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USBORNE



THE BOY WHO MADE MONSTERS

JENNY PEARSON

ILLUSTRATED BY KATIE KEAR

THE BOY WHO MADE MONSTERS



For Rebecca Hill,
this book was always for you.



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THE THING ABOUT MONSTERS

The first thing you need to know about monsters is they're real. I understand if you find that hard to believe. My big brother Stanley thinks you shouldn't believe *anything* you're told, unless you have weighed up all the evidence. He's a bit of a joy-sucker like that. Always questioning, never just believing.

But sometimes there isn't any evidence. Sometimes, you need to have the vision to believe that the most unlikely things can happen. Like a monster living at the bottom of a loch. Or that your parents will come home safe, even when they've been missing for months.

Sometimes all you have to go on is a feeling.

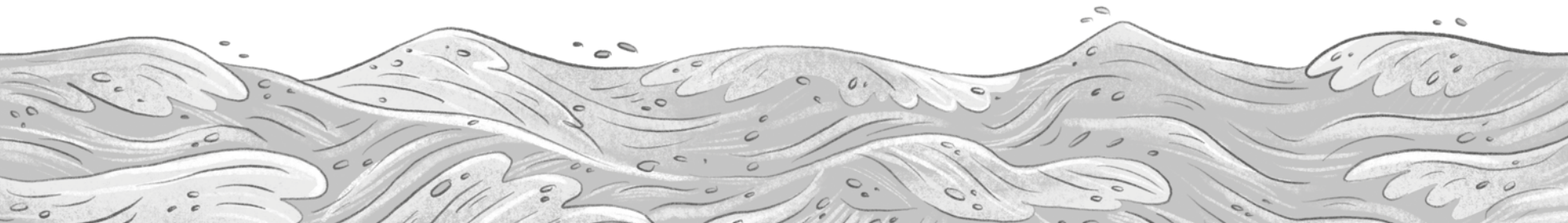
I'm okay with trusting my feelings, because I am an incredibly visionary person – I have a lot of faith in feelings. But to be honest, I think most people are more like Stanley. They want cold hard proof before they'll believe something. For instance, when you say, "I saw a monster in the loch with my very own eyeballs," people don't say, "Wow, that's amazing! How big was it?" They say, "There must be something very wrong with your eyeballs," or they say, "You, Benji McLaughlin, have lost your conkers. Where's your proof?"

This leads me on to the second thing you need to know about monsters. They like to go about their monstering unnoticed, which is a bit inconvenient. Loch monsters in particular don't like having their photo taken. They lurk under the surface – there but not always seen. This is very annoying when you're trying to prove to people that they exist, and this is the reason why my friend Murdy Mei-Yin McGurdy and I ended up having to create our own evidence to convince people that the Loch Lochy Monster was a real-life, living, breathing thing. You might think this is a bit of a dishonest move on our parts, and maybe you're right, but it was for a very good cause.

It was for Uncle Hamish.

And the third thing you need to know about monsters is this: there are a lot of different types of monster. Some live at the bottom of lochs, some are found far out at sea and some swim about in the depths of your mind – if you let them – and these can be the scariest monsters of all. Some monsters could be considered bad, but some monsters turn out to be the exact opposite. Some monsters can bring out the best in people. Some monsters can challenge you to face your fears and make you see the truth.

This is a story about the Loch Lochy Monster and how, in some ways, it saved me. How it saved us all. And that's because it helped us to see what was really there and taught us to live with what we'd lost.





CHAPTER 1

A TRAIN TO THE START

Some stories start by telling you *exactly* what happened. Like in *James and the Giant Peach* when you find out James's parents were eaten by a rhinoceros that had escaped from the zoo. BAM. Just like that. Gobbled, gone, get over it.

But I can't do that. I don't want to talk about what happened. How our parents went missing at sea. How that shouldn't have happened when they were accomplished sailors.

What I'm going to do is start my story at a good place. And I guess the start of things getting better for me and Stanley was when we were sent up to Scotland

to stay with our Uncle Hamish. It had taken a while. We'd been placed with a very lovely foster family, the Wests, while we were waiting for the news that we could stay with Uncle Hamish. Apparently, he had to jump through all sorts of hoops so the people in charge, social services I guess, would let us go and stay with him. The courts had to be very sure that he was the right person to look after us because he lived so far away, and we didn't know him *that* well.

Stanley was NOT happy about it at the time; he didn't want to leave London. I was okay with it. London didn't feel like home without Mum and Dad. Stanley had quite a strop about it but back then, Stanley was miserable about everything. Don't hold that against him – he was having a tough time. I suppose we both were. But on top of everything, Stanley had also turned thirteen. Dad had always warned me about the "transformation" – that as soon as a kid becomes a teenager, they go all moody and start grunting instead of talking. Which was *exactly* what happened to Stanley! I'm ten and a bit, so I've still got a couple of years until it happens to me. Although, I just can't see

me changing like that. I like talking too much.

Uncle Hamish met us at Edinburgh train station in his beat-up old Land Rover. It seemed like ages since he'd first rushed down to London. That meeting was a bit of a blur. I can remember our social services lady, Maria, and Uncle Hamish and the bright red beanbags we all sat on. But I don't remember what was said. We'd seen him a few times after that, but always with someone official in the room, checking that everything was going okay.

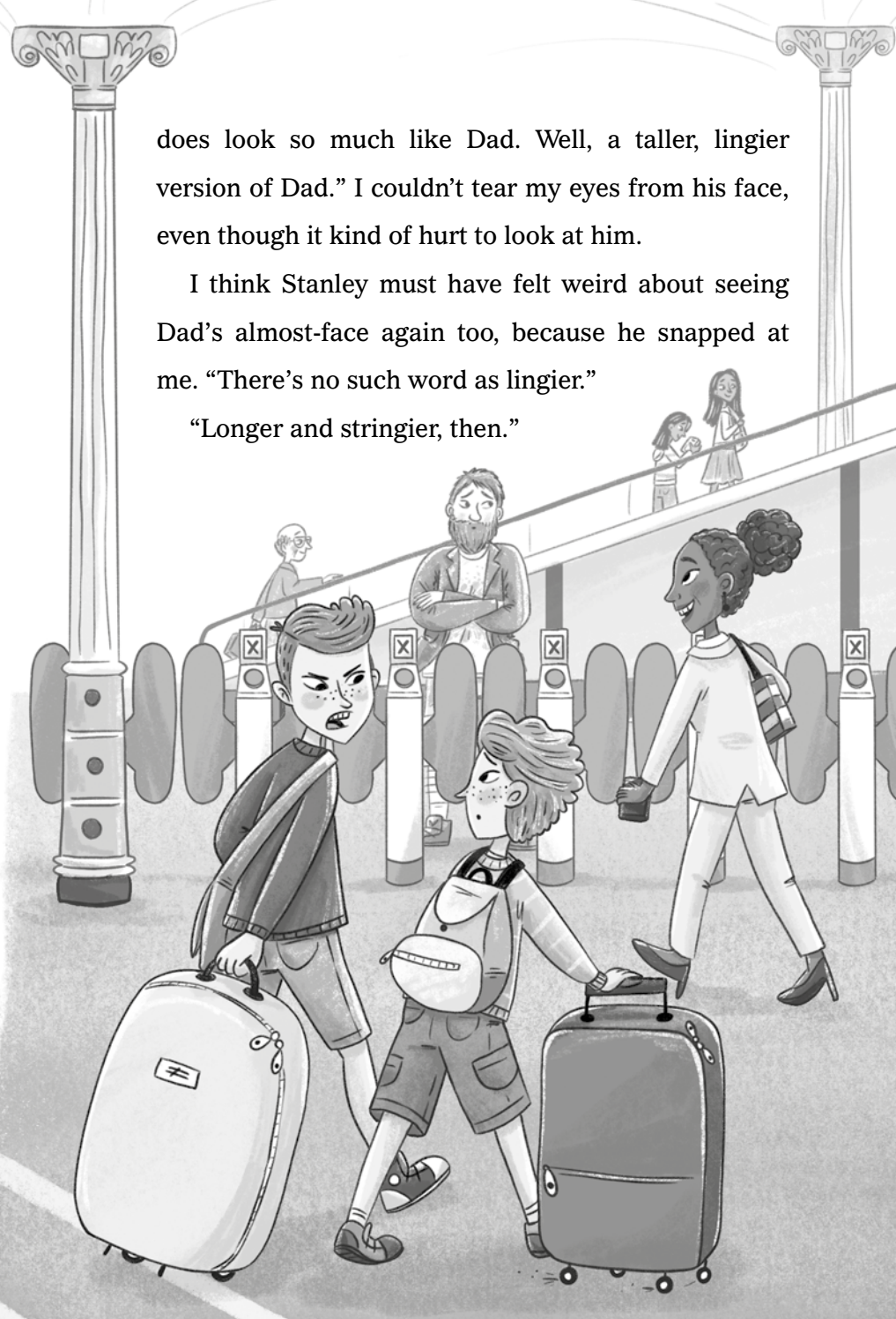
I spotted him first, standing the other side of the barriers. I remember exactly what he was wearing – a pair of cargo shorts and a very-not-white T-shirt that looked like it had muddy paw prints on the front. Over the top, despite it being the summer, he had chosen to wear a blazer. It was like he'd remembered last minute that he should make an effort and grabbed the first thing he could to smarten himself up.

"What is he wearing?" Stanley said, clearly not impressed.

As the train pulled away behind us, I gripped hold of my suitcase handle tighter and whispered, "He really does look so much like Dad. Well, a taller, lingier version of Dad." I couldn't tear my eyes from his face, even though it kind of hurt to look at him.

I think Stanley must have felt weird about seeing Dad's almost-face again too, because he snapped at me. "There's no such word as lingier."

"Longer and stringier, then."



He couldn't disagree with that. Uncle Hamish is possibly the tallest real-life man I've ever seen. Stanley reckons he's over six foot seven. I think if he had lived in America and not in a teeny village beside Loch Lochy, he would have been a basketball player and not run holiday home rentals. Although maybe not a very good basketball player because he is a bit on the clumsy side.

Maria, our lady from social services who had come with us in case we got lost (which would be a very hard thing to do on a train), said, "Are you ready, boys? I think that's your uncle over there."

Stanley said, "What choice do we have?" Which sounded a bit rude, but I knew what he meant. We didn't have any choice. Uncle Hamish was the only family we had left.

Maria tilted her head in that way people had started doing to us once they'd heard what had happened. "I know this is difficult, but I think it really is for the best. Honestly, people go to Loch Lochy for their holidays. I hear it's a beautiful place. And your Uncle Hamish is very excited about having you to stay with him."

"He doesn't look excited. He looks like he doesn't

want to be here," Stanley muttered. Then even more quietly, so only I could hear, he said, "I don't want to be here."

I looked at Uncle Hamish. Stanley was right, he didn't seem *that* excited. He had his hands stuffed in his pockets and he was chewing his lip. But I don't think he looked like he didn't want to be there. To me, he looked more nervous than anything else. And he must have wanted us – we'd heard him say it to Maria enough times for me to think so. Maybe Stanley had just been choosing not to listen.

Maria bleeped herself through the barriers and bounded towards him shouting, "Mr McLaughlin, Hamish, Hamish, coo-eee!" Everyone who was milling around the train station turned to look because Maria was very loud and very noticeable in her bright pink suit and pointy yellow heels.

Stanley and I started after her at a much slower pace. I saw Stanley look over his shoulder back at the train tracks, like he was considering doing a runner, so I helped him through the ticket gate with a friendly shove.

We stood a few steps behind Maria while she shook Uncle Hamish's massive hand like she wanted to rip his arm out of the socket.

"It's wonderful to see you again. I've been telling the boys how good it will be for them staying here with you in your lovely home by the loch," she was saying. "The boys have talked of nothing else the whole train journey."

"Is that so?" Uncle Hamish said. His voice was quite soft, and it made me feel a bit less nervous.

It wasn't true that *we* had talked of nothing else, but I didn't see any point in highlighting Maria's lie. *I* had asked her a lot of important questions about our move.

Like whether we'd have to go to school now we lived in Scotland and, if we did, would I have to learn the bagpipes and, if so, were they easier than the French horn, because I tried to learn that in Year 4 and discovered I wasn't very good at blowy instruments. And if in PE lessons we'd have to practise throwing those caber tree-trunk things instead of cricket balls, because that would be cool. I'd asked if they had proper food, like pizza and chips or if we'd have to eat haggis

all the time, because Dad had told me *all* about what they put in that stuff, and I was NOT sure I liked the sound of it. Although I would probably try it because I think you should try everything once – you never know, it could be great! I'd also asked if we'd have to wear a kilt and whether it was true that we wouldn't be allowed to wear underpants underneath even if it was really cold. I'd also checked if Uncle Hamish belonged to a clan and, if so, did that mean we belonged to a clan and would we be asked to do clan-type things, like painting our faces blue and white and running around on hills shouting, because I could really see myself getting into all that!

But Stanley hadn't asked *anything*. Not a thing. He just had his head in a book which was called *Understanding Mechanics*. I don't think it was a very good book though because I flicked through when he went to have a pee and it didn't have one interview with a mechanic in it. I think if you're going to understand somebody, you should ask them questions. Not draw a load of wiggly lines on graphs. But who am I to say? Stanley is way cleverer than me.

"Yes," Maria continued. "They are very excited to find out what life is like at Loch Lochy. Isn't that right, boys?"

Stanley shrugged but I said, "Oh yes. There is so much I would like to know. But the first thing I want to talk to you about is the Scottish underpants situation."

"The *what*?" Uncle Hamish said.

"Do you wear underpants?" I said.

Stanley shook his head and Uncle Hamish looked at me very strangely then said, "Yes."

"Excellent," I said. What a relief.

Maria said, "Right, well, now that important detail has been cleared up, let's move on to logistics. Mr McLaughlin, I know you've been in frequent communicado with my colleague Sandra, who is your local social services contact. She's the person to check in with if you have any problems and I know she'll be popping by soon to check the boys are all settled. She will also organize for Stanley to continue with a counsellor."

Stanley groaned and rolled his eyes. Like I said, he didn't like talking. Especially not to counsellors.

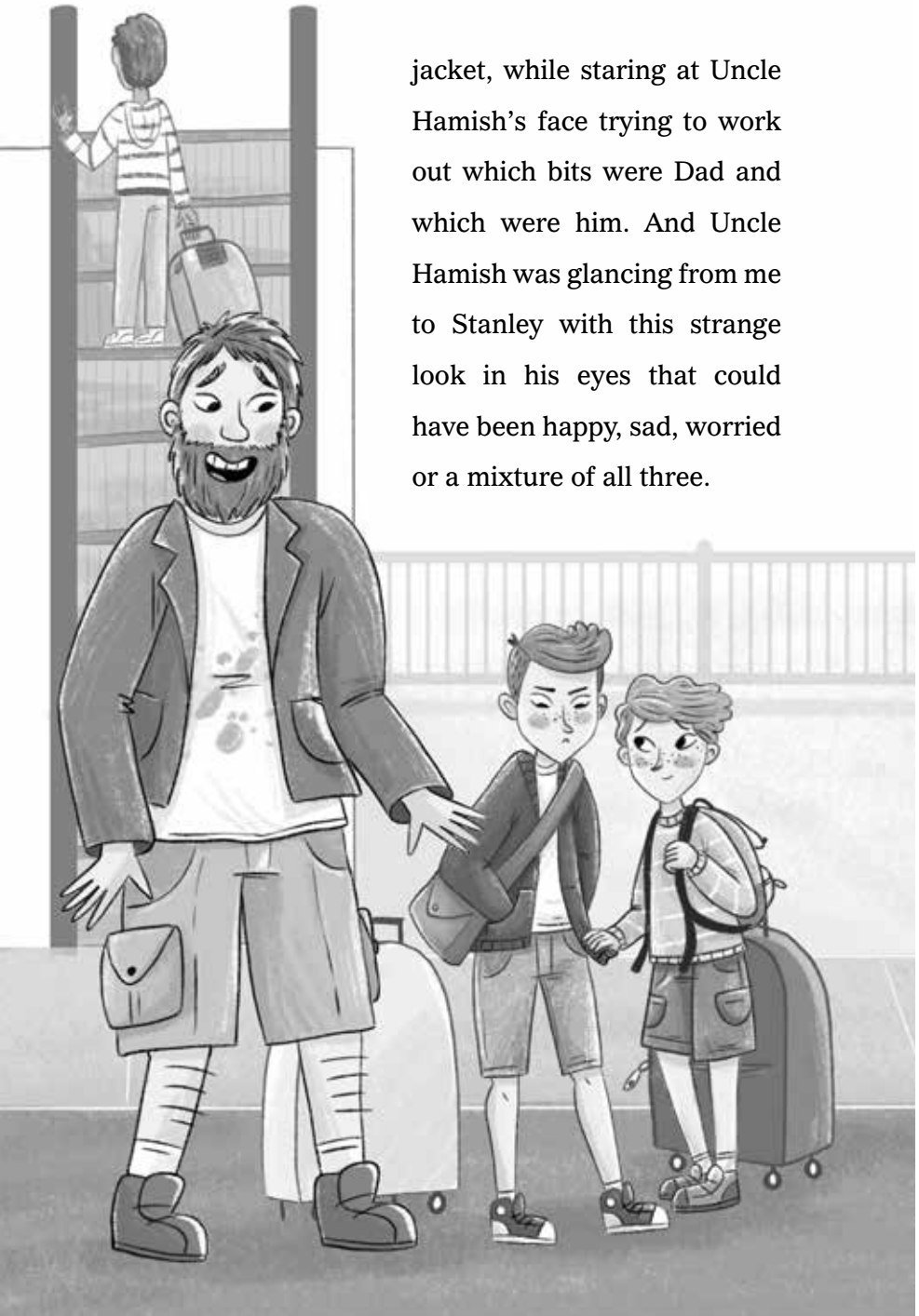
Not like me. I'd talked to my counsellor, Marvin, a lot.

In fact, I'd done so brilliantly in the months since Mum and Dad disappeared that Marvin said it was up to me if I continued. It annoyed Stanley that he still had to go and I didn't. But he'd been there when it had happened, and I hadn't. Although, it turns out, I wasn't necessarily talking about the right things. I probably didn't speak the truth. I wasn't ready to. That happened much later.

Maria checked her watch. "Well, on that note, I need to get to my platform, or I'll miss the train back to London." She gave us both a quick hug, clutched her hand to her chest and said, "You'll be fine, I promise. I'll keep in touch through Sandra and we're both going to make sure you're supported as a family." And then she was off, her yellow heels click-clacking across the concrete.

"As a family?" Stanley said quietly. I knew what he meant. This wasn't how our family was supposed to be. I reached out and held on to the bottom of his jacket, just to know he was still there.

The three of us stood there for a while. It was the first ever time we'd been on our own together. Stanley was studying his shoelaces. I was still holding on to his



jacket, while staring at Uncle Hamish's face trying to work out which bits were Dad and which were him. And Uncle Hamish was glancing from me to Stanley with this strange look in his eyes that could have been happy, sad, worried or a mixture of all three.

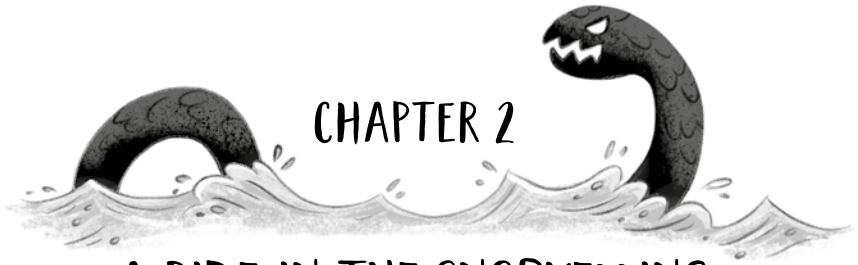
Eventually, Uncle Hamish clapped his hands together, which made both me and Stanley jump, and said, "Right we'd best be off, then. It is a wee bit of a drive to the loch."

We headed out into the train-station car park and loaded our bags into the back of the Land Rover, which Uncle Hamish called his pride and joy. When he was paying for the parking, I said to Stanley, "He really does seem okay, don't you think? I like him."



Stanley shrugged. "You like everybody. He could be a monster for all we know, Benji."

Uncle Hamish obviously wasn't a monster. And he definitely wasn't the monster that Stanley or I had to worry about.



CHAPTER 2

A RIDE IN THE SNORKELLING LAND ROVER WITH MR DOG

We weren't long into our *wee* journey before I had decided that I very much liked Uncle Hamish's Land Rover. He said it was a Defender and that made me feel safe, although I'm not sure what it was defending us from. It had roof bars and this long plastic pipe thing that Uncle Hamish said was a snorkel and helped the truck get through big puddles. I had never in all my years heard of a car with its own snorkel. I wondered if it was another Scottish thing.

Stanley sat in the front, because he's the oldest and apparently those are the rules. But I didn't mind because I got to sit in the back on a bench, not a proper seat,

with Uncle Hamish's dog, Mr Dog.

"Why's he called Mr Dog?" I asked.

"Why do you think?" I saw Stanley roll his eyes in the rear-view mirror. "It's not because he's an armadillo, is it?"

Obviously, Mr Dog wasn't an armadillo but if he had been called Mr Armadillo that would at least be a bit interesting. To be honest, I think Mr Dog's name showed a startling lack of vision. "Is it because Scottish people aren't very good at naming things?"

"What do you mean?" Uncle Hamish asked.

"Mr Dog – it's hardly very imaginative, is it? A bit like calling your loch, **Loch Lochy**. It's like someone named all the lakes in Scotland but when they got to yours, they ran out of ideas and just went – *well it's quite lochy looking, let's go with that*."

Uncle Hamish laughed a deep, deep laugh which filled the whole Land Rover. "Well maybe when you see it, you might be able to come up with a better alternative, hey, laddie?"

"Okay, I will," I said, because it would be easy to come up with a better name than Loch Lochy. "I'm sure

I can think of something visionary. Mum and Dad say I have a very good imagination."

"And I'm sure they are right about that. Your da—" Uncle Hamish suddenly stopped and did this little swallow like his words were struggling to get out of him. He did a few more swallows, then let out a long breath. "I really am sorry, boys – about what happened to your folks. A terrible thing..." Then he sort of trailed off.

Stanley and I didn't say anything. It had been five months, but neither of us were ready to work out the best response to people who said things like that.

"And I'm sorry it took me so long to get both of you here, but everybody just needed to make sure this was the right place for you."

He was being kind, but there was only one right place for us, and that was with Mum and Dad.

Uncle Hamish looked at me in the rear-view mirror. There was a pain behind his eyes. "You stick with each other, alright? Don't let silly arguments run on too long. You only have one brother."

It hadn't really occurred to me until that moment that Uncle Hamish had lost his brother and that he

might be sad as well. I wanted to tell him I was sorry too, that it was going to be okay. It was going to be okay because it was only a temporary situation – Mum and Dad would turn up and everything would be fine. That while everyone else had said the chance of finding them all these months later was very small, it was still a chance. But I didn't trust myself to speak. Suddenly, there was too much sadness, and it was filling up the car, so I wound down the window to let some of it out.

Despite his daft name, Mr Dog must have been quite clever, because he nuzzled his nose into my lap like he sensed that I was in need of a hug. Which I was – conversations about Mum and Dad always left me needing a hug.



Stanley said, in a bit of an angry tone, "How long is this *wee* drive going to take, Hamish?"

Uncle Hamish said, “It takes as long as it takes,” which was a very unclear answer, but neither of us pushed him to be more exact.

As it turned out, the wee drive from Edinburgh took FOR EVER. It was not a wee drive at all (unless you count all the toilet stops) but a very, very long drive, and it was dark by the time we reached Uncle Hamish’s house by the loch. My bum was so numb from sitting on the wooden bench thing for hours and as I climbed out of the car on very stiff legs, I said, “I can’t feel my bum, Uncle Hamish. I’m beginning to doubt whether it is still attached to me.”

He laughed his booming laugh again. “Well, let’s hope it is, we wouldn’t want you to be known as Bumless-Benji.” He carried our bags to the front door and said, “Here it is, the place your da grew up. I hope that, one day, you’ll be able to feel happy here, and that it could be a home to you too.”

I think Uncle Hamish must have registered the look on our faces, because he quickly added, “In time, of course.”

Uncle Hamish’s house was more like a big cabin, set a few metres up the hill, overlooking the loch and all

the little holiday huts that people could rent out. It was built completely of wood with a veranda round the outside. Hanging from a post by the front door was a white-painted sign which said LOCH LOCHY HOLIDAY LETS – WHERE ADVENTURE HAPPENS!

Adventure – that sounded promising, although I was too exhausted from the very-not-wee journey to explore just then. But, despite my bum-numbing tiredness, I still felt a ripple of excitement when I saw the crescent moon reflected on the black waters of the loch and remembered the stories Dad had told us about Loch Lochy; as a boy, he’d thought there might have been a monster waiting in the deep. I decided right then and there that there was something about the place that felt mysterious, magical even. I’ve always had a good sense about these things.

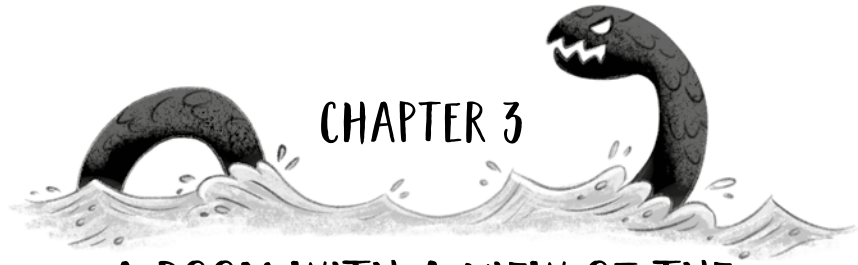
I didn’t argue when Uncle Hamish sent us straight to bed after fixing us a snack, which I was relieved turned out to be a cheese sandwich and not minced sheep lungs, heart and liver served inside a dead animal’s stomach. Perhaps the information I had gathered on Scotland wasn’t all that accurate. From what I’d seen at

the station, no one had been wearing a kilt or white-and-blue face paint either.

After Stanley had turned out the light in our bedroom I said, "I have a feeling that it might be alright here, Stanley. Don't you think?"

I heard him turn over. "Nothing's ever going to be alright again, Benji. I think you need to get used to that."

I felt a little jolt of pain in my chest but clenched my jaw until it was gone. I wouldn't let Stanley be right. Dad always used to say, if you imagine positive things happening, they just might. Because I was the one with the excellent vision, and Stanley was a natural pessimist, I knew that if Mum and Dad were to be found, even after so many months, all the positive imagining would come down to me. I vowed I would never let the sadness take over.



CHAPTER 3

A ROOM WITH A VIEW OF THE ROBOT TADPOLE

Our room was up in the eaves of the house and was way bigger than any of the rooms in our house back in London. It smelled of new paint, which made me think Uncle Hamish had spruced it up especially for us. At the bottom of each of our beds, over the duvet, he had put a patchwork quilt – made by our Great-Grandmother Elsie, apparently. Stanley had let out a little grunting noise when he'd found out we were sharing, but I was really happy about it. I liked having him close by when the lights went out and my brain whirred. That first night at Uncle Hamish's there was a lot going on in my head and I found it really difficult to drift off.