thing, with a duck beak.”

“Now I know you’re making it up!” Tai cracked up. “Next you’ll be telling me that aliens are real and ... they fly around in these!” He held up the packet of jam tarts and the boys collapsed into hysterics. “Wait a minute!” Tai bolted upright. “What if *nothing* happens tonight?” He shook his head in horror. “That would be the total worst, right? All this build-up and then nothing. Borrrrrring!”

“Except then Cheddar would be OK.” Digby gave Tai a playful shove. “Which is the most important thing!”

“Oh yeah, course.” A sheepish grin crossed Tai’s face. “Nothing better than watching a mouse all



night and absolutely nothing happening, I always say.” He pulled out another jam tart, then dropped the open packet on the bed, while Cheddar eyed it eagerly. “But if something *did* happen? Well, nothing is going to get past us.”

There was a snort from behind them, and the boys turned to see Digby’s practically-perfect-in-every-way older sister, Mog, standing in the doorway.

Mog was tall and confident, never a hair out of place from her impossibly swooshy ponytail, never a crease on her pristine white shirt. She was always organized, always in control. Digby sometimes wondered how on earth they were related. He plucked a strand of duck-billed platypus fur from his own oversized jumper, which sported the words “I Dig Fossils”. Not that Digby cared what it looked like. The jumper hid Cheddar’s pouch bag perfectly, so that made it his absolute favourite.

“You’re not seriously still talking about that curse, are you?” Mog folded her arms. “You do know there’s no such thing?”



“Yes, there is!” Digby marched to the door, ready to shut it in her face. “How else do you explain Flapper and Snuggles disappearing?”

“Coincidence?” Mog raised her eyebrows. “‘Curse’ is just a term people use to explain a bunch of random bad stuff that isn’t actually connected.”

“Bit of a weird *coincidence* though, isn’t it?” Digby retorted. “That both yours and Benedict’s pets disappeared on your tenth birthdays.”

“Except they were never really our pets, were they?” Mog scoffed. “We just sort of adopted them. It’s not really that shocking that they didn’t stay.”

“Mog, why are you even here?” Digby was tired of having this conversation ... *again*. “What do you want?”

“I just...” Mog hesitated, glancing past Digby into his room. “I don’t want you to get worked up over nothing. Things just happen sometimes. It doesn’t mean it’s all part of some curse.”

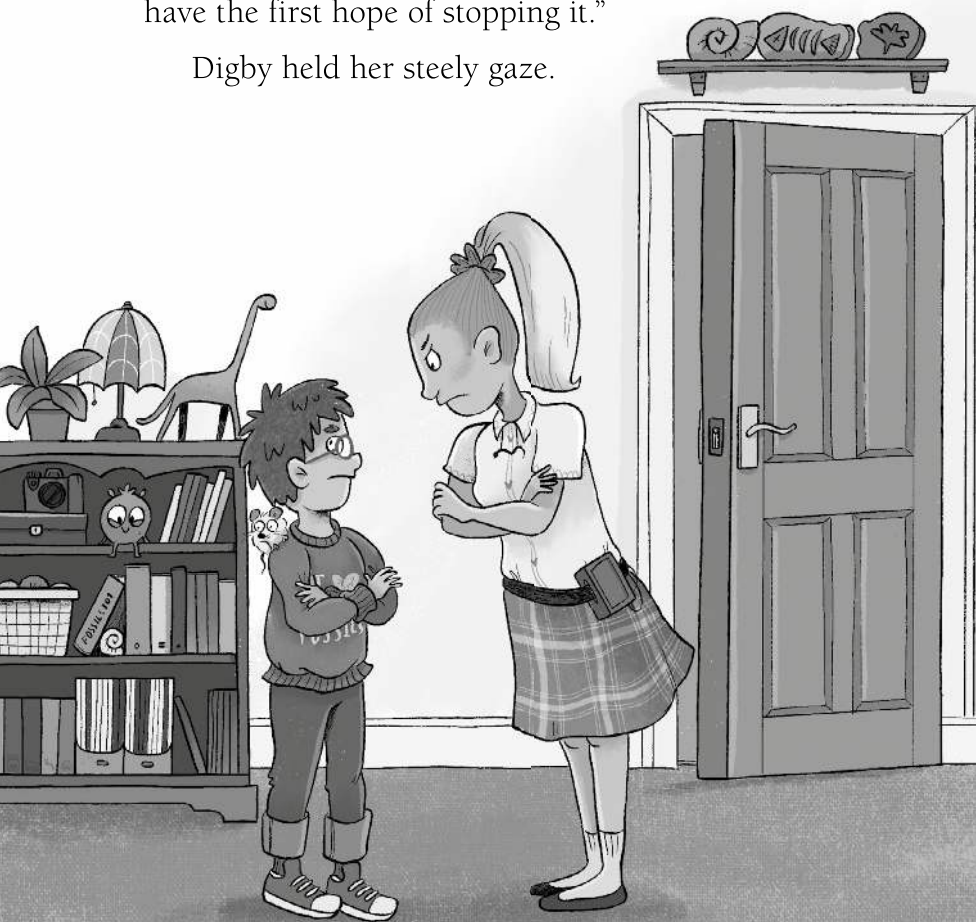
“I know!” Digby hissed. “But what if it’s *not* just a coincidence? I’m not taking any chances.”

Mog reached for the snake pendant she always wore. She would never admit it, but Digby knew that she thought about Snuggles all the time. “If you really are determined to believe in the curse,” she said, “wouldn’t you be better off ... just saying your goodbyes to Cheddar?”

“No!” Digby tried to close the door on her yet again. “I don’t need to say goodbye. Cheddar’s not going anywhere!”

“Exactly!” Mog’s eyes flared, her foot out now to stop the door from closing. “Which just goes to show that you can’t really believe the curse is real. If you did, then you’d know that *you two* wouldn’t have the first hope of stopping it.”

Digby held her steely gaze.



"I don't need to stop the curse to keep Cheddar safe," he finally replied. "I just need to stay awake."

"Yeah!" Tai piped up from over his shoulder.

"And staying awake is our speciality."

"Fine." Mog put her hands up in surrender.

"Whatever. No need to get so defensive. I just didn't want this supposed curse to ruin your birthday, that's all. Mum asked me to make sure you were OK."

"Well, I'm fine," Digby huffed.

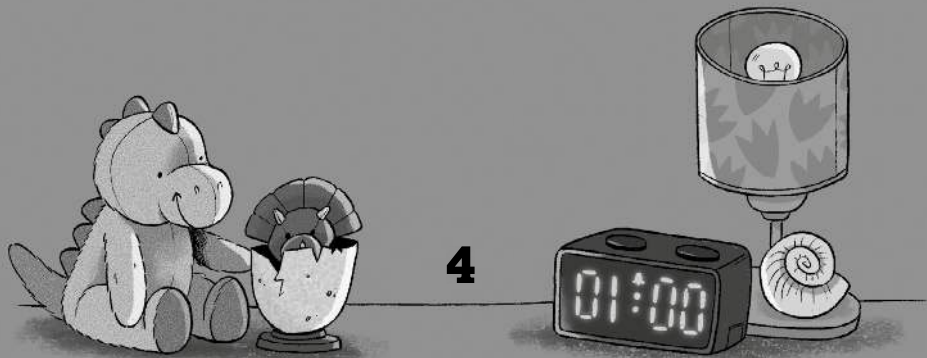
"Great." Mog pulled a tight smile. "Then have fun tonight. I know Grandad's here but if you want someone who's a bit more ... well, *responsible*, then I'm here too. If you need me."

"We won't," Digby muttered, as Mog stalked back to her bedroom.

"Don't worry, Diggers." Tai gave him a friendly nudge. "She doesn't know what she's talking about. But as soon as the pizza arrives, maybe we should barricade the door, if only to keep Mog out. And then" – he pulled a music sheet out of his backpack

with a flourish – “we could practise my song for the school play auditions next week. You know, just in case the podcast doesn’t take off.” He stood up and did a twirl. “I’ve made up a brand-new musical number.” He struck a jazz-hands pose. “It’s called ... ‘Shoo-be-do-be.’”





BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

Digby's eyelids grew heavy as the clock struck 1 a.m.

Up until an hour ago, the idea of staying awake all night had seemed easy. First of all, the boys had decided to remain in their clothes, just in case their pyjamas made them too comfortable. Then Tai had spent most of the evening entertaining Digby with multiple renditions of “Shoo-be-do-be” while Digby hurled gummy bears for him to catch in his mouth. It had soon evolved into a “how many gummy bears can Tai catch mid-song while maintaining his musical performance?” challenge. Cheddar had eagerly joined in, scampering about

as she tried to intercept the falling sweets. But gradually the pitter-patter of Cheddar's tiny paws had slowed, and Tai's singing had softened into a gentle murmur, until Digby could only hear the rhythmic sound of their heavy breathing, mixed with the odd snore and snuffle.

He peered over his bed to check on them. Both Tai and Cheddar lay on their backs, arms and legs splayed out, mouths hanging wide open, a line of dribble on their cheeks. Carefully, he reached down and plucked an empty crisp packet from the side of Tai's face.

"Shoo-be-do ... zzzzzzzz," Tai grunted as he rolled over.

Digby sat up. It was tricky to stay awake without Tai and Cheddar to mess about with, but there was no way he was going to risk falling asleep. Whatever happened tonight, he had to be sure Cheddar was safe. He wondered if Mum was back from her shift yet. He hadn't seen all that much of her recently and, when he did, she was even more

tired than usual. As if in answer, he heard the front door open. It was quiet for a few minutes before Mum's distinctive steps sounded on the stairs.

Digby quickly pulled his covers right up and closed his eyes. Mum was bound to check on him and she was busy enough right now. She definitely didn't need to be worrying about Digby staying awake all night. The handle of his bedroom door turned noiselessly and Digby suddenly remembered his glasses. He yanked them off, shoved them on his bedside table and closed his eyes again. He listened as Mum stepped across his room, then sat down at the foot of his bed.

"Digby?" she whispered. He kept his eyes closed. She sighed, and then he sensed her laying something on his bedside table. "Happy birthday, love." Her fingers briefly ruffled his hair, and then she quietly slipped out of the room.

As soon as the door was closed, Digby sat up, put his glasses back on, and looked at his bedside table. There was a note and a small, wrapped present.

To Digby,
Happy birthday!

I'm sorry but I won't be here when you wake up, I have an early shift. I've left instructions for Grandad and Mog to give you lots of special treatment and I'll see you when I get home. I hope you enjoy your present. Dad and I thought it might be important right now.

All my love,

Mum

xxxxxx

Digby stared at the little wrapped box on the table, wondering if he should open it right away. He peered at the door. Technically it was already his birthday. And anyway, Mum wouldn't even know, seeing as she wasn't going to be here tomorrow. It might be something to help him stay awake. As quietly as he dared, Digby lifted the corner of the wrapping paper and gasped. He ripped the rest of the paper off, his face lighting up. It was a phone. Nothing fancy, just one of those



old brick ones that didn't do much other than make calls and message, but still, now he could keep in touch with Dad and Benedict! A grin spread across his face as he powered it on. Opening his messages, his smile widened at the sight of two notifications waiting for him.

Benedict: Happy Birthday, Diggers! Hope Cheddar's OK – can't wait to hear what happened at the all-night vigil!

Dad: Happy Birthday, Digby! Looking forward to celebrating with you at the annual day trip to the Fossils Gallery when I'm back next month!

Digby's eyes darted towards a poster on his wall for the Fossils Gallery. It was advertising the latest exhibition – Digby's favourite, an entire T-rex skeleton. He smiled as he went to type replies to Dad and Benedict, then stopped as he remembered

it was the middle of the night and he probably shouldn't have opened his present already. The replies could wait until tomorrow. He lay back down, when a faint rustling noise disturbed his thoughts. Digby peered over the edge of his bed to where Cheddar had been just seconds ago.

There was no sign of her.

"Cheddar?" Digby hissed, his eyes scanning the room and his stomach flipping anxiously. "Cheddar? *Where are you?*" A sudden flicker of movement caught his eye, and there she was, scurrying towards the door, her tiny paws pattering quickly across the floor. "Oh, Cheddar, you had me worried there!" He breathed a sigh of relief.

It didn't last long.

Without a backward glance, the little mouse slipped under the door and disappeared into the shadows of the hallway beyond.

"Cheddar? Where are you going?" Digby tossed his duvet aside and darted for the door,

accidentally colliding with Tai's feet in his urgency.

"I'm awake!" Tai sat bolt upright, then squinted at Digby, bleary-eyed. "Wazzappening?"

"It's Cheddar!" Digby yanked open his bedroom door. "She's ... going somewhere!"

"What? Where?" Tai wrestled himself out of his sleeping bag in a flurry of arms and legs.



"I don't know!" Digby shook his head, his eyes searching everywhere for Cheddar. "It's like she was sleepwalking or something. She didn't even react when I called her name!"

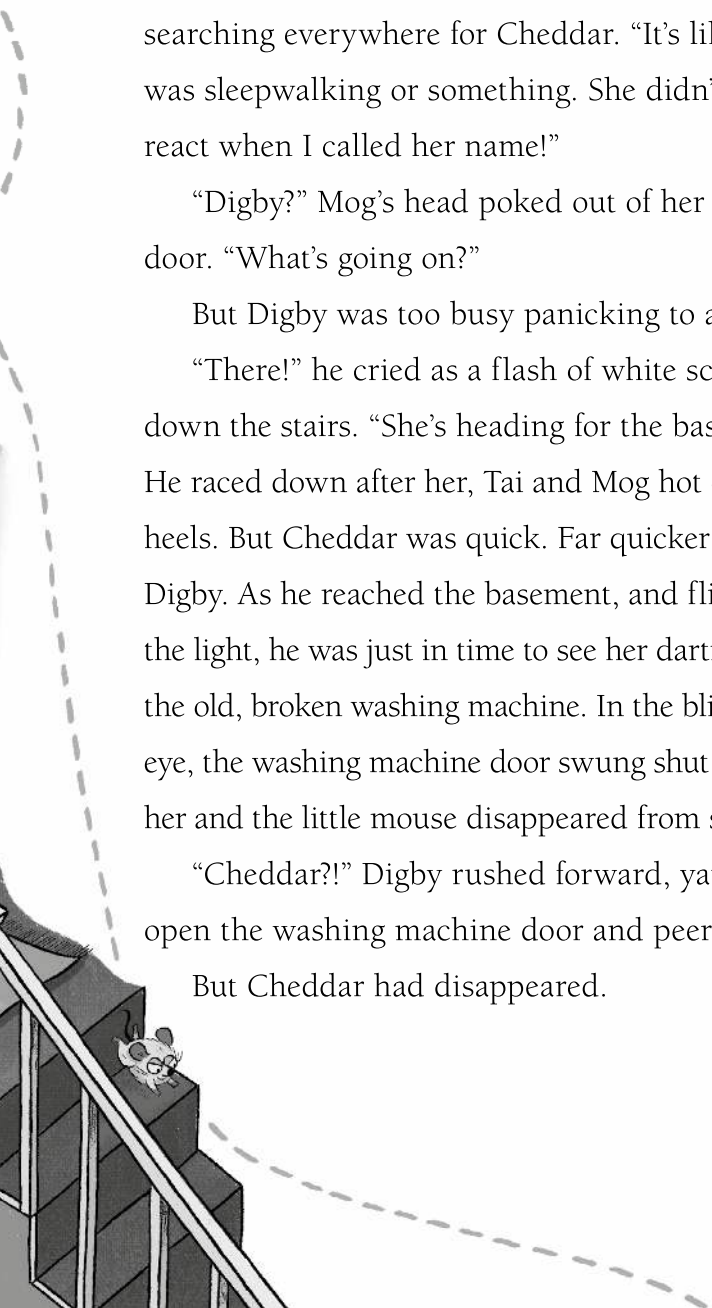
"Digby?" Mog's head poked out of her bedroom door. "What's going on?"

But Digby was too busy panicking to answer.

"There!" he cried as a flash of white scampered down the stairs. "She's heading for the basement!" He raced down after her, Tai and Mog hot on his heels. But Cheddar was quick. Far quicker than Digby. As he reached the basement, and flicked on the light, he was just in time to see her darting inside the old, broken washing machine. In the blink of an eye, the washing machine door swung shut behind her and the little mouse disappeared from sight.

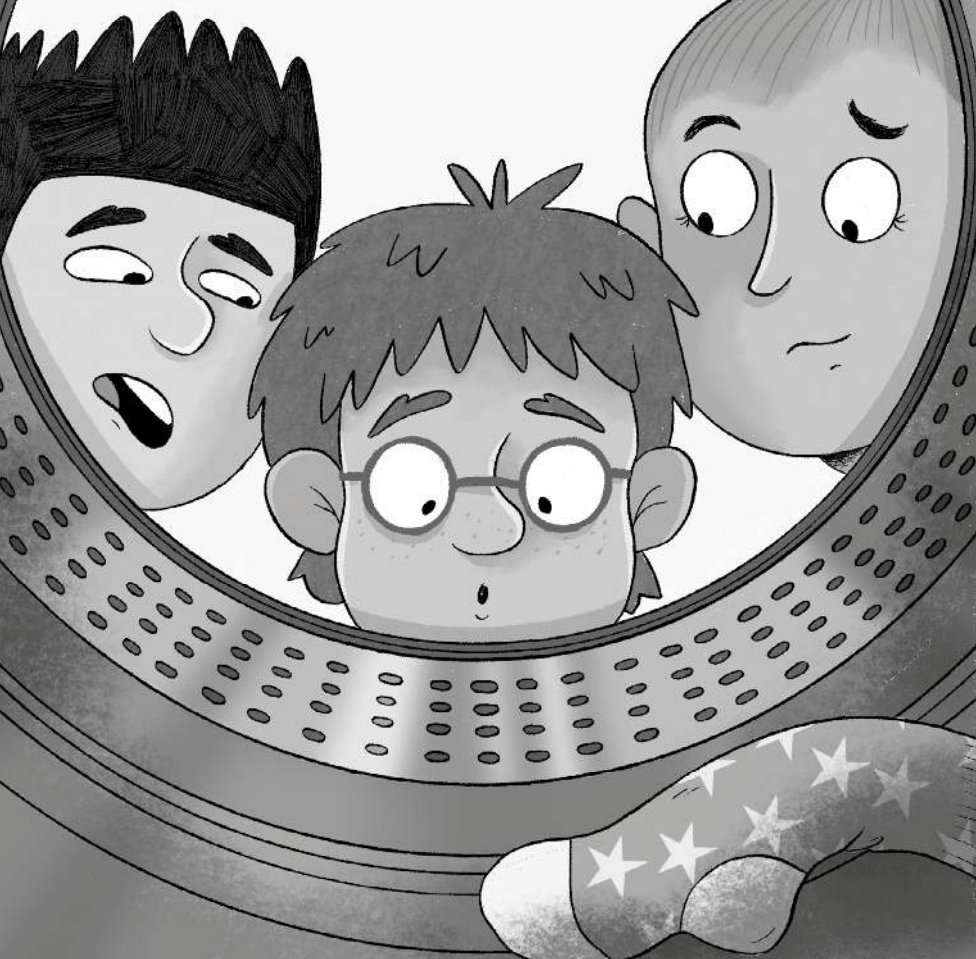
"Cheddar?!" Digby rushed forward, yanked open the washing machine door and peered inside.

But Cheddar had disappeared.



5

THE WASHING MACHINE IN THE BASEMENT



“Where did she go?” Digby inspected every corner of the washing machine.

Cheddar was nowhere to be seen.

He checked behind it, wondering if she could have slipped out the other side.

Still nothing.

“It’s not even plugged in.” He lifted up a cable.

“Digby?” Tai stood statue still, his voice quivering. “If it’s not plugged in ... how come it’s doing *that*?”

Digby followed his gaze and gasped. A small red light was blinking next to the *On* button.

“Stay away from it, Digby,” Mog cautioned as Digby stared at the little light, his finger slowly lifting. “It’s probably dodgy electrics. We need an adult to check this before we do anything. A responsible adult, I mean. Like, well, *not* Grandad. We should get Mum.”

But Digby wasn’t listening. Before he could think better of it, he reached forward and, *click*, pressed the button.

“Ow!” He pulled his finger back as a small spark of *something* zapped it.

“Digby!” Mog scolded, grabbing his hand and inspecting his finger. “Why would you do that? Are you OK?”

“I’m fine, Mog,” Digby reassured her, giving his finger a shake. “It was probably just static.” He pushed his glasses up his nose and turned back towards the washing machine.

Cheddar had definitely gone *inside* it.

He got back down on his knees, poked his head into the washing machine again, and ... his mouth dropped open in surprise.

Inside, a short tunnel led to a platform, where a small, oval-shaped pod sat, doors open. It looked futuristic, yet cosy, with a glass roof, cushioned benches and fluffy white rugs on the floor.

“Cheddar?” Digby called, his voice echoing down the tunnel.

Only silence replied.

“You’re not going to believe this.” Digby pulled