# Questers Academy

## The Box of Locks

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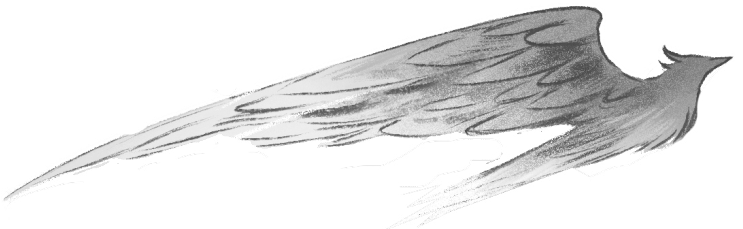
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For Alice and Archie – always my inspiration.



## CHAPTER 1

### SOUTH KENSINGTON, LONDON

09.58

We're running. Me. Mum. My four siblings. Out of the station, onto the street. We're dodging people and puddles and dogs in backpacks. *Huh?* I twist my head to get a better look and then trip over a small crate. 'Hey!' the owner of the crate says. 'Watch where you're going.'

'Sorry,' I say. And I notice a lizard's claw poking out of the crate, and a flash of bright red from inside. Its owner has a white umbrella hooked over his arm and is holding an envelope stuffed with money. But then another man steps in front of me and blocks my view. That's when I realise I've lost Mum.

I scan the sea of umbrellas as people dash past me. Mum says she didn't start rushing until she had kids. But Gran says it's not the kids that are the problem. It's the number. And that only organised people should have *five* kids, but she winks at me when she says this. I love Gran; she tells it like it is.

'Tom!' Mum's head pops up from the crowd. 'This way!'

I duck past a couple of tourists checking a map on a phone, and dive past three nuns with wheelie suitcases.

Mum is heading for the corner, past a deli with seats outside. My older sister, Erin, is behind her, rummaging through her bag. The twins follow, butting each other with their new backpacks. When Mum turns to check we're all still with her, I notice the baby – in the sling across her front – is snoring, oblivious to the chaos. I've no idea how he does that.

'Not far now,' Mum calls. 'Don't worry, Tom, you'll still make it.'

I'm *not* worried. I don't want to make it.

'Wait!' Erin has stopped. She's still searching through her bag. 'I can't find my wallet.'

Mum's face pales.

'I can't go to the open day without it.' Erin glares at Mum, looking exactly like Gran when someone takes the last piece of cake.

'I need the toilet,' Aidan says.

'Me, too!' Beth, his twin sister, steps closer to him.

Mum glances at the deli obviously wondering if they'd let the twins use the loo. 'Can you hold it in? Tom's already late—'

'NO!' The twins are squirming. Their faces twisted in fake pain; their usual Oscar-winning performance.

'What about my wallet?' Erin looks close to tears now.

Mum pushes her damp hair off her face, the lines on her forehead turning into deep crevasses. 'Do you think someone took it?'

'Like a pickpocket?' Beth's eyes sparkle.

'I don't know! All my money is inside.' Erin plants her guitar case in front of her like a fence post. 'I can't leave without my wallet.'

Mum nods. 'What colour was it again?'

'Purple and orange with a gold clasp. You bought it for me!'

Without thinking, I say, 'I saw that wallet. A kid with hazel eyes and a nose stud picked it up back there. She had freckles. And gold earrings, three of them up one ear and—'

Suddenly everyone's staring at me.

'He's doing that weird thing again!' Erin's eyes narrow. 'If you saw someone take my wallet, why didn't you say?'

'I didn't know it was yours. I thought the girl must have dropped it. But I'm sure I can find her again.' I look

around. 'She was wearing a dark rain jacket, with the hood up, and blue trainers and—'

'They're ALL wearing dark rain jackets!' Erin shouts.

She's right. But I'm sure I'd know the girl again. Just like I'd know the old guy on the tube platform, with no teeth. And the kid with the spiky eyebrows who left his gum stuck to the train door. And as for the man with the dog in his backpack… I'd recognise him for sure.

'That's her!' I twist round as a figure in a rain jacket walks past.

'Tom, I don't think we can just stop people and—'

But I'm already tapping the girl on the shoulder. 'Excuse me.'

She turns and her nose stud glints, and I see the three earrings and the freckles. Just like I said.

'Um, sorry,' I say, suddenly feeling sweaty, 'but you didn't just find a wallet, did you?'

She smiles, her hazel eyes crinkling. 'Yeah, I did. I gave it to her.' She points to a police officer outside the tube.

'Thanks.'

I look back at Erin and I want to say 'see!' but she's already gone, dashing towards the officer. Then the twins start to move.

Mum tries to grab Beth's hood, but she slips out of reach. 'Beth! Aidan! Come back here, right this minute!' But the twins are darting towards the deli.

'There's a toilet!' Aidan shouts. 'I can see a sign through the window.'

Mum looks at me, her eyes wide, a sheen of worry on her face. I can see she's thinking: *Do I follow my seven-year-olds to the toilets or walk my twelve-year-old to the museum – his first solo London day out?*

Then the baby wakes up.

'Oh, hey, Mattie.' Mum leans down to smile at him. 'It's okay, we're just having a little outing and—'

But my little brother hasn't reached the stage of being reasonable.

I stick my hands over my ears to block out his noise. 'Don't worry,' I shout. 'I'll walk to the museum by myself.'

'No, Tom,' Mum begins, 'if you'd just wait—'

'MUM!' Beth reappears from the deli. 'Aidan says the waiter won't let us use the loo and he's about to pee his pants!'

'It's fine,' I say. 'I'll message you when I get there.' I turn to leave, but Mum reaches over and hugs me tight, squishing the baby between us. I breathe in the smell of roses from her wet hair and close my eyes for a second, ignoring Mattie's wailing. Maybe I shouldn't go. I mean, I haven't really hung out with Oscar and Harley since I was a baby and we'll probably have nothing to say to each other and—

'Okay, you'd better run,' Mum says releasing me. 'Harley's mum said they'd meet you on the steps outside the museum. Oh, and Dad will see you there at five-thirty; hopefully he won't be late— Beth, I'm coming!' she adds, as my little sister starts to shout again.

And that's it. I'm on my own. For a moment I feel a rush of adrenaline. It's just me and the world! Then suddenly I don't feel so brave. I grip the straps of my backpack and duck my head, trying not to make eye contact with anyone.

When Gran heard we were moving back to London for Dad's job, she'd told me to be careful. She said London kids are street smart and know how to avoid danger. Whereas kids from the country … not so much. Gran's a retired police officer. She knows what she's talking about.

I look back to see if Mum's still watching. She is. But only just. I give her a thumbs-up, but I can't see if she returns it, because she's suddenly lost in the crowd.

I cross the road onto Cromwell Place. There are fewer people here and the buildings are grander. It's nice not having to dodge around other pedestrians. But I think how easy it would be to get kidnapped; no one would see! I shake the thought away and remind myself that kids in London walk about by themselves all the time.

In less than a minute I see the museum looming large, with its turrets and arches and long windows, and my shoulders relax a little, because this is somewhere I recognise. I was here two weeks ago when Dad took me and Erin on a tour of the building site he's working on – an abandoned tube station below the museum.

I run the rest of the way. But as I reach the wide steps at the entrance I realise I've made a huge mistake.



## CHAPTER 2

### NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, LONDON

10:02

Oscar and Harley and his mum are not here. I scan left. Right. Gazing at the groups of tourists queuing up outside the museum doors. Then I check my phone. *Maybe they've gone in already?* But Harley's mum has got my ticket to the shark exhibition, so they'd definitely wait for me. *Wouldn't they?* Unless Mum got the wrong day. She arranged it with Harley's mum, Carol, ages ago. They've been friends since before I was born. Oscar's mum, too. I've seen cringy pictures of the three of us as babies laid out on a picnic rug in Hyde Park. But then we moved to Wales. I've only seen

them once since we moved back to London, and it was kind of awkward.

Weirdly, them not being here is a relief. Not that Mum will see it like that.

My phone pings. *Mum?*

Not Mum.

**Message from Oscar: Harley's cracked his head. We can't come. Sorry.**

I stare at the text. Is it bad that I feel sort of happy? Not about the cracked head, obviously. Just the 'not having to tour a museum making uncomfortable conversation with two boys I barely know' part, while Harley's mum does that 'parent' thing of filling the silences with chatter about how we've all got so much in common: *You like pizza? Wow! Harley and Oscar like pizza, too!*

I should call Mum. Instead, I just stand there, and it's kind of peaceful. But then it hits me. I'm alone in the centre of London. And I won't get picked up for seven hours. What if I get mugged? Or worse.

I reach for my phone—

Just then there's a shout. 'Watch it!' And a bird swoops down at me. I duck. But it makes my hair move. I don't like birds. Not since a budgie pecked me when I was four. So I crouch down in case it comes back, and start typing…

**Message to Mum: Oscar and Harley aren't coming. Can you meet me?**

'Why aren't Oscar and Harley coming?'

I look up at a girl standing next to me. She has brown eyes and dark curls: almost crow-coloured curls. I can tell they're crow-coloured, because the bird that nearly got me – an actual crow! – is on her shoulder now, and it blends in with her hair. It turns its head to peer at me. And I shrink back; it's like being eyeballed by a pterodactyl.

'Sorry about the bird. It's got a problem with its wing, so it's not the best at flying.'

I shove my phone in my pocket – message to Mum unsent – my face burning with embarrassment. The girl saw me get buzzed by the bird AND she read my message to Mum. She's going to think I'm a baby.

'I'm Leesha. What's your name?'

But I'm still staring at the bird. 'I didn't know you could keep crows as pets.'

'It's not a pet.' Leesha reaches up to give the bird a seed. 'You can't keep crows as pets. They're wild animals. This one's a young raven, by the way. Poor thing was stuck in a cage until I rescued it.'

'Um, cool.' Though I still don't like the way it's staring at me.

'I'm taking it to my aunt. She works here. You haven't told me your name.'

'Tom Friday.'

She grins. 'Good name for today, but what about the rest of the week.'

I do that half-smile thing, because I hear that joke a lot. 'What's the bird called?'

'Dunno. I don't speak raven. But I guess we could name it. How about *Tom*?' She laughs. 'Or maybe you have a cooler middle name?'

My middle name is Gruffudd after my grandad. But it's not a name you hear much outside of Wales, so I don't want to tell her. Just then my phone pings.

'Aren't you going to check that?'

I take my phone out and turn it away so she can't see.

**Message from Mum: Carol just called. They're at the hospital. Harley's bumped his head. He's fine but getting stitches. Are you inside the museum?**

'Poor Harley.'

'Hey! You shouldn't look at other people's messages.'

Leesha shrugs. 'Were you going to the shark exhibition? I can show you where it is if you like. Though if your friends aren't coming, maybe you're going home now.'

I lift my chin higher. 'I'm still going. By myself.' I'm not sure that's true, but I don't want to tell her that.

'Okay, let's go then.' She sets off up the stairs, two-at-a-time, ignoring the queue of people waiting there. I hesitate for a moment, wondering if I should call Mum from round the corner. But Leesha's looking back at me. So I follow, head down, trying to ignore the people in the queue.

'Wait in line!' someone shouts.

Leesha pulls a lanyard out of her pocket and dangles a security pass at the shouter. 'Staff privileges!'

'Is that really yours?' I whisper.

'Nah, it's my aunt's old one. But we look kind of similar… Morning, Julie,' she adds to the guard, who is standing by the doors. 'This is Tom.'

The guard nods and lets us pass, completely ignoring the bird on Leesha's shoulder. And then we're inside. And I stop. And stare. And breathe in that slightly musty, inside-of-a-wardrobe smell you get in museums. I look up at the high painted ceiling. And I see the giant terracotta stone archways and the glass cases and the old bones, and for a moment it all feels comfortingly solid and safe and quiet. Well, apart from a line of people coming down the hall carrying tables and chairs, and trays of empty glasses.

'What's going on?' I ask Leesha.

'There's a big event tonight. The King's coming. He's opening the new Evolution Gallery. Come on, the shark expo is this way.' She heads for the dinosaur hall – the twins' favourite room, and I run to catch up…

'Wait! I haven't *actually* got a ticket… Harley's mum has got them and—'

But just then two security guards appear in front of me. And I freeze. Because they've obviously found out I jumped the queue and don't even have a ticket.