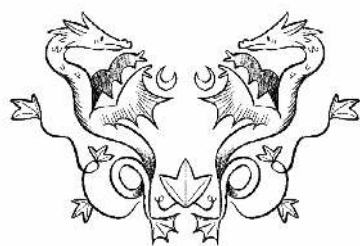


BEASTOPIA



CHRISSIE SAINS
ILLUSTRATED BY **JENNY TAYLOR**



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

**For Hannah
– J.T.**



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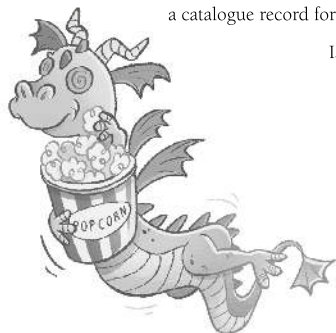
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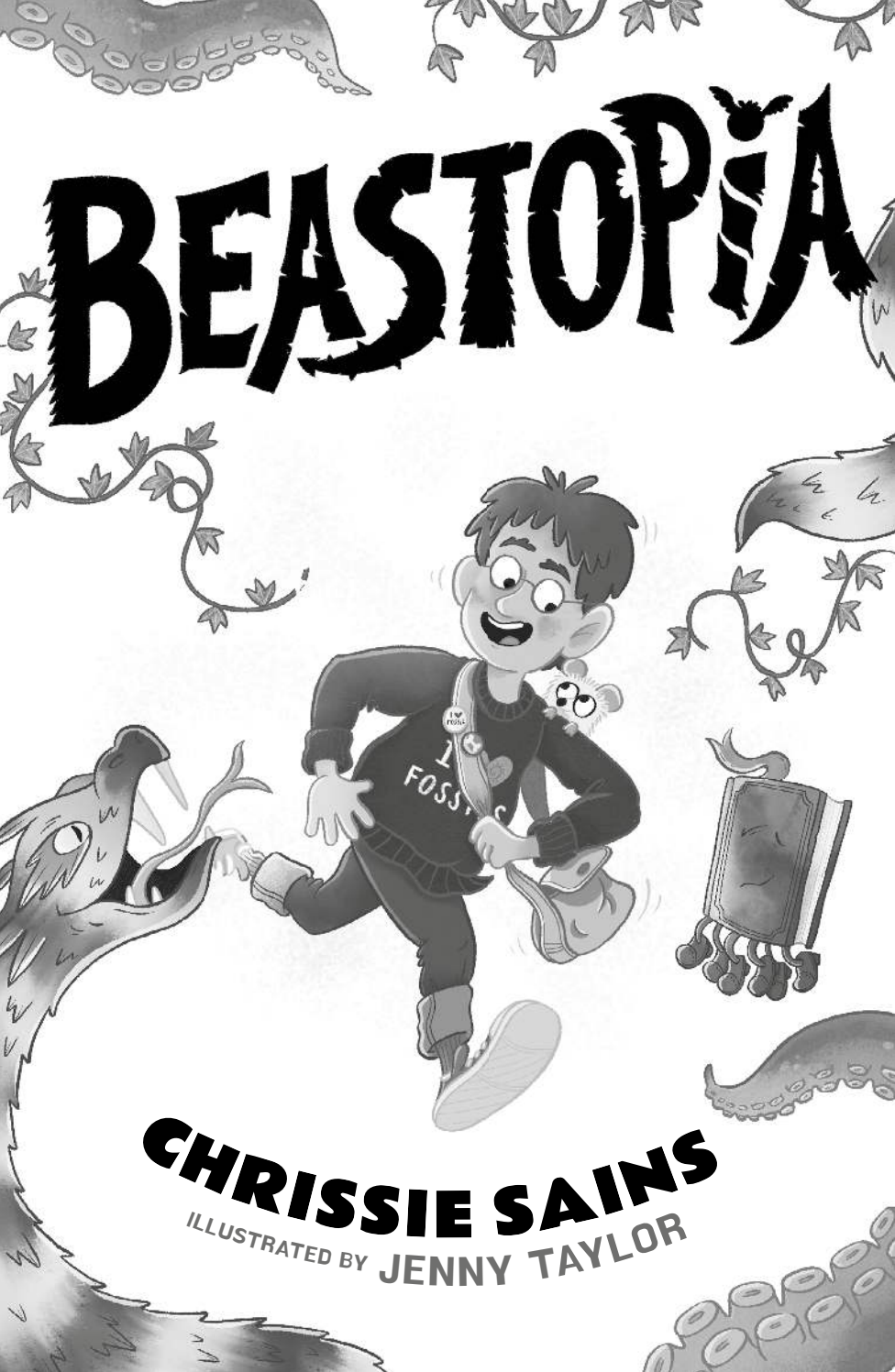
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A BOY AND HIS MOUSE

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

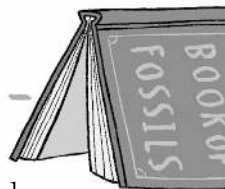
It had been like that ever since the day he'd found her making a nest in his sock drawer. Cheddar was small (even for a mouse) and extremely fluffy. If it hadn't been for her soft round ears and little pink nose, framed by a pair of twitching whiskers, Digby might have mistaken her for a pompom off the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

He was right, as it turned out.

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



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



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

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

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

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



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

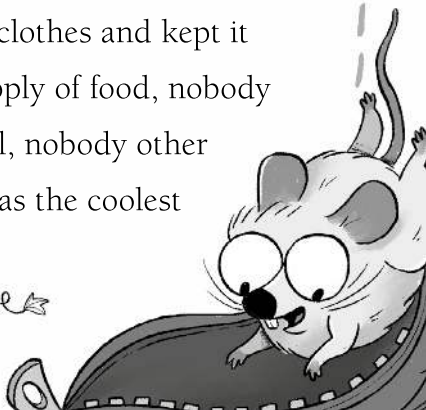


If Digby went to his best friend Tai's house, Cheddar would most definitely go too.

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



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



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

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

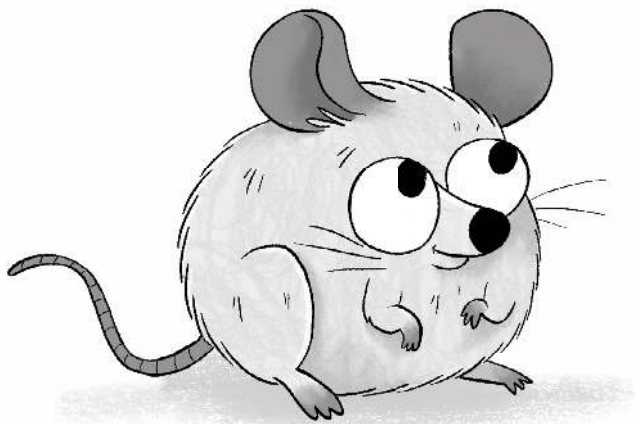
Oh no.

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

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

It had happened *twice* before.

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



The Curse of the Tenth Birthday

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

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

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

And then there were the animals.

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



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

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

But, very occasionally, they decided to stay.

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



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



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

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

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

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

Then it happened again.

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

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

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

It was the curse of the tenth birthday.

Digby's tenth birthday just happened to be
tomorrow.

Which meant the curse would strike again
tonight.

And this time it would strike Cheddar.