

If there's one thing I've learned on this school trip to the Natural History Museum, it's that fossilized dinosaur poop doesn't smell.

It's also called *coprolite*, which is the fancy name scientists use. All right, that's two things. I guess I've paid more attention than I'd realized. I wasn't expecting to come away from this trip with much new information. Museums aren't really my thing. Everything's a bit too . . . dead.

The only reason I know all this stuff is because I've been dared to drop a nugget of coprolite into the hood of the ginormous coat Hayley Pritchard is wearing today.

It was all Keegan's idea, and the rest of the Crew soon tagged on. I think he just wants to get back at her because he fancies her and she won't go out with him, but he can't let *her* know how furious he is, which is why he's getting me to do the deed for him.

It's a rubbish dare but I'm not exactly in a position to say no. Keegan and the Crew are the only friends I've managed to make at this stupid new school. I'm the new recruit, and if I do this . . . well, I'll properly be one of them. I'll be a *legend*.

I look round the vast room, filled with the skeletons of long-dead dinosaurs. A few of the teachers chat together near a glass cabinet full of swirly rocks, sipping from flasks of coffee and not paying much attention. And the only thing the security guard is guarding is his handheld games console, which he plays from his chair in the corner.

I study the dinosaur poop. It's on a small pedestal, with a tag next to it that reads: *Coprolite – Dinosaur Faeces*. It looks like an ordinary rock, about the size of my fist, except it's a bit . . . knobbly, like a fossilized chicken nugget. Did whatever dinosaur pooped this visit the drive-thru before they met their end?

'Just do it,' whispers a voice in my ear.

I turn and find Keegan standing behind me. He's got this ratty face, all pointy features and narrow eyes.

'What're you waiting for? A dino poo bag?' Keegan sneers and glances over his shoulder. Behind him, the rest of the Crew snicker on cue.

'No,' I huff. 'I'm just . . . waiting for the right moment.'

'Well, don't wait too much longer,' he warns. 'Remember last week, when you chickened out of putting chewing gum on Mrs Perrot's seat? We were so disappointed, weren't we, guys?'

The rest of the Crew nod in agreement.

'We fancied a laugh,' says Kayleigh.

'And this museum is so *boring*,' says Keegan. 'Who cares about all this dead stuff? Let's liven things up a bit. Ha! Get it? *Liven* things up a bit! Because everything in here is dead?'

The Crew start snorting hysterically, like a bunch of demented pugs.

'OK, fine. I'll do it,' I mutter.

I turn back to the lump of dino doodoo as Keegan and the Crew retreat across the room, sniggering at me.

Well, not at *me*, I don't think. At what I'm about to do.

Hayley stands a few metres away, her back turned, surrounded by a cluster of girls.

And there's her hood – an open goal.

I take a breath.

Don't do it, says a voice in my head. *Mum and Dad would be so disappointed*.

And that's what seals it. Doing something bad is like getting back at them for what they've done to me. If my dad hadn't lost his job a few months ago, we wouldn't have had to move to this stupid old house in this ridiculously boring village in the countryside where nothing ever happens except for prize-winning butternut squashes. I'd have been able to stay at my old school, where I definitely wouldn't be about to lob a lump of dinosaur poop into a popular girl's hood in order to impress my new mates.

I reach out and pick up the coprolite.

OK. OK. I'm holding a lump of dinosaur poop. Something that actually came out of a giant lizard's

butt, gazillions of years ago. I look around. The security guard is still playing his game. Hayley's back is turned, and the teachers –

They're moving! Mrs Perrot has finished her coffee and now she's turning round. She's going to see me standing here with a fossil in my hand, and I'm going to be in *so* much trouble.

There's no time to drop the poop into Hayley's hood like I'd planned, so instead I do the only thing I can think of: I toss it.

Time slows as the lump of ancient poop arcs through the air like some sort of meteorite from the bowels of outer space. Sweat beads on my forehead as Mrs Perrot continues to turn. Keegan and the Crew follow the coprolite's path with wide-eyed focus.

And Hayley – well, at the very last second, Hayley steps to the left, her school bag swinging round and batting the poop right out of the air, sending it whizzing on a new trajectory across the room. My heart leaps into my throat as it soars above the heads of my classmates, straight towards the skull of a velociraptor skeleton elevated on a podium nearby.

My mouth opens around a *Noooooooooooo!* but it's too late.

The coprolite smacks into the velociraptor's face and falls to the ground, smashing into three pieces.

Heads start turning.

My body seizes up.

And then a groan fills the air, and I watch in disbelief as the raptor's skull starts to tilt before breaking away from its body and dropping to the marble floor.

It shatters, its lower jaw severing from the rest of its head, sharp brown teeth scattering over the floor. The crashing sound seems to go on and on, and then . . . silence.

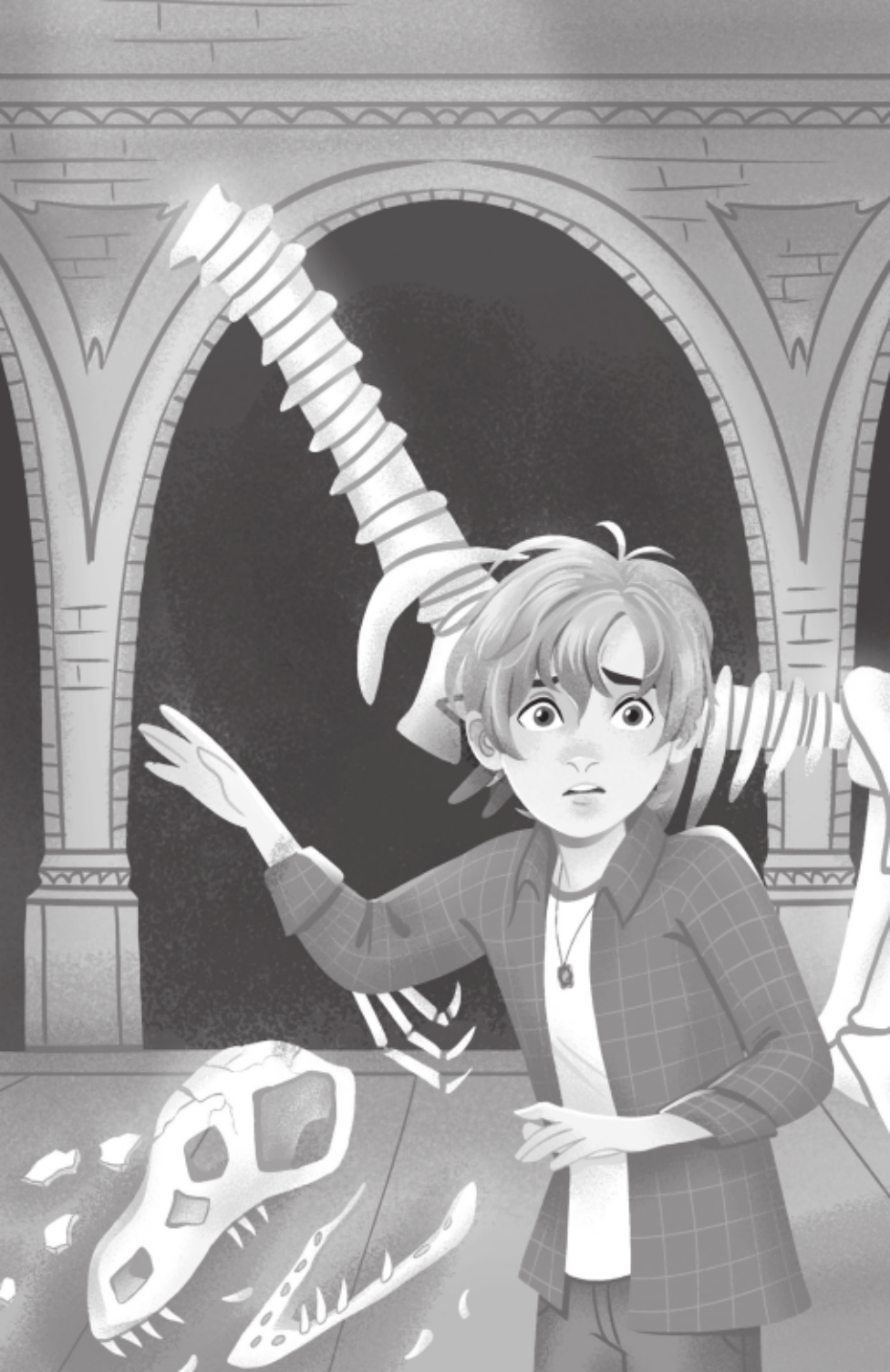
The security guard is on his feet. The teachers gawp. Keegan and the Crew are nowhere to be seen.

There's only me, standing among the chaos, my cheeks bright red and my hand held up – very much the hand of somebody who's just thrown something extremely precious and expensive.

All eyes land on me.

So I do the only thing I can think of in that moment.

I run.





The next thing I know, I'm running through the grand entrance gates of the Natural History Museum and on to the busy London street. While everything inside the museum was very dead, the air outside buzzes with life. Car horns blare and scarlet double-decker buses zoom down the road.

I look behind me, expecting to see Mrs Perrot and an army of security guards spilling out behind her.

What am I going to do? I can't go back. I broke a lump of ancient poop and smashed a velociraptor – they'll arrest me and bundle me off to kiddie jail or something. But where can I go?

The answer arrives on a cloud of taxi fumes: *Nan!*

Nan lives in London! My parents and I used to catch the train to visit her when I was younger, when I used to enjoy going places with them. Before butternut squash village, and this awful new school where I'm the newbie who doesn't fit into any of the friendship groups, apart from the Crew. But I remember seeing the station name: *Finsbury Park*. Nan's flat is only a few streets from there.

I pull out my phone so that I can give Nan a ring, but my battery's gone. I whirl round, my eyes searching for the red Underground symbol, and instead I almost collide with somebody standing behind me.

'Argh, sorry –' I exclaim, but my voice breaks off when I find myself looking at one of the most peculiar individuals I've ever seen.

They're older than my twelve years – perhaps sixteen or seventeen – and they're wearing a pair of aviator goggles so big that they hide the top half of their face. On their head is a bright-blue top hat, a sleek peacock feather tucked into the ribbon that winds round it, and on their spindly frame is a dazzling cerulean tuxedo

jacket with tails that swoop to the ground. They're wearing knee-high boots with astonishingly high heels.

'You need not apologize,' they say, 'for today is a good day to get lost and then find your way again.'

I gawp at them. 'Eh?'

'That was a curious sound.' The stranger sniffs. 'But don't you agree?'

'What?'

'That today is a good day to get lost and then find your way again!'

The stranger beams, twirling a sleek white cane. It's topped with a clear stone, which catches the spring sunlight and sends rainbows into the air. Something hums through me at the sight of it – at the sight of *them*, this bizarre person with their peacock top hat. Something I've never felt before, and yet somehow feels familiar.

I glance over my shoulder. The security guard is emerging from the museum, followed by Mrs Perrot. All they have to do is turn and they'll spot me.

'Now's really not a good time –' I stammer.

'Fear not,' the stranger replies, digging into their

jacket and pulling out a tattered old umbrella, which they spring open and thrust into my hands. There are holes in the canopy, one of them so big I'm pretty sure I could stick my head through it.

That familiar hum intensifies as my fingers close round the handle, like I've just waltzed into a dream that I've had before.

'Whatever you do, keep the umbrella open above your head,' they instruct. 'And stay *quiet*.'

Without another word, they place their hands on my shoulders and swivel me round so that I'm standing beside them. Then, with a mischievous grin, they turn back to face the museum.

'What? Are you serious? I need to go –'

'Ssh!' the stranger hisses, clacking their cane against the ground for emphasis. 'Trust me!'

And then it's too late. Mrs Perrot and the security guard are moving now, ricocheting from pedestrian to pedestrian. I can hear them from here – they're asking if anybody has seen a young boy running out of the museum.

My heart pounds in my chest. I'm caught. If I run



now, they'll see me. But if I stay still, they'll find me anyway.

'Excuse me, ah . . .' Mrs Perrot pauses, an eyebrow arched in hesitation. 'Mr . . . er, I mean, Miss –'

She stumbles clumsily around the words, but at that moment the stranger swoops in and rescues her from her obvious plight.

'Neither, actually,' they say, but they do so with an encouraging smile on their lips. 'Some people feel that neither Mr or Miss quite fit, and so they choose to go by neither. You can be whoever you feel you are on the inside, as long as you are kind. Instead, I go by Mx –' they say it like the word *mix* – 'but it's OK that you didn't know.'

Mrs Perrot regards them curiously – with a sense of wonder, maybe? 'Ah, yes, well . . . now I know. Thank you. So, have you seen a young boy run past?'

The security guard has reached us, with Mrs Perrot trailing behind. Oddly, though, it's the stranger they are focused on.

'Hmm,' the stranger replies. 'A boy, you say?'

'Yes,' says Mrs Perrot. 'Twelve years old, blonde hair, about this tall?'

'It's not a hard question,' the security guard grunts.

They haven't noticed me. How is that even possible?

'I suppose not,' says the stranger. 'But what gets wetter the more it dries? That *is* a hard question.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I don't think they've seen him,' says Mrs Perrot. 'Come on. Let's keep looking.'

She takes a step to the side so that she's right in front of me. My heart leaps into my throat. She scans the other side of the road, then turns her head back and looks directly at me.

Or, rather, *through* me.

Because her face doesn't light up with the mixture of rage and relief I was expecting. In fact, her despair seems to deepen. It's like she hasn't seen me at all.

But . . . but how? I'm standing in full view, holding an *umbrella*!

'I'll alert the authorities,' says the security guard, and Mrs Perrot returns her attention to the museum.

'We have to find him before the end of the day,' she says, and then they stalk back to the building together.

What on earth just happened?



A few seconds pass in silence. My mouth is open so wide you could fit three tennis balls inside. Once Mrs Perrot and the security guard are safely out of sight, the stranger sighs and wheels round to face me.

'It was a towel,' they say.

'Eh?'

'The thing that gets wetter the more it dries. A towel. Nobody ever gets that one.' They pull a face at the umbrella I'm still holding. 'Put that thing down, will you? You'll have somebody's eye out with one of the spokes.'

When I make no move to lower it, they pluck it from my fingers and do it themselves.

'W-what just happened?' I finally manage.

'I beg your pardon?'

'My teacher looked right at me. Or, at least, I *thought* she did, but then she looked away like she hadn't seen me at all!'

The stranger cackles. 'Oh! The umbrella, silly!'

'The umbrella?'

'Yes,' they reply proudly. 'Deflects more than just rain, if you know what I mean.'

'No,' I blurt. 'I don't know what you mean.'

The stranger rolls their eyes – which, I swear, when they catch the fading sunlight, sparkle violet.

'Attention! It deflects attention. When you use my umbrella, you can walk down the street without a single person noticing your presence.'

'What, like you're invisible or something?'

'I suppose you could say that,' they reply. 'I had a feeling I'd need it today, if you know what I mean.'

'Will you stop saying that?' I snap. 'I don't know what you mean. There's not a cloud in the sky!'

'I mean the streets are particularly busy today. And sometimes, you don't want to be seen. Isn't that right?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I say, glancing over my shoulder at the museum. No security guards or teachers to be seen – but how long before they come back?

'Mmm,' says the stranger, pursing their lips. 'So, ah . . . ?'

'Theo,' I say automatically. I know you're not supposed to share your name with strangers, but there's something very inviting about this person.

'Theo.' They smile. 'So, Theo, can I assist you in any way?'

Now that they mention it, I *could* do with some help. Sure, I've been to London before, but I was always with Mum and Dad. And now I've got to find Nan's flat on my own. I would phone her if my battery wasn't dead. Anyway, I don't want to talk to my parents, not until I'm safe with Nan, so she can convince them that what happened at the museum was just a huge misunderstanding.

Except it wasn't really, was it? I *meant* to take the coprolite. I even meant to throw it. I just hadn't anticipated Hayley swinging her school bag like a

champion cricket player's bat. It all went wrong in the space of two seconds, and now I'm in deep dino dung.

Maybe Keegan and the Crew will back me up. Say it was their idea and just a prank. Yes. That's what's going to happen. I try not to think about how they vanished the moment things went wrong.

'Erm, do you have a phone I could use?' I ask in a small voice.

The stranger's face lights up. 'Ah! It's your lucky day! As a matter of fact, I am indeed in possession of a telephone, and I should be delighted to let you use it!'

The relief wraps itself round my waist like a cloud of balloons, making me feel all light and feathery.

'Thank you so much. It will just be a quick call, I promise!'

'All right then, follow me!' They turn on their extravagant heel and start marching down the street.

I stare after them. 'Erm, what?'

'Well, you need to follow me back to my home so that you can use the telephone.'

'Oh,' I say, my heart sinking. 'I thought you meant I could use, you know . . . your mobile phone?'

'Mobile phone,' they repeat, turning the words over in their mouth like a sour sweet. 'Heavens, no. I don't carry one of those. But if you'd just like to follow me –'

'No, thank you.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I can't go with you,' I say. I *really* need a phone, but following a stranger back to their house . . . that's a bit *too* far. 'How do I know you're not a murderer? Or a kidnapper? Or a cannibal? You might have your oven pre-warming to a hundred and eighty degrees, right now.'

They nod, thoughtfully. 'That is quite true. You have absolutely no way of knowing I'm not dangerous. How very wise of you. Are you sure?'

I nod, even though I really *do* want to use their phone. 'Yes, but thanks for the offer.'

'A polite young man,' they muse, 'who just happens to have got into a spot of bother. We've all been there.' They stare off into the distance, like they are recalling a sad memory. Then they shake their head. 'Anyways, I must dash. It's been lovely talking to you, Theo.'

'You too,' I say.

'One more thing, before I take my leave,' they say, reaching into their jacket. They pull something out and extend it to me. It's a card.

I take it and look down at the curlicued writing. It reads:

Mr Alistair Goodfellow cordially invites you
to stay at the Casablanca Lily,
the hotel for vagrant children.

I look up. 'Is this some kind of joke?'

'Oh, there's absolutely nothing funny about it,' they say, without even the slightest hint of a wobble in their voice.

'But how did you . . . ?' I falter. This individual is a bit *too* strange. First, the funny umbrella that can apparently make you invisible, just when I needed not to be seen. Then, the invitation to some sort of hotel for runaway kids – minutes after I started running away.

It's all a bit too coincidental. It's almost like they *meant* to meet me here.

'If you change your mind, all you need to do is pay

me a compliment. Just make sure the card hears you,' says the stranger. 'Oh, and might I suggest you keep this? I've a feeling you might need it. But not to use against rain, if you know what I mean?'

They wink as they hold out the umbrella, and, for the first time, I think I actually *do* know what they mean. Sort of. There's not a cloud in the sky, but there are people everywhere – and I've no doubt some of them will soon be teachers and police on the lookout for me.

I take the umbrella and my fingers hum once again with that strange sing-song energy, but before I can say anything, my rescuer swirls round and strides off, heels and cane clacking against the pavement as they go.

'Wait!' I cry.

They pause. 'Yes?'

'Who are you?'

'Alistair Goodfellow, at your service,' they say, tipping their top hat. 'Proprietor of the Casablanca Lily and overseer of Moonlighter operations. It's all there on the card. I bid you good day. For now.'

They give their cane a flick and, just like that, they're

gone. I'm not sure if the crowd has gobbled them up, or if they've actually disappeared – all I know is that they're there one second and gone the next.

I'm left standing alone on the London streets.