KID NORMAL

AND THE ROGUE HEROES



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ILLUSTRATED BY
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BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY



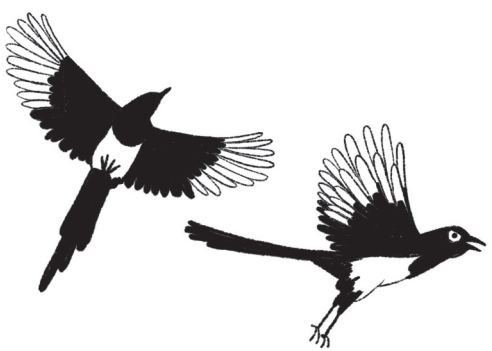






One for sorrow,
Two for joy,
Three for a girl,
And four for a boy.
Five for silver,
Six for gold,
Seven for a secret
never to be told.









1

The Treasures of Amasis

Running a team of crime-fighting superheroes is a complicated business, especially when you're not allowed to tell your mum.

And it's even worse, thought Murph Cooper as he glanced at his watch, *when you're supposed to be home by half past eight.*

Murph's mum had made him promise to be back in time for a special end-of-the-summer-holiday takeaway, but it was already seven forty and he hadn't even started to save the day yet.

'Showtime,' said Murph, turning to the rest of his team. 'Let's move.'

The five members of the Super Zeroes crunched up the gravel driveway in front of them. Up ahead was an impressive stone building with a large sign hanging from one brass handle of its entrance doors.

The sign read: Museum Shut.

Murph beckoned his team over to one side of the path, where they crouched down behind an enormous ornamental fountain.

'This is the place,' he hissed over the trickling of the water.

'So, what are we up against this time?' asked Mary, the late afternoon sunlight reflecting off her bright yellow raincoat. 'I suppose it's too much to hope that the HALO unit has actually given us some useful information for once?'

Murph pulled what looked like a mobile phone out of his pocket and stared at the green-tinted screen. Text scrolled across the top:

ROBBERY IN PROGRESS ... NEUTRALISE.

Beneath this was a map marking the museum's location with a blinking lightning-bolt symbol – and just next to it, a tiny winged letter 'Z' showed their own position. This handset was known as a HALO unit, and it was the Super Zeroes' only connection to the Heroes' Alliance. It had been handed to Murph months earlier by the head of the Alliance, Miss Flint,

on the day they'd become the youngest heroes ever to join that legendary but notoriously mysterious organisation.

Murph thought back to that day. None of them had known what to expect. What actually happens once you become a superhero? Is there a special shop where you pick up your costume? Do you get issued with a cool utility belt and a selection of gadgets? Does a wizened old butler come and live at your house to give you advice when the whole hero-ing lark gets a bit too much for you emotionally?

Murph now knew the answers to all these questions, and they were – in no particular order – no, no and no.

In fact, from what he could tell, the world of Heroes seemed to have changed a great deal since the 'Golden Age' of a few decades ago. These days, Heroes operated in the shadows, for fear of being exposed and causing panic in a world that was scared of anything seen as too different or hard to understand. So their missions were carried out in secret, using only the most basic information from the Alliance. No adoring crowds, no newspaper headlines and most

definitely no costumes. But still, on a few occasions this summer, the HALO unit had flashed its small green light to indicate that the Alliance had a job for the Super Zeroes, and, costumes or no costumes, Murph's heart always did a little skip like a mischievous lamb at the sight.

'Just says there's a robbery in progress,' he told Mary, looking at the closed front doors. 'But we can't go in that way – whoever's in there would see us straight away.'

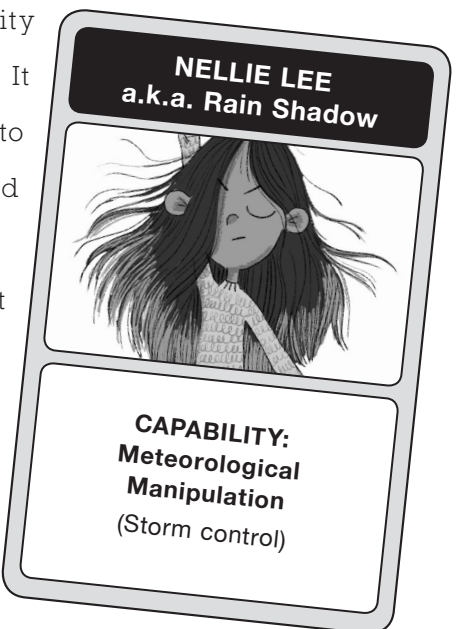
It was a humid day, and Murph eased his sticky T-shirt away from his sweaty back as he cast his gaze about for another way in. High up in one honey-coloured stone wall, a window had been left slightly open. Below it was a wide window ledge and the blinking red light of a security camera.

'Nellie,' whispered Murph, 'we need to take out that camera.'

The figure at the back of the group silently stuck up a thumb. Nellie, who was wearing her usual ripped jeans and baggy jumper despite the heat, slipped out from behind the fountain. Darting from shrub to shrub

to avoid the camera's line of sight, she scuttled over to the wall, holding her hand out, palm upwards, as she went.

The clouds above the museum began to grow darker. There was a rumble of thunder, and all at once a lightning bolt forked down and hit the camera, which fell to the ground in a shower of sparks. Another, smaller bolt of electricity branched off and down. It seemed to disappear into Nellie's hand, which glowed with dancing blue fire.



Nellie made a swift chopping motion with her glowing hand and mimed wearing binoculars to signal to her friends the words, 'Camera's out.' That doesn't make much sense written down, but get your hands out and have a go and you'll see what we mean.

'Good work, Nellie,' said Murph, as the others ran

over to join her. 'Right, time to get inside.' He turned to Mary. 'Would you do the honours?'

Mary nodded, producing a small, folded-up yellow umbrella from her raincoat pocket and pressing the button on the handle.

'Hang on!' she said.

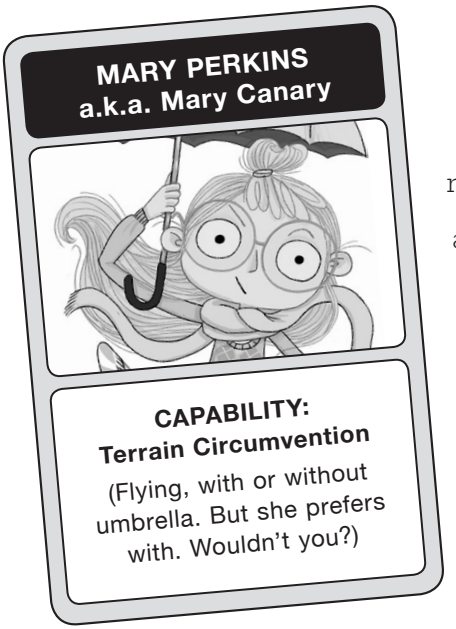
'Oh no, what's wrong? What's the hold-up?' asked Billy, who was prone to being the voice of doom at times like this.

Mary looked at him in exasperation. 'No, *hang on*. As in you're going to need to grab on …' she explained patiently.

Billy gave her the universally recognised stretchy-mouthed face that means 'Oops, sorry.'

They each grasped the handle of the umbrella and began to rise into the air like … Well, it's quite difficult to compare it to anything really. They looked like a bunch of flying child-grapes. They looked like five kid-shaped fish on a hook. Most of all, they looked like five children hanging on to an airborne umbrella.

Mary steered them towards the window ledge.



'Right, so what do we reckon they're here to steal?' asked Murph as they rose. He was still quite new to the town and until now hadn't realised it even had a museum. 'What's the most valuable stuff here?'

The others shrugged. 'I heard there's a whole display about the history of cheese graters or something,' whispered Billy.

'My dad said the woodwind gallery is really fascinating,' said the final member of the Super Zeroes, Hilda, her red curls tickling Murph's nose as she spoke. 'Apparently they've got the region's oldest bassoon,' she added excitedly.

Murph grimaced. 'I don't think anyone's going to want to steal that,' he retorted. 'Sounds like you'd be doing everyone a favour if you did. Well, we'll just have to get in there and take a look.'

The five Super Zeroes squeezed on to the ledge

and one by one dropped through the open window and into a dimly lit room. It was lined with glass cases filled with hats.

That's right: in a museum that did indeed contain a display devoted to cheese graters, they had been unlucky enough to drop straight into the Hat Room, the least interesting exhibit in the whole place, and possibly on earth.

'Worst. Museum. Ever,' said Murph softly, reading the label on the nearest display case.

This hat was worn by Sir Thomas Wimpole on the day his second-cousin-once-removed married the fourteenth duke of Carlisle. It is a fine example of late Regency hatsmanship, fashioned from finest Canadian otter skin with mouse fur trimmings. For goodness' sake, Murph, why are you still reading that ridiculous hat label?

Murph realised that last part wasn't written down. It was just Mary whispering in his ear.

'Sorry,' he said, 'but who in their right mind would want to steal anything from this museum?'

'The thieves aren't here for the hats –' Mary began.

'Nah, course not. Who'd be wearing a hat in this weather anyway?' Billy broke in. 'Your head would go all sweaty.'

'No, I mean the hats aren't worth stealing but –' Mary tried again.

'What about this lovely one?' cried Hilda. She had her nose pressed up against another large case. 'It's divine, look! A genuine 1920s horse hat! It's even got holes for its little ears.' Billy and Nellie headed Hilda's way. Even Mary was beginning to look a bit interested.

Another complicated aspect of running a team of crime-fighting superheroes, thought Murph, *is to not let them get sidetracked by weird hats.*

'Can we focus, please?' he said through gritted teeth. 'Mary was about to say something important.'

'Oh yes,' said Mary. 'I was saying that whoever's robbing this museum is here … for *those*.' She pointed to a brightly coloured poster near the doorway.