

**WINNER OF THE
CRIMEFEST AWARD FOR
BEST CRIME NOVEL
FOR CHILDREN 2021**



**WINNER OF THE
SAINSBURY'S
CHILDREN'S BOOK
AWARDS 2021**

PRAISE FOR *TWITCH*

“Leonard knows her audience and the jeopardy comes
in flocks... Find your nest, curl up and enjoy.”

THE TIMES, CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE WEEK

“A twist-laden, thriller-like tale.”

OBSERVER

“A lively, twisty crime drama as well as a persuasive
story about friendship and protecting nature.”

SUNDAY TIMES

“Another soaring success from Leonard.”

DAILY MAIL

“A tale of friendship, of being yourself, of seeking
solace in nature ... simply genius.”

BBC WILDLIFE

“[A] pacy mystery adventure.”

iNEWSPAPER

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and the wonderful world of birds.”

THE BOOKSELLER

“One of those really, really good books!”

THE BOOKBAG

“Leonard has crafted an intelligent mystery
from unlikely material, with bonus bird facts.”

IRISH TIMES

“A winged masterpiece.”

MAZ EVANS

“Enthralling from beginning to end, it really touched my
young bird-loving heart!”

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“Glorious! Full of excitement and wonder!”

SOPHIE ANDERSON

“Brave and thrilling.”

JASBINDER BILAN



“Birds, mystery and fowl play! What more could you want?”

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“Cracking characters, beyond pacy plotting and an ending
that is almost Buggy Malone-esque!”

PHIL EARLE

“A delight from start to finish.”

ABI ELPHINSTONE



“An absolute triumph.”

CHRISTOPHER EDGE

“An adventure mystery with birds – what more
could any reader want?!”

STEPHEN MOSS

“Adventure, friendship and the pure unassuming beauty
of nature ... a book that could have been a collaboration
between David Attenborough and Roald Dahl.”

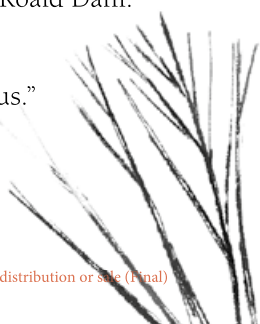
DR JESS FRENCH

“Delightful and marvellous.”

LIZ HYDER

“WILDly good!”

MATT OLDFIELD





FEATHER



M. G. LEONARD



WALKER
BOOKS



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For Kasper, always loved, never forgotten.

“Leave no black plume as a token of that lie
thy soul hath spoken!”

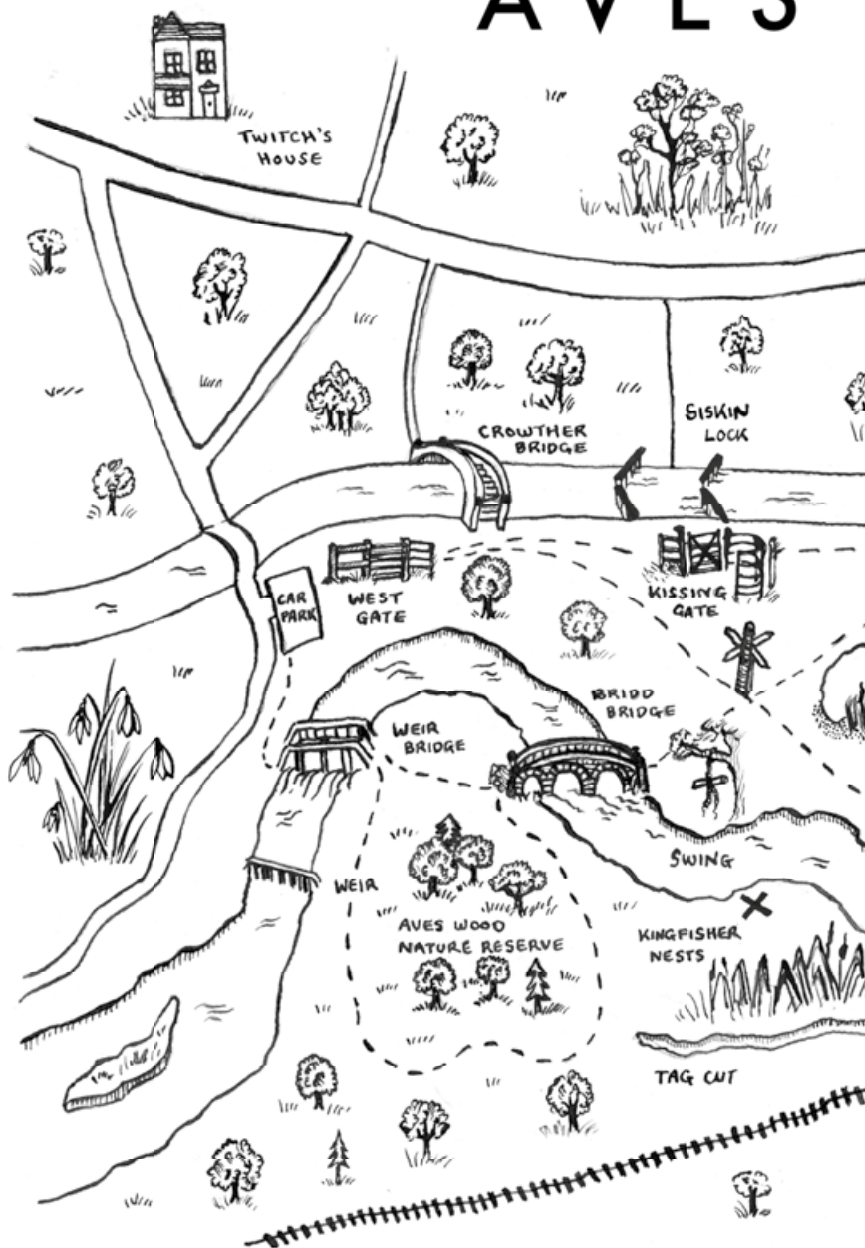
– Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven”

“...all living things were not made for man.”

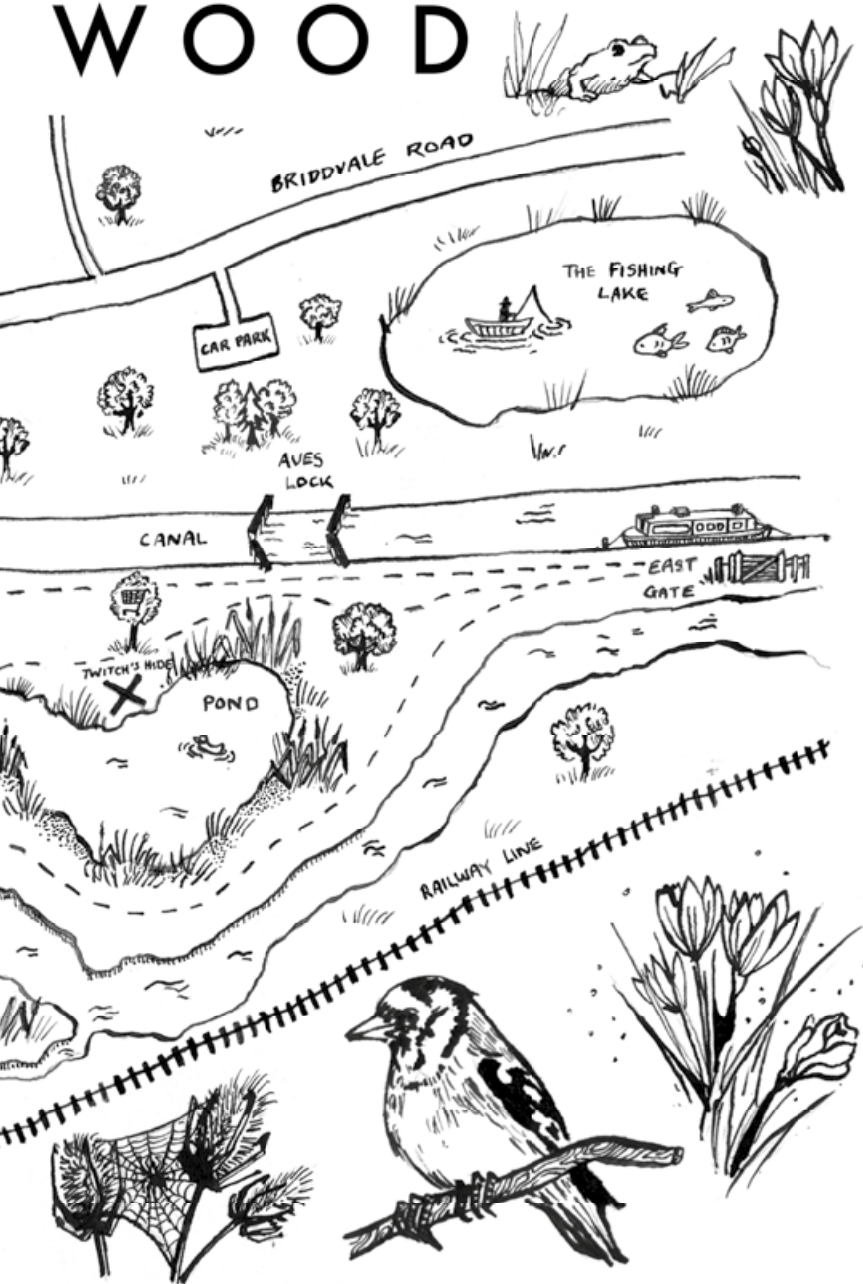
– Alfred Russel Wallace,
The Annotated Malay Archipelago



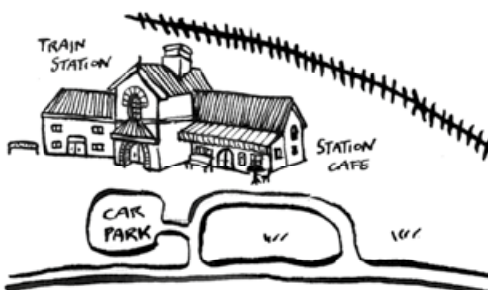
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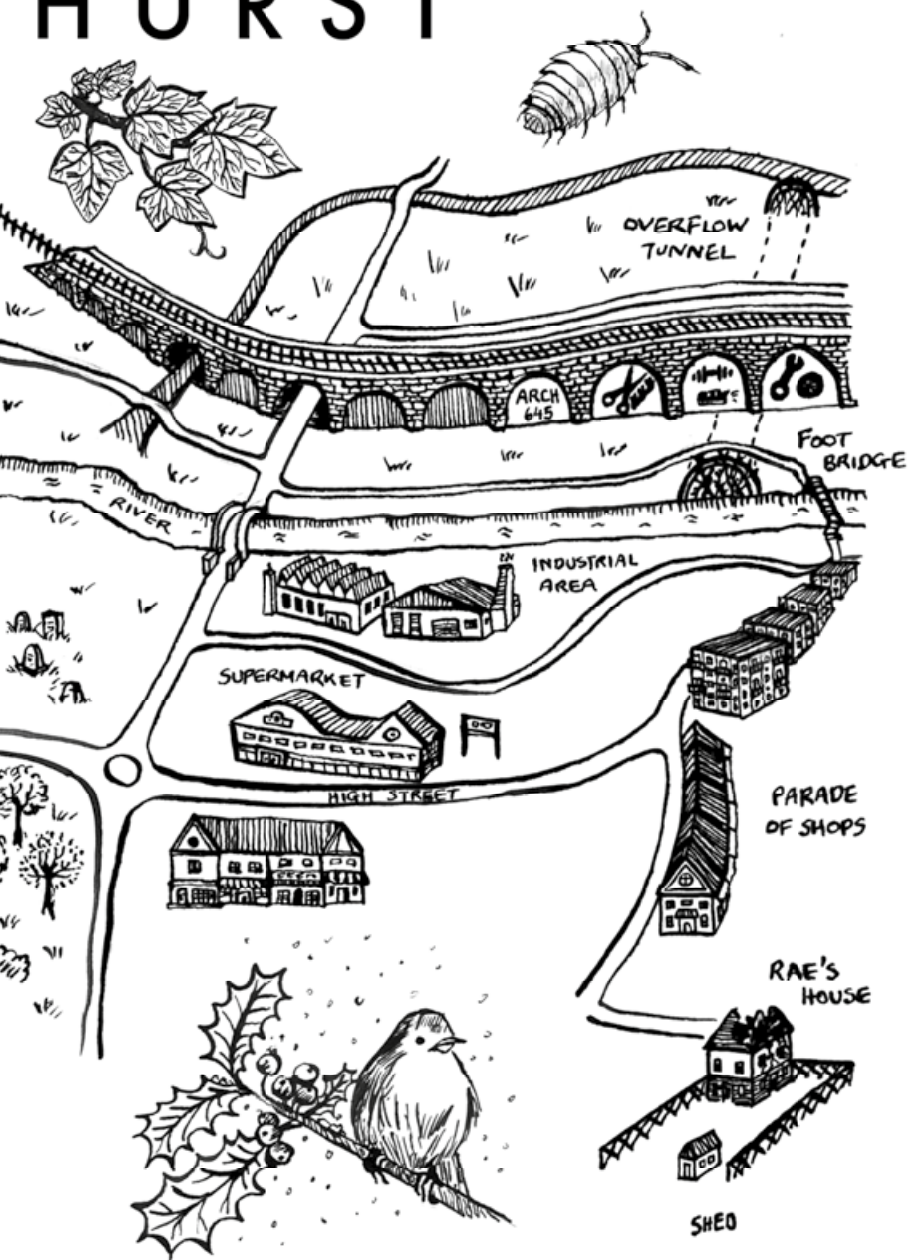
WOOD



SWAN



HURST





1

BIRDS OF PARADISE



Museums are places the living go to think about things that are dead, Ava thought as she wiped condensation from the window with her fist. The school coach was parking outside an old manor house; she was looking at a pair of stone columns, supporting a porch, framing a giant wooden door. There was a sign hammered into the lawn that read: *THE SWAN NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM*. The place looked creepy.

The school trip was supposed to be a treat before the half-term holiday, but Ava couldn't wait for it to be over.

"Gather on the grass outside," Ms Frank called as the coach door opened.

Ava's classmates began pushing and shoving their way down the aisle. She waited until the crush had passed before getting off herself. The fresh air was a cold shock. The veil of drowsiness, created by the body heat

of forty-five teenagers and the motion of a travelling coach, was whipped away by the freezing temperature. The pavement glittered with frost particles. The grass was dressed with ice. A shiver climbed Ava's spine. She folded her black-and-purple blazer across her chest, hugging it round her as she glanced up. The sky was a pale stone white and clear of clouds. A pair of jackdaws with pewter-grey heads and bandit-like eye markings watched them from the skeletal crown of a dormant silver birch.

"Listen, please." Ms Frank's chestnut curls bounced as she stepped down from the coach. "Get into your groups. Mr Barnes will give each of you a clipboard with the scavenger hunt on it as you go into the museum. First group back with the right answers gets a prize." She tipped her head. "Everyone got that?"

A series of grunts, affirmative murmurs, and the shuffling of feet was her reply.

"We'll meet in the lobby at twelve-thirty for lunch." She glanced at the museum entrance to make sure Mr Barnes was in position with his box of clipboards. "Off you go."

Ava moved away with the rest of her class. Feeling her phone vibrate in her pocket, she slid it out, speedily scanning the message from her best friend, Tara, and

smiled to herself as she put the phone away. She and Tara, along with Jack, Terry, Ozuru, Twitch and her nine-year-old sister Tippi, were part of a group of birdwatching detectives called the Twitchers. Tara's message had said that they would all be at the station tomorrow morning to meet her when her train arrived in Briddvale, and that Jack was desperately trying to find a crime for them to solve during the February half-term holiday.

The thought of seeing her friends tomorrow and staying a whole week at Tara's triggered a warm glow inside Ava that eased the chill of the winter morning.

She took a clipboard as she passed Mr Barnes and joined Nadine, Jenny and Sarah, who were waiting for her in the tiled lobby of the museum.

"Look at these questions," Nadine was complaining. "Find a case of birds that feed on insects, and complete the food chain diagram. How are we supposed to know which birds eat bugs?"

"So dull." Jenny sighed as she flicked through the pages.

"Passerines," Ava said, her mind still on the Twitchers.

"What?" Nadine and Jenny looked at her. The girls were best friends and practically the same person. They both had high ponytails, twinkly stud earrings, badges

on the lapels of their blazers, and bags decorated with dangling keychains of fluffy goggle-eyed creatures.

“Perching birds, like finches, sparrows and starlings,” Ava explained, not sure which of them to look at. “I mean, lots of birds eat bugs – most of them, actually – but we’re probably looking for a case of small songbirds.”

There was an awkward silence. Sarah, who was a nervous girl and eager to please, blurted out, “Who even cares about” – she glanced at the scavenger hunt – “Ecosystems and Food Webs! I mean ... so boring!” She snorted as she chuckled.

“Everyone should,” Ava replied flatly, feeling annoyed with herself that she’d mentioned passerines. She usually avoided the complicated politics of school relationships by keeping her mouth shut. “If food chains break down, the planet’s ecosystem collapses, and we’ll all die.”

“Yeah, Sarah,” Nadine said.

“Yeah, Sarah,” Jenny echoed.

“Erm, I think we need to go this way.” Ava pointed, trying not to notice the crestfallen expression on Sarah’s face.

Nadine and Jenny led the way, ponytails swinging. Ava tried to walk beside Sarah, who scowled and

picked up her pace to catch up with the other girls. Not for the first time, Ava wondered why she didn't seem to be able to get on with the kids at her school. She had joined Mountview Secondary in September, after they'd moved house. Her mum had wanted a fresh start for them all after she'd been released from prison. Yet, somehow, rumours about Ava's family had crept through the school. She'd heard the whispering; some of it wasn't very quiet.

Whereas she'd met the Twitchers in the previous summer; they knew what had happened to her mum and it had never been a problem. Her friends in Briddvale were different and she missed them intensely. She imagined her train pulling up at the station tomorrow morning and seeing their delighted faces as she got off. She couldn't wait to take the path into Aves Wood and follow the rabbit track below the shopping trolley tree to their secret hide.

Ava blinked. Nadine, Jenny and Sarah were no longer in front of her. They'd vanished. Two open doors led off the cavernous hall; above one was a sign saying: *CREATURES THAT MADE HISTORY*. There was a staircase in front of her with a lift beside it. Gazing up, Ava could see the low balcony wall of each level and it occurred to her that it might be more fun to complete

the scavenger hunt on her own. She pressed the button to call the lift, which was on level three. She stepped inside. She'd start at the top of the building and work her way down.

The silver doors opened and Ava came out on level five. She saw glass cases containing stuffed birds, but the gallery was empty of people. A sign informed her that this was the Birds of the World exhibit. Her footsteps echoed off the polished wooden floor as she approached a cabinet the size of a shop window. The exhibition was divided into sections, a different type of bird in each. The glass eyes and straw innards of the dead birds made them look like puppets. Ava felt goosebumps rising on her body as she passed along the display. She preferred birds to be alive.

Drawn towards an arrangement of brightly coloured passerines on perches, she read the white plaque in the case: *PARADISAEIDAE – BIRDS OF PARADISE, COLLECTED BY ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE, 1857*. She blinked, astonished to realize that these were the very birds Wallace had described in his book about the Malay Archipelago. Twitch had told her about the enigmatic birds that lived, hidden and protected, in the rainforests of New Guinea. It was his dream to one day make the expedition to see their dazzling displays and

curious courtship dances. His dog-eared copy of Alfred Russel Wallace's book lived in the hide. Ava had dipped into it many times.

Reaching into her pocket, Ava got her fingers around her phone, thinking she'd take a photo to show Twitch, when a long, high whistle, followed by a piercing alarm, sliced through the dusty silence. Startled, she dropped her clipboard, letting out a cry of surprise.

Spinning around, Ava searched for a reason for the noise. Her heart was racing. Fear made her skin prickle. She was alone in the gallery.

Running to one of the arched windows, Ava looked out. She thought it must be a fire alarm but she couldn't see smoke.

She sniffed the air. Nothing.

People below were hurrying out of the museum looking concerned. Ava spotted Ms Frank waving at the children from her school. Mr Barnes was counting heads and taking a register. She should join them.

Hurrying back to Wallace's birds, Ava grabbed her clipboard, shoving it into her rucksack, yanked her phone from her pocket and snapped a photo, feeling a pang at the thought of Alfred Russel Wallace's birds being burned.

“They’re already dead, Ava,” she muttered. “Get moving before you are too.”

The alarm seemed to be ringing inside her head. With a lurch she remembered she was at the top of the building – the worst place to be if there was a fire. She knew not to use the lift. That could be a death trap. She needed to find the stairs.

Hearing a door slam and running footsteps, Ava pivoted. At the far end of the gallery was a corridor; beside it was a sign saying *NO PUBLIC ACCESS*. To the right she spotted a staircase with a green fire exit sign. She sprinted to it and down to level four.

Through a window, Ava glimpsed three police cars pulling up, blue lights flashing, officers leaping from their vehicles. She paused. They’d got here fast! Where were the fire engines? She heard no more approaching sirens. A security guard jogged out of the building, waving the police inside, and the alarm suddenly fell silent.

Ava’s skin prickled.

The people milling about below looked disgruntled. They didn’t look afraid or alarmed. Surely if there was a fire, the police would be outside setting up a cordon, not going inside.

Still no fire engines.

Was it a false alarm? Had Freddy Rigby set the fire alarm off on purpose, like he did in school? But then, wouldn't the police be questioning the people outside?

Maybe it hadn't been a fire alarm at all.

Ava was suddenly alert. Her ears were pricked up. Her eyes were wide.

What if it was a burglar alarm?

She knew some burglar alarms were connected to police stations. It made sense that the museum's would be.

What if there was a crime taking place in the building right now?



THE DARWIN DECOY

I could take a quick scout around, Ava thought, pulling a scrunchie from her blazer pocket and tying her mane of black curls into a top knot. It would do no harm to investigate. It might help the police. Pushing open the door to level four, she scanned the gallery for any sign of thieves, all the while sniffing the air for fire. If she detected a whiff of smoke, she'd run.

Darting from case to cabinet, Ava peered into every corner but saw nothing. Below her, she could hear the distant clatter of running feet and barked orders.

Where had the alarm been triggered? It must be in a different part of the museum? This was the geology floor. The case nearest to her contained fossils. It didn't appear to be alarmed but it was locked. Perhaps the museum only put alarms on cases containing valuable things. Ava felt a thrill at the idea that something

priceless might have been stolen from the museum whilst she was in it. Jack would be so impressed when she told him.

Satisfied that there were no clues or robbers to be found on level four, Ava returned to the staircase and quickly descended to level three. As she crept into the exhibition hall, she heard a quiet sound, like fabric brushing against fabric, followed by the rustle of plastic. She stiffened, trying to tune in to the sound and identify where it was coming from.

Dropping into a squat, she crept and crawled through the hall, hiding and peeping around cabinets containing polar bears and penguins, closing in on the noise. The police were getting louder. She leaned her back against a display case containing a disgruntled walrus and closed her eyes, straining to hear, but the commotion of the police officers and security guards searching the floor below eclipsed all other sounds.

Concerned she would lose the source of the noise, Ava dashed, bent double, to the end of the room. She saw a corridor cordoned off by a rope and a sign saying *AUTHORIZED ACCESS ONLY*. Down the wood-panelled wall of the corridor was a door. A brass plaque above it said: *THE WALLACE ROOM*. The door was ajar.

The people inside probably heard the alarm and ran, Ava reasoned. Or, there could be someone in there committing a crime right now!

She tiptoed to the rope, ducked under, and sidled up to the door. She held her breath as she peered through the gap.

The room was empty.

Exhaling a disappointed puff of relief, Ava went inside. She found herself standing in a wood-panelled room lined with cupboards. There weren't any windows or pictures on the walls. It was a fancy storage cupboard. She turned to leave, feeling deflated, but was stopped by an odd sight.

On the floor, in front of the cupboard behind the door, was a large black feather.

"What are you doing in here?" Ava whispered, picking up the feather and twirling it. She ran her finger along the inky veins. It didn't look like an old feather. It shimmered with newness. The only birds in the museum were dead, stuffed and in cases, their feathers showing signs of dryness and fading. This looked like it had come from some sort of crow.

Pulling out her clipboard, Ava lifted the scavenger hunt sheet and trapped the feather beneath it.

"It could be just a feather," she told herself, sliding

the clipboard into her bag. “Or, it could be a clue!” Her heart bounced at this thought.

Footsteps in the exhibit hall made Ava pivot, looking for a place to hide.

“None of Darwin’s finches are missing,” a man said. “Your curator has checked. They are going through the rest of the exhibition now.”

“Thank goodness,” replied a woman with a gravelly voice.

“It looks like someone tried to break into the display case. A metal rod was found inserted into the lock. When they couldn’t pick it, they tried to smash the glass with a rock. That’s what set off the alarm.”

“So they were after the finches?”

“Looks likely,” he went on. “There’s a broken window on the ground floor. The rubber seal around the glazing has been levered out. The glass fell and smashed on the path. But it’s a small window – too small for an adult to have climbed through. It might not be related.”

“Which window is it?”

“In the public toilets, at the back of the building.”

“The ones that look out onto the wooded picnic spot?”

In the silence, Ava guessed the man was nodding.

“Officers are checking the area.”

There were more footsteps.

“Is anything missing?” the woman with the gravelly voice asked.

“The curators are double-checking the rooms around the Creatures That Made History exhibit,” a young woman’s voice replied, “but it doesn’t look like it.”

“Thank you for coming so swiftly, Chief Superintendent,” the woman with the gravelly voice said. “Friday is when we have visiting school groups and it is often full of ... shall we say ... mishaps, but never before an attempted robbery.”

“Not a problem,” the man said. “Although we haven’t ruled out this being a mishap. The attempt to get into the finches’ case wasn’t professional. It looks like the work of an amateur.”

“Will I be able to let the visitors back into the museum today?” the young woman asked.

“Possibly, but only once we’ve completed a thorough search of the museum,” replied the Chief Superintendent. “That will take some time.”

Ava frowned as they walked away. If the thief had failed to break into the case of Darwin’s finches, why would they smash the toilet window to escape? Surely they would simply walk out of the museum with the other members of the public? And if the thief had fled

the moment the alarm was triggered, then who or what had she heard in here?

Nobody had searched the room she was in yet. She considered the tall cabinets that lined the walls. What was in them anyway?

Covering her hand with her school jumper, so as not to leave fingerprints, Ava tugged at the handle of the closest cupboard door, expecting it to be locked. It opened. Inside was a stack of white drawers. Pulling at one, she saw it was empty except for two dead brown birds at the back. Peering at the white labels attached to their legs, she saw they were female birds of paradise. She guessed this room must house the rest of Alfred Russel Wallace's collection of birds, the ones not on display upstairs in the Birds of the World exhibit.

She touched her finger to the tail feathers of one of the brown birds. This small creature connected her to one of the greatest naturalists in all of history. She pulled another drawer open, hungry to see more. It was empty. The missing birds must be the ones she'd seen upstairs, although the Birds of the World display case had only featured one bird of each species. The label on this drawer suggested it should contain multiple birds of a single species. She opened another drawer. It too

was empty. Ava felt a lurch of alarm as she pulled open three more drawers. They were all empty.

Thinking of the black feather in her rucksack, Ava checked the labels on the drawers, but none of them said *Corvidae*. She remembered the strange sound that had brought her to this room. Could it have been the sound of bird skins being hurriedly shoved into a carrier bag?

Had the alarm been a decoy? Was this the true crime scene? Had the thief been after the Alfred Russel Wallace bird skins all along?

She needed to tell the police!

Ava dashed into the gallery, sprinting to the staircase, rushing down the steps two at a time, all the while thinking about the moment the strange rustling noise had stopped.

Where had she been?

With a shiver of fear, Ava realized the thief must have passed by her on the other side of the cabinet with the walrus in it!

As she stumbled into the lobby, out of breath, Ava saw a uniformed man with grey hair and an air of authority was standing in the museum entrance, shaking hands with a woman in a toffee-coloured skirt and jacket as if he was leaving. “Stop!” she called out. “Wait!”

“Are you looking for your school group?” An eager-faced young officer stepped in front of Ava. “They’re out the front by the coaches.”

“No, you don’t understand. There’s been a robbery!”

“We’ve got it all in hand.” The officer motioned for her to move towards the door. “No need to worry.”

Ava walked towards the door, but when the officer turned his back, she changed direction, running to the woman. “Please. You must listen to me. Wallace’s birds of paradise are gone. They’ve been stolen!”

“I beg your pardon?” The woman in the toffee-coloured suit blinked. Ava recognized her gravelly tone as the woman she’d heard speaking to the Chief Superintendent upstairs.

“The drawers in the Wallace Room... They’re empty!”

“Who are you?” The woman frowned. “What were you doing in the Wallace Room?” Her tone was sharp. “It’s out of bounds to the public. It’s locked.”

“It’s not locked.” Ava could feel herself getting hot.

“No collector would steal the Wallace birds when Darwin’s finches are in the building,” the woman said, almost to reassure herself. She glanced at the Chief Superintendent. “Darwin’s birds are invaluable.” She gave a shake of her head and frowned at Ava. “The drawer you looked in must’ve been the one we took

specimens from for the Birds of the World display.”

“No, I’ve seen that. Way more birds are missing. More than one drawer is empty. Lots of them are.”

“What?” The woman was looking alarmed now.

“I found a clue in the Wallace Room, on the floor,” Ava told the Chief Superintendent, who raised a whiskery eyebrow. “It’s a large black feather. It looks like it could be from a crow.”

“Really?” The Chief Superintendent suppressed a smile. “Well, you’ve been very helpful,” he replied with a wink. “Now, you should return to your classmates. They’ll be wondering where you are.”

“Don’t you want the feather?”

“Why don’t you keep it as a souvenir?” The old Chief Superintendent smiled at her, and Ava realized he wasn’t taking her seriously.

“Fine,” she snapped, walking towards the exit. “But I’m not the one who fell for the Darwin decoy. When you go up to the Wallace Room, you’ll see that you all did!”



3

THE RAVEN

Standing on the doorstep of the museum, Ava glanced back. The woman, Chief Superintendent and the young officer were hurrying up the stairs. Quick as a flash, Ava darted back inside. She couldn't investigate the Darwin exhibit – it would be crawling with curators – but she might be able to investigate the broken window before the police realized there had been a theft and the whole museum became a crime scene.

Moving slowly with her back against the lift, Ava sidled into the stairwell that led down to the lower ground floor. A police officer was talking to a museum security guard in front of the corridor to the public toilets. Keeping low, she crept to the opposite wall and inched round the corner, behind them.

“To be honest, we're not the kind of place that gets broken into,” the security guard was saying. “And

no one in their right mind would break a window to climb in when they can walk through the front door? Entry is free, you know. My money's on one of those schoolkids smashing it. That happens."

"The Super thinks it's a false alarm," the police officer agreed. "Nothing's been nicked."

As soon as she was out of view, Ava sprinted to the toilets, not daring to look back. The criminals had been clever to use the Darwin alarm as a distraction. Who knows how long it would've taken someone to notice the drawers in the Wallace Room were empty if she hadn't gone in there? An hour? Maybe longer. Ava was one step ahead of the police and she wanted to keep it that way. A corridor took her into a room with a row of cubicles opposite a line of sinks. Above one of the sinks was the missing window.

Pulling out her phone, Ava took a photo of the empty casement. Looking around, she could see no sign of what had broken it: no stone or tool or weapon. Poking her head through the hole, she saw smashed glass on the concrete path outside. She snapped a picture. Under the glass was a black strip and Ava remembered the Chief Superintendent saying the rubber seal had been levered out. The way the glass had landed made Ava think it had been pushed from inside, but if the rubber

seal had been pulled out, maybe the thief had prized out the glass from outside. But then why let it smash on the ground? That would make a noise and draw attention. And the security guard was right: why come in via the window when entrance to the museum was free?

Was the window a red herring? Or was it an escape route?

The casement wasn't big, but Ava reckoned she could get out of it. Pulling her sleeves over her hands, she clambered onto the sink and slid through, dropping to the path. Her feet crunched on the broken glass. She looked at the window from the outside. She didn't think anyone much bigger than her could have got through it. She took another photo.

"If I were a thief and I came this way, where would I go next?" Ava looked across the lawn, immediately drawing back against the brick wall as two police officers came running across the grass, their ears pressed to the radios on their protective vests.

The missing birds must have been discovered.

Peering across the lawn, beyond a group of picnic tables, Ava saw a winding path edged with snowdrops. It led into a wood that looked like a pen and ink drawing: black trunks, bare branches, white sky. Might the thieves be hiding in there?

Checking the coast was clear, Ava sprinted across the lawn.

“Ava Kingfisher!” Ms Frank’s voice stopped her in her tracks. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Ava winced at the tone of her teacher’s voice. It was then that she became aware of a pair of beady black eyes staring at her from the low branch of a chestnut tree on the fringe of the wood.

A raven!

Ava locked eyes with the ebony bird and thought of the feather in her bag.

“Come here this instant,” Ms Frank insisted.

The brooding raven had eyes like a demon, wicked and wise. With a shiver, Ava did as she was told. She glanced back. The ominous bird was watching her.

“Sorry, Ms Frank,” Ava mumbled as she drew near the harassed teacher.

“What on earth are you doing back here?” Ms Frank was cross. “I’ve been through the register twice. I thought we’d lost you! I was about to ask the police to look for you.”

“I’m sorry, Ms Frank. I didn’t mean to worry you,” Ava said, apologetically. “I was birdwatching.”

“We’ll discuss this when we get back to school.” Ms Frank motioned Ava to walk in front of her.

“Yes, Ms Frank.”

As they walked around the building, Ava couldn't shake the image of the watching raven. Did the feather in her rucksack belong to that bird? Surely that was unlikely. What would a wild raven be doing inside a museum? It could hardly have been the thief.

When they reached the coach, half her class were on board. With nothing else to do, they were eating their packed lunches.

“I see you found her,” Mr Barnes said with a shake of his head. “Whilst you were away, a police officer informed me that they won't be letting anyone back in the museum today. We must cancel the trip.”

Ava kept her face blank and her eyes on the ground.

“What a disaster,” Ms Frank sighed. “Well, let's round everyone up and get them back on the coach. You first, Ava.”

Ava nodded, suppressing a smile as she pictured the excitement of the Twitchers tomorrow when she told them that she had a case for them to solve. She couldn't wait to reveal that she had been the one to discover the crime scene.

An idea flashed into her head. What if she was to go to Briddvale today instead of tomorrow? Swanhurst was only about a forty-minute drive from Briddvale. It was

a big town – it must have a railway station. She had the money she'd brought for the museum gift shop. She could catch a train!

She felt a crackle of excitement.

“There are thirty-one children on the coach,” Mr Barnes told Ms Frank. “Ava makes thirty-two. The rest of them are over there.” He pointed across the car park to a bench beneath a giant oak tree where Nadine and Jenny were holding court.

“I’ll get on the coach shall I, Ms Frank?” Ava said.

“Hmm? Yes. Climb aboard, Ava.” Ms Frank nodded, and Ava made sure her teacher saw her climb the stairs.

Hovering in the aisle by the driver’s seat, Ava watched Ms Frank and Mr Barnes set out to round up the group of students around the bench.

She let out a mumbled exclamation as if she’d forgotten something and hurried back down the coach steps. Rushing to the front of the vehicle, she squatted down behind one of its enormous wheels. She looked about for a hiding place but was surrounded by flat lawn and thin trees. Panic fluttered in her chest as she heard her classmates approach the coach and board. She needed to move!

Beyond the car park, across the road, was a playground. On the pavement in front of it was a bus

stop. Sitting on the bench inside was a kid about her own age, a skinny figure in black, with straight hair centrally parted, hanging like half-closed curtains in front of her face.

Launching into a sprint, Ava charged across the car park and over the road to the bus stop.

“Hi. My name’s Ava,” she said, wrenching off her rucksack and wriggling behind the bench. “I’m going to hide down here. Please don’t give me away.”

“You in trouble?” the girl asked in a muted voice.

“No, no. Nothing like that. I just don’t want to go back to school.”

“OK,” the girl replied, as if this made perfect sense.

“Will you tell me when that coach has driven away?”

“Sure.”

Squatting soon became uncomfortable. Ava shifted, trying to find a better position. When the coach engine roared into life, her heart gave a tiny hiccup of fear. Unable to see, Ava stared at the girl, hoping her expression might give some clue as to what was happening. But the girl’s chin was thrust forward and her stare blank. Ava saw the purple shadow of a faded bruise around her right eye and wondered how she’d got it.

“Stay down,” the girl muttered. “The coach is coming out of the car park.”

Ava felt her phone vibrate in her pocket but didn't dare pull it out. She heard the growl of the approaching vehicle and held her breath as it passed.

"Don't get up yet," warned the girl. "They'll see you in the rear-view mirror."

Ava listened as her classmates disappeared down the road, on their way back to school.

"All clear."

"Thanks!" Ava popped up from behind the bench, unable to keep the grin from her face. She yanked her phone from her pocket. The message was from Tara, asking what time her train was getting into Briddvale the next day.

"Do you know if there is a station near here?"

"Yeah." The girl pointed in the direction the coach had travelled. "It's that way."

"Do you know how long it takes to walk there?"

"About half an hour."

"Brilliant. Er..." Ava found she wasn't sure what to say to the girl. She didn't know her name. "Thanks for helping."

"No problem." The girl turned away from Ava, looking up the road as if expecting her bus to arrive at any moment.

"Bye then," Ava said, typing a message into her phone as she walked away:

Change of plan! I'm coming TODAY!!! Got a case for the Twitchers! And it is a BIG ONE! A x

A case? How? Aren't you at school? T x

Will explain. Am on my way. Will let you know when I'm on a train. A x

BRILLIANT! I'll tell the others. School breaks up at lunch today. We can meet you at the station. T x

Ava started to jog. As she ran, more police cars passed her on their way to the museum. She couldn't help feeling proud to have been the one who'd discovered the theft. She knew Jack would be impressed.

It occurred to Ava that her mum might be cross that she'd slipped away from the school coach. She would call and explain once she was on the train to Briddvale. After all, she was thirteen and it wasn't her fault the school trip was cancelled.

Realizing that her holiday had started, Ava felt a rush of freedom. Her little sister, Tippi, was away at a school residential. She didn't get back until Sunday, which meant Ava had two Tippi-free days in Briddvale. She loved her sister but had to take care of her when they stayed with Tara. Right now, she had no responsibilities and an incredible mystery to solve: a museum heist!

4

THE FEATHER HEIST



As her train approached Briddvale Station, Ava's spirits lifted. Her mum had been horribly cross with her. She wasn't happy about calling the school to explain why Ava wasn't on the coach. She'd told Ava that another stunt like this would mean no more unsupervised trips to see her friends and Ava had apologized repeatedly. Eventually her mum had calmed down, making her promise to be good for Tara's parents.

Springing up from her seat, Ava looked for her friends through the window in the train door. The sky was overcast and threatening rain. The doors opened. Stepping down to the platform, she saw Tara and Jack running towards her.

"Ava!" Tara cried, her long black hair flying out behind her, with a wide smile on her face. "We came straight from school."

“What’s the crime?” Jack asked, fixing his green eyes on her. “You said there was a crime to solve – what is it? I’m dying to know.”

“Jack!” Tara smacked his arm lightly. “Ava’s just got here.” Linking her arm through Ava’s, Tara walked towards the exit. “Everyone’s meeting at Twitch’s house to hear your news.”

“I saw your message to Tara,” Jack said, hurrying to Ava’s side. “The case – is it juicy?”

“Can’t you wait?” Tara sounded exasperated.

“I need to know.” He clasped his hands together and his voice took on a pleading tone. “Don’t torture me, Ava. I can’t take it.”

“I suppose I could tell you...” Ava teased. She felt a spot of rain on her head and looked up, holding out her hand. “Hey, is it raining?”

Tara pulled an umbrella from the side pocket of her school bag.

“Who cares about rain?” Jack groaned.

“Actually,” Tara said, opening the umbrella as icy needles bombarded them, “I think it’s sleet.”

“Kill me. Kill me now!” Jack threw out his arms dramatically, letting sleet pelt him. “I can’t take this torture!”

“All right!” Ava laughed, grabbing him and

yanking him under the umbrella. “I’ll tell you... It’s a museum heist.”

“A museum heist?” A look of awe dawned on Jack’s face. “Really? Which museum? When?”

“Today. The Swan Museum in Swanhurst.” Ava paused. “I was there when it happened. I discovered the scene of the crime.”

“What?” Jack looked like he was struggling not to swallow his own tongue. “You have to tell me everything. Immediately!”

“Jack.” Tara’s voice had a warning tone. “Everyone is waiting to hear Ava’s news. It’s not fair if you hear it first.”

“But...” Ava tried not to smile as Jack struggled to find a good argument. “What if I die before then?”

Ava laughed and hugged Tara’s arm to her. “I’ve missed you guys.” It felt great to be back with her friends.

“I’ve missed you too.” Tara beamed at her. “When you and Tippi aren’t here, I’m the only girl and *that*” – she eyeballed Jack – “can be infuriating.”

“Fine, I mean, you don’t have to tell me everything” – Jack bumped into Ava as the three of them tried to stay under the umbrella – “but surely there’s something...” He looked hopefully at her.

“All right.” Ava chuckled. “I will tell you that I found a clue.”

“A clue? What was it? Does it point at a suspect? Do you have any suspects? It would really help to know exactly what the crime was. You said it was a heist, so I’m guessing a theft, but what was stolen? Were the police there? Are they investigating? Of course they are. I wonder if it’s going to be on the news.”

Ava lifted her chin to show that she wouldn’t be saying another word until they were at Twitch’s house.

“Oh, come on!” Jack stopped walking, but only for two seconds because the sleet drummed on his skull, plastering his spiky hair over his forehead.

Despite the umbrella, all three of them were soaked and shivering by the time they reached Twitch’s front door.

Ozuru had spotted them coming up the road and was standing in the open doorway grinning. They hurried inside. Twitch handed Jack a towel as they took their shoes and coats off.

“Do you want some hot blackcurrant squash?” Ozuru asked. “We’ve already boiled the kettle.”

“Yes, please.” Ava nodded. Her legs felt like icicles.

“On it!” Twitch dashed off, returning with a tray of five steaming cups. He put it down on the coffee table in the living room.

Ava liked the homeliness of Twitch's faded furniture and the quaint paintings of birds that hung on the walls. It was a comfy room that wouldn't tell on you if you accidentally spilled or scratched something. Seeing the gas fire was on, she went and stood in front of it to warm up the backs of her legs. Her socks were wet through and she couldn't feel her toes. "Where's Terry?" she asked, looking around.

"At Pam's," Jack replied as he dried his wet hair with the towel.

"Pamela Hardacre's?" Ava had not expected him to say that.

"Ozuru thinks they might be secretly boyfriend and girlfriend," Tara said.

"What?" Ava's jaw dropped. "But Terry HATES Pam!"

"And yet," Twitch said, "right now he's at her house helping her set up her new computer."

"Terry doesn't know anything about computers." Ozuru crossed his arms. He and Terry were best friends and Ava could see that he wasn't happy about this new relationship.

"Does he know I'm here?" Ava asked. "With a case that needs solving?"

"We told him," Jack said. "He said he would come ... as soon as he'd finished helping Pam!"

“Wow.” Ava tried not to feel offended. “I don’t believe it.”

“Yesterday, after school,” Ozuru told her, “he said he needed to run an errand for his mum, but he lied. I followed him all the way to Pam’s house.”

“He lied to you?” Ava frowned. It didn’t sound like Terry.

“Anyway, enough of Terry’s love life.” Jack dropped the towel to the floor and rubbed his hands together. “Let’s hear about the case!”

“In a sec,” Ava said, picking up her cup of hot blackcurrant and taking a slurp.

Jack wailed, falling back into an armchair, and everyone laughed.

“OK.” Ava sat down on the rug, wrapping her hands around her mug. “This is what happened.”

She began with her decision to do the scavenger hunt on her own, and going up to the fifth level of the museum. “They have a display up there with birds of paradise.” She looked at Twitch. “Some of them are the actual birds that Alfred Russel Wallace collected.”

“I’ve seen it.” Twitch nodded. “They’re incredible.”

“I thought you hated displays of dead birds,” Ozuru said.

“Museums are different,” Twitch said. “They have

a collection that everyone can go and look at to learn about birds. If people don't learn about birds, they won't care to protect them. Some of the birds in the Swan collection are already extinct. They're a warning." He paused, thinking for a moment. "Back when Wallace collected his birds, there was no other way to record a species. There were no cameras. And they weren't endangered. They were new wonders. Wallace's generation discovered birds. Our generation must save them." He sighed. "That's why I get angry when people destroy precious habitats or shoot birds for sport and keep creepy cases of them in their house."

Ava thought about the cases of stuffed birds in Mord Hall and nodded. "What do you know about Darwin's finches?" she asked Twitch.

"Charles Darwin collected them when he was on the HMS *Beagle*, exploring the Galapagos Islands," Twitch replied. "The finches all have different beak shapes because of what they eat. They're the evidence that supports Darwin's theory of natural selection, and the theory of evolution. They're probably the most important birds in human history."

"They are in the Swan Museum," Ava said.

"Yes." Twitch nodded.

"Forget boring old Darwin and tell us about the

crime!” Jack insisted. “You were up looking at birds when...” He waved his hand at her encouragingly.

“An alarm went off,” Ava told him. “I thought it was a fire alarm. I searched for the stairs and the fire exit, but then I saw police cars arrive and officers running into the building.”

She described how she’d discovered the theft in the Wallace Room, feeling a surge of pleasure as the others leaned forward, drinking in every word. Ozuru was scribbling down notes. Twitch had a faraway look in his eyes. Tara was shaking her head. And Jack looked like he might explode.

“I don’t understand,” Tara said. “Why would anyone want to steal dead birds?”

“These aren’t just any birds,” Ava said. “These are birds of paradise. Some of them were collected by Alfred Russel Wallace himself! He’s one of the greatest naturalists in history.”

“But still...” Tara looked doubtful. “Why? I mean, that curator lady said herself, Darwin’s finches are more valuable. Why not steal those?”

“Maybe the finches were impossible to get at,” Ozuru said, “in the alarmed case.”

“Perhaps someone wanted pretty feathers,” Jack suggested. “They’re brightly coloured birds. Maybe the

robbery was done by a fashion designer with a feather fixation.”

“Like *101 Dalmatians* but instead of puppy coats, they want colourful feathers?” Ava shrugged. “It’s possible.”

“This is a feather heist,” Jack declared. “And the Twitchers were the first at the scene. We discovered this crime and we’re going to solve it.”

“Yes.” Ava pulled her rucksack towards her, sliding out her clipboard and producing the large black feather. “And this is our first clue!”



THE DANCING BABOON

Ozuru's phone lit up and he answered it. "Hi, Terry... What?" He rolled his eyes and sighed. "Fine. I'll tell them. Bye."

"Terry's going to be a while," he said. "Apparently, setting up Pam's computer is taking ages."

"Probably all the smooching they're doing is getting in the way." Jack made a kissing noise.

"Ew, Jack!" Tara pulled a face. "Gross!"

"Why don't we go to Pam's?" Ava suggested.

"What for?" Ozuru asked.

"To find out what Terry's up to," Ava explained. "We can pretend that we need to use her computer because we don't want our parents to know we're working on a case."

"Actually, I'd rather my parents didn't know," Tara admitted.

“That’s a genius idea.” Twitch was grinning.

“We can’t start this case without Terry,” Ava said. “And we need to get online, to find out what kind of person wants bird skins badly enough to steal them from a museum.”

“And if we go to Pam’s we can do both,” Tara said.

“But Pam will want in on the crime solving,” Jack pointed out.

“She won’t,” Tara replied. “She only ever wants to report crimes, not solve them.”

“I want to find out why Terry’s been lying to me.” Ozuru got to his feet.

“The first forty-eight hours after a crime are critical.” Jack jumped up. “If you don’t have a lead, a suspect, or an arrest within forty-eight hours, the trail goes cold. Your chances of solving a case are cut in half.”

“It’s decided then.” Ava drained her cup. “Let’s go to Pam’s.”

It was getting dark by the time they rang Pam’s bell.

“Hi, Mrs Hardacre,” Jack said, as Pam’s mum opened the door. “We’ve come to help Pam set up her computer.”

“Hello, Jack.” She gave him a bemused smile. “That’s very kind. Although, I thought Pammy had set up her computer weeks ago.”

“Oh! Er, she did,” Jack improvised. “She’s having teething troubles.”

“It’s nice of you to help.” Mrs Hardacre stood back, ushering them inside. “Pammy’s studio is in the spare bedroom. Up the stairs to the right, at the end of the landing.”

“Her studio?” Ava whispered to Tara.

“She’s taking being a YouTuber very seriously,” Tara replied as they entered the immaculate white house with champagne-coloured furnishings.

Jack led the way up the stairs, marching to the end of the landing, and pushing the door open without knocking. He froze, looking shocked. Curious, Ava peered past him into the room.

Terry was standing in front of a green backdrop, lit by a ring light, dressed as a cartoon bank robber with a black mask over his eyes and a giant sack swung over his back.

Pam was looking into a video camera and shouting, “Come on! Be menacing! You look like one of Santa’s elves bringing presents! You’re meant to be a criminal!”

“I’m trying.” Terry turned and dropped the swag bag when he saw the Twitchers. “It’s not what it looks like!” He held his hands up.

“Oh, it’s you lot.” Pam blew at a strand of blonde

hair that had fallen over her face. “What do you want? We’re busy.”

“I thought Terry was helping you set up your computer.” Ozuru eyeballed Terry and he blushed.

“Oh please!” Pam’s voice was dripping with disdain. “I know how to plug in a computer. I’ve had my editing station set up for ages.”

“What *are* you doing?” Twitch asked, looking mystified.

“Acting!” Terry said, snatching off his burglar’s eye mask.

“I needed some funny cutaways to spice up my news videos,” Pam explained. “Terry volunteered.”

“As if!” Terry folded his arms. “You filmed me on your phone doing ... doing ... something, and ... and you said you were going to put it on YouTube if I didn’t help you.”

“And then you immediately volunteered!” Pam countered.

Tara suppressed a giggle.

“We’re here on serious Twitchers business,” Jack said importantly. “We need Terry. We’ve got a case to solve.”

“A case?” Pam straightened up, a keen look in her eye.

“A big one,” Ava told her. “A museum heist.”

“What was stolen?” Pam’s eyes sparkled. “Jewellery? Priceless art? Roman coins?”

“Really old bird skins,” Twitch told her.

“Urgh!” Pam looked disappointed. “I should’ve known it wasn’t a real crime. No one would steal a dead bird’s skin.”

“A bird skin holds all the feathers,” Tara explained patiently. “It’s the feathers that people want, not the skin.”

“These are birds of paradise skins that Alfred Russel Wallace collected in the Malay Archipelago,” Twitch told her.

“Russell Wally who?” Pam waved her hand as if swatting a fly. “Sounds boring. Can’t you find a proper crime, like a murder or something? I need *good* stories for the channel.” She pointed at Terry. “Why do you think I’m making him dance around like a baboon?”

“A baboon?” Terry glared at Pam. “That’s rich coming from a ... a ... spider like you.”

Pam turned away, acting as if she hadn’t heard him. Terry silently mimed strangling her.

“I don’t think you have to worry about them being boyfriend and girlfriend,” Ava said to Ozuru with a chuckle.

Terry heard her and his mouth dropped open. He glared at Ozuru. “Girlfriend and boyfriend?”

“You lied to me,” Ozuru retorted crossly. “How was I supposed to know what you were doing?”

“What did you think I was doing?” Terry asked.

“Kissing.” Jack grinned.

“Ew, don’t be disgusting!” Pam shuddered as if a ghost had passed through her.

“As if!” Terry looked mortified. “I wouldn’t kiss her. She’s blackmailing me!”

Ava thought it was time she changed the subject. “Pam, do you think we could use your computer to do an internet search?” she asked, bringing everyone back to the investigation. “We need to find out what those bird skins are worth and who might want them.”

“Sure. I’m curious too.” Pam sank into the seat in front of her computer screen, which was zoomed in on Terry’s mask-clad face.

“They must be valuable,” Tara reasoned, “else why would anyone steal them?”

Pamela typed *museum thefts*.

“You need to type in *bird skins*,” Twitch told her.

“Let’s see what kind of things people steal from museums first,” Pam said, scrolling through the list of links. “Oooh, look, there was a Chinese jade theft a few

years back. Now that I can understand. Jade is pretty. And here” – she clicked on an article – “someone stole a couple of rhino horns from a museum in Edinburgh. Rhino horns are rare now. I saw a documentary about it. They’re more valuable than gold.” Before Ava could read the story, Pam had already clicked away. “Check this out, gold jewellery, gemstones and antiquities stolen from the British Museum!”

“OK, but we want to know about people *buying* rare bird skins,” Ava prompted. “Or who is interested in birds of paradise feathers.”

Pam opened a new window and searched but was only served articles about the actual birds. “Nothing,” she said. “I told you, no one in their right mind would steal—”

“Wait.” Jack pointed. “Go back. There.” He read out the title of an article. “Plume Hunter Gets Plucked! Designer milliner found guilty of possessing illegal feather haul.” He looked at Pam. “Can you print that article out?” He looked gleefully at Ava. “I’ll bet any money our thief works in fashion.”

“Oooh, I do hope so,” Pam said enthusiastically, as the printer started to buzz.

“What’s a milliner?” Terry asked.

“A hat maker,” Tara replied.

“This is interesting.” Ozuru had taken over the mouse and gone back to the search list.

“Victorian salmon flies,” Ava read. “What are they?”

“Flies are a lure for fishing,” Ozuru explained. “My dad has a friend who ties Victorian salmon flies. It’s an art.”

“I don’t see what fishing has to do with this.” Twitch skimmed the article and shook his head. “It will be a bird collector we’re after, someone who wants to own Wallace’s birds.”

“Or will it be someone prepared to pay a lot of money for really old, rare, feathers?” Ozuru countered. “The old recipes for fly-tying need feathers from extinct birds.”

“Birds of paradise aren’t extinct,” Twitch said.

“No, but they are protected, and you can’t get hold of their feathers easily,” Ozuru argued. “If it’s a choice between travelling all the way to the Malay Archipelago to hunt living birds, or a trip to the Swan Museum to snatch dead ones, isn’t it easier to steal birds from a museum?”

“Yes,” Jack said, waving his printout. “Which is why I think we’re looking for a milliner or a fashion designer.”

“I’ve never even heard of Victorian salmon fishing ties,” Ava said. Of the three theories, she thought Jack’s was the most promising.

“That’s because you’re not into fishing,” Ozuru said, sitting down at the computer and typing. “Let’s see how much fly-tiers are willing to pay for feathers.” A website came up: www.classicsalmonfly.com. “Look, there’s a noticeboard.”

“WHOA!” Ava was shocked by what she read. “Someone is selling a bag of six red-ruffed fruitcrow feathers for two hundred pounds!”

“From an original Victorian hat purchased at auction,” Jack read. “See. Hats!”

“That makes each feather worth over thirty pounds!” Tara said.

“How many feathers are on a bird skin?” Pam asked. They all looked at Twitch.

“On a songbird, somewhere between fifteen hundred and three thousand feathers,” he replied. “But it depends on the bird. I mean, a bird of prey has over five thousand and a swan way more, something like twenty-five thousand.”

“That makes one bird skin worth tens of thousands of pounds!” Terry exclaimed.

“How many did you say were stolen?” Pam’s blue eyes were wide with surprise.

“Drawers and drawers of them,” Ava replied. “I’d guess at least a hundred.”