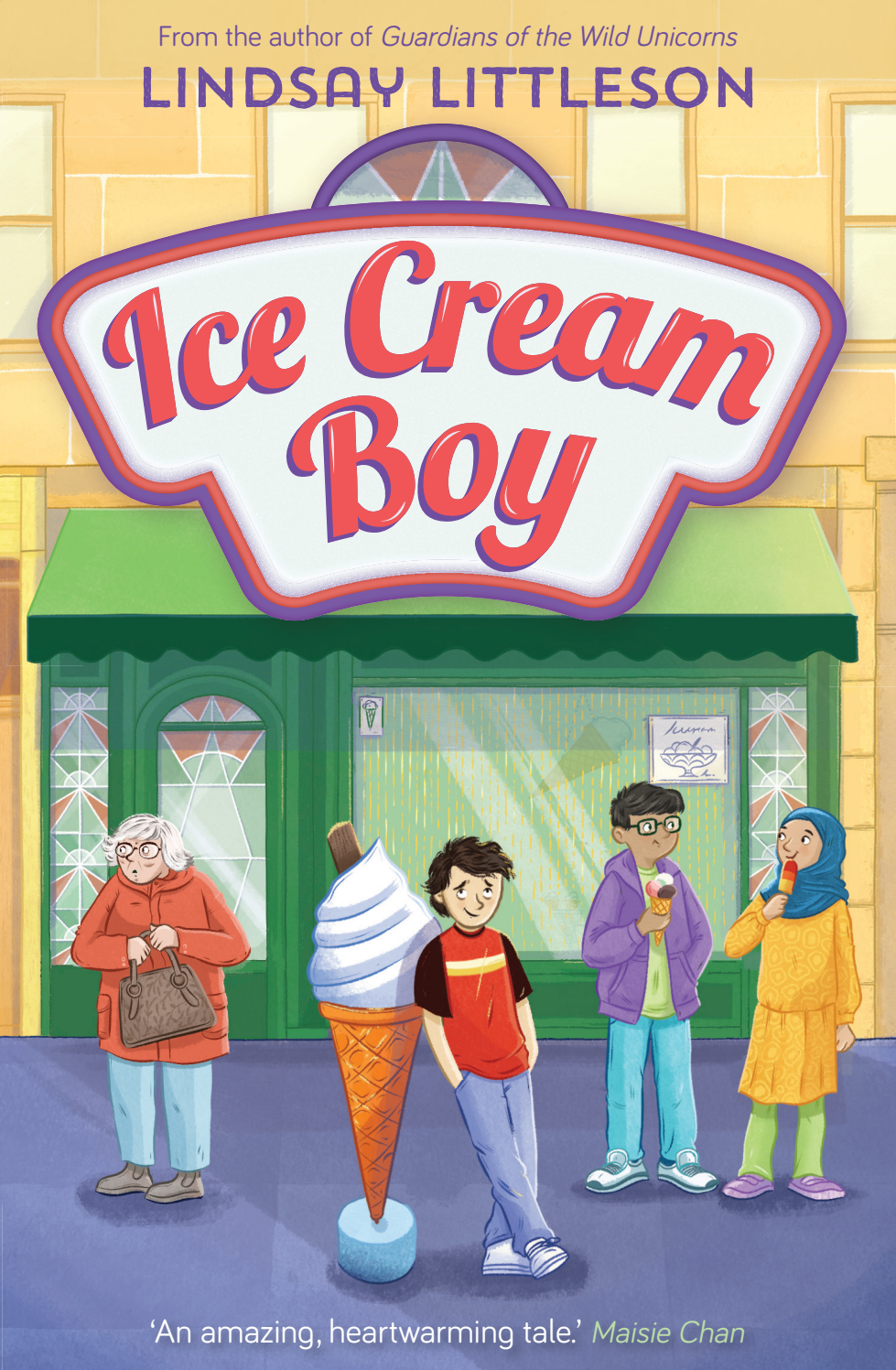
From the author of *Guardians of the Wild Unicorns*

LINDSAY LITTLESON

Ice Cream Boy



'An amazing, heartwarming tale.' *Maisie Chan*

In loving memory of Sally Gibson.
We miss you so much, Mum, but treasure all
our happy memories. Love always wins xx

Kelpies is an imprint of Floris Books
Published in 2024 by Floris Books
© 2024 Lindsay Littleson

Lindsay Littleson has asserted her right under the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be
identified as the Author of this Work

All rights reserved. No part of this book may
be reproduced without the prior permission of
Floris Books, Edinburgh
www.florisbooks.co.uk

Also available as an eBook

British Library CIP data available
ISBN 978-178250-889-2
Printed in Great Britain
by Bell & Bain Ltd

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C007785
www.fsc.org

Uses plant-based inks which reduce chemical emissions.

Ice Cream Boy

LINDSAY LITTLESON

Kelpies



1

BRAIN FREEZE

My evening was going okay, until my gran lost her mind.

We ate fish fingers, chips and beans in front of the telly, as we always did when Mum was away. Then Nonna got out a tub she'd picked up at my family's ice cream café that afternoon and nudged me with a sharp elbow. "If you don't hurry up, I'll finish this before you've even got started."

Between us, we polished off the lot. It was creamy, cold, chocolatey heaven.

Afterwards I sprawled across the couch, groaning: stomach full, suffering from brain-freeze, bone-tired after a day at school. Clawdio circled before curling up on my legs, purring like a Ferrari.

Everything was fine, and then it happened.

Nonna's favourite soap was on but, bizarrely, she didn't seem to be enjoying it. A scowl pursed her mouth, and she kept tsking.

I glanced at her, totally clueless that my life was about to change. "What's up, Nonna?"

My gran clicked her tongue and gestured at the screen. "Why's that man shoutin at me? What've I ever done to him?"

Unease crept up my spine like a spider. Nonna's voice was odd, trembly. Sitting up, disturbing the cat but too worried to care, I leaned forward, trying to explain what should have been totally obvious. "He's not shouting at *you*, Nonna. He's an actor on the telly. He's playing Tony Waters, who manages the pub, remember? Tony was having it off with Iris, the glaikit woman who works on the stall, but she's dumped him and he's ragin."

Anger twisted my gran's kindly face. She banged her fist on the coffee table, making her mug rattle, tea slop everywhere, and me nearly jump out of my skin.

"Well, he's a right bampot, an if he doesn't stop yelling right now I'm going to call the polis!" She started rummaging through the heap of magazines and *Daily Record*s on the table, muttering while she hunted for her ancient mobile phone. "Cheeky sod. Knew that yin was trouble when I first clapped eyes on him. I tellt my Vic, but he didn't listen… That man never ruddy listens… Why wouldn't he listen?"

Her voice rose in a wail, and panic surged through my chest.

What the heck? Since when has Nonna been telling her husband anything? Nonno died years ago, when I was just a little kid.

"No, Nonna." My voice sounded so calm and reasonable I could have been one of the paramedics on that hospital programme she loved, but fear was quivering like jelly in my stomach. "Remember, the shouty guy's an actor. On the telly. You've never met him in real life." Grabbing the remote, I started flicking through the channels. "It's a rubbish episode anyway. Let's watch something else. Look, we've seen this programme before. That daft lassie's going to get married to a guy she's never met!"

The camera zoomed in on a young couple, mid-snog. Gran gasped, one hand flying to her mouth.

"Is that our Julia? What the heck's she playin at? Tell her to get in the house right now!"

Clicking the off button, I put down the remote and patted my gran's arm, trying to calm her.

"Nonna, you're all mixed up. Aunt Julia's miles older than that lassie, and as far as I know she's never been on the telly."

Frantically, I scanned the room, desperate to find something to distract her. I thrust her mug into her hands. "Your tea's getting cold. Drink it up."

But it was a stupid move. Nonna's hands were trembling too much and tea splashed on the carpet, speckling it

with dots. Trying to avoid a tea tsunami, I snatched the mug back.

Nonna laughed, sounding a bit more like herself. "Och, see what I've done. I'm going daft. Get me a cloth, will you, son?"

Relieved to escape, I headed to the kitchen, brain whirring, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

I wasn't stupid. I'd heard of really old folk getting confused. They could get All-zimers or whatever it's called and then they couldn't remember what day it was and they had to go into care homes, in case they wandered off or set the house on fire. But Nonna was only seventy… She was an old lady, but she wasn't ancient, like bent-backed Mrs Chatterjee on the second floor, who must have been a hundred at least. My mum said Mrs Chatterjee was amazing for her age, as sharp as a tack. This couldn't be happening. My gran couldn't really be losing her mind.

My brain ticking like a bomb, I grabbed a cloth from the cupboard under the sink, held it under the tap and stared out the window, as if the answer was down in the tenement's communal back court, with its weed-infested paving slabs, rusting clothes poles and metal sign saying NO BALL GAMES.

People ramble when they have a fever, don't they? Maybe I should check if Nonna's feeling hot. I should phone Mum, tell her I need her to come home – that Nonna's acting weird,

and might be really sick. But Mum's miles away, in a scuzzy motel in Hull, or maybe Leeds, or Wolverhampton… Mum's sales job is rubbish, having to travel to all those grim-sounding places. Although even places I'm dead keen to visit, like Barga in Italy, would be ruined if I had to stay in a seedy motel with a stained, sticky carpet and a manky shower. And my whole blooming life would be ruined if I had to spend all day, every day, selling surgical products, whatever the heck they are. If I am sure about anything in life, it's that I am not *going to end up like my mum, in a job I hate. My future's planned.*

Back in the living room, everything looked normal. I shooed Clawdio off the coffee table before he licked up any spilled tea. Nonna was lying on the carpet, arms raised, doing her own unique version of Pilates.

"Thought I'd better have a lie-down, an do my exercises," she explained. "Kill two birds wi wan stone, as it were."

Glancing at the clock, I saw that it was nearly seven and the footie game was about to start: the perfect distraction. My gran loved watching football.

After giving the carpet a quick wipe, I threw myself onto the couch and pressed the remote.

"Game's on, Nonna."

Struggling to her feet, she picked up her handbag and plonked herself down beside me. She pulled a massive bar of chocolate from her bag and placed it on the coffee table beside Clawdio.

"Right, I'm laying my bet." Nonna's voice sounded stronger, no longer wavery and uncertain. "A win to St Mirren an hauf the bar's mine. If they lose, it's aw yours."

We talked about this half an hour ago. She knows it's Celtic and Aberdeen tonight.

It was impossible to tell if she was joking, but surely she couldn't have forgotten.

"Gran, you're at it! St Mirren aren't even playing."

"Och, well. You can have it aw then. Sugar's bad for my teeth, anyway." Nonna pushed the chocolate towards me, her grin showing off sparkling new dentures.

She's just having a laugh.

Weak with relief, I smiled back.

Together, we watched the match, calling the ref names, turning the air blue as ink. At half-time Nonna nudged me with a bony elbow and chuckled.

"Your maw would be ragin if she could hear us, but that eejit deserved it. Give us a square o that chocolate, will you?"

"So much for 'You have it, it's bad for my teeth!'" Laughing, I broke off a couple of squares and handed them over. Then I put another piece in my own mouth, letting the chocolate melt on my tongue, and snuggled further down on the couch, preparing to watch the second half.

There's no point phoning Mum. It'll only worry her, and Nonna's back to herself now anyway. Everything's okay.



And for a while, everything was. More or less.

Every day was pretty much the same. When I got home from school, Nonna greeted me at the door with a hug and sat me down with a cup of builders' tea and a caramel wafer or, sometimes, if she'd been to the café, a strawberry tart. Complaining of being shattered, I flopped down on the couch and told her who'd got into bother at school that day, leaving out any troubles of my own. She didn't need to know about the fire alarm incident, or the day I got caught climbing up on the school roof in a pointless effort to rescue the janny's cat (eejit jumped down herself and left me hanging by my fingernails from the gutter), or any of the other times I ended up sitting outside the head teacher's office.

Once I'd finished my carefully spun version of events, Nonna told me the latest local gossip, gathered from her daily visits to the newsagent's and her friend Mags's flat. Nonna's news nearly always featured some kind of scandal: thefts, newly graffitied walls, or drunk customers causing havoc in the chip shop where Mags worked. Cheery news from Nonna was as rare as snow in Death Valley, but she enjoyed the telling, always embroidered with details of her own invention.

After I'd finished my snack and watched some telly, Nonna would order me to my room to do homework.

"Better to get it over wi, an then the night's your own. If you need any help wi the sums, let me know. I was a whizz at sums, in my day."

I never bothered to argue, as I appreciated the alone time. 'Homework' usually involved texting my pals, Sitara and Kamal, playing a game on my phone or having a pre-dinner snooze. Actual teacher-set tasks could get done later… if at all.

I mean, what is the actual point of homework? Home is my time, not theirs. School sucks enough of the fun out my life.

After dinner, me and Nonna usually watched our favourite soaps and reality shows on the telly, saving the programmes we knew Mum would really disapprove of for the times she was away down south. If there was nothing on the telly we played cards, and bet Smarties or loose change on endless games of Switch or Gin Rummy, though Nonna never accepted defeat at cards and always insisted on "best o three", or "best o seventy-umpteen". I had to watch her like a hawk or she cheated.

Sometimes, when I reached home, Nonna would be standing on the front steps, clutching her big handbag, her coat buttoned up tight, even on sunny days. This meant she was planning a walk for the two of us. My heart would sink just a bit, knowing that relaxing in my room would

have to wait. But I never complained, because a walk with Nonna was kind of fun, really. We'd either head along the winding White Cart Water or through the park.

One of Nonna's favourite facts was that there are ninety parks in Glasgow. It seemed a massive number, even for a big city, but it was impossible for me to check, as Nonna stuck rigidly to Queen's Park. She wasn't a great fan of changing things up, except when it came to flavours of ice cream.

Queen's Park was a brilliant park to walk through, a huge area of hills and grass and towering trees right in the middle of the city's Southside. We visited to escape the sound of screeching bus brakes, the stink of traffic fumes and the irritable folk who pushed past us as Nonna shuffled along on the pavements. The sounds in the park were nicer, from the gentle cooing of the pigeons to the giggling of toddlers running across the grass, and the tarmacked paths were wide enough for everyone. I didn't have the heart to point out I was twelve, not three, so we always fed the ducks in the small wildlife pond next to the boating lake. Nonna would pull out a bag of oats and we'd stand for five minutes on the rickety jetty scattering them for the mallards and the occasional moorhen, while Nonna chatted away to the birds like they were old pals.

"Hope your havin a guid day, lassies. What's that your quackin? A big dug jumped in the wattir? Och, that's terrible, hen."

When the bag was empty, we'd leave by the side gates and head across busy Pollokshaws Road to Verani's Café to see Aunt Julia and Uncle Gordon and have a hot chocolate or an ice cream sundae. If it was pension day or if Aunt Julia was feeling generous, we'd have both.

So afternoons with my gran were pretty good. Nonna was crazy that one time, and then life went on.

But it wasn't the same. The whole weird, horrible incident had shaken me, and there were little echoes of that night. I noticed every time my gran repeated a question she'd just asked or a story she'd already told me. When she forgot a word or something we'd done the weekend before, it made me shiver. I guess it was like living somewhere a volcano has erupted or a tsunami has hit (an actual one, not just spilled tea): you never really feel safe there again.



2

PISTACHIO

Mr Connon's face was turning an alarming shade of purple, and an ugly vein bulged in his neck. There was no point in denials, as my school trousers were covered in pistachio-green chalk dust. You didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to find the culprit here, and even Mr Connon wasn't as thick as he looked.

"I just picked up the chalk so it didn't get crushed, sir. One of the little kids must've left it lying out in the playground."

I was trying to build a picture in the head teacher's head… *Precious school property abandoned, in terrible danger of being crushed underfoot by the rampaging hordes at playtime. Luca rescuing the chalk was a GOOD THING. He's done NOTHING WRONG…*

But my mind-control attempts weren't working. Mr Connon just kept staring, eyes bulging like a frog's,

at the words I'd scrawled on the tarmac a few minutes ago. Glancing upwards, I sent a quick prayer to the God of Rain for a sudden heavy downpour, but for once the Glasgow sky was Saltire-blue and cloudless.

Trying to deflect some of Mr Connon's rage, my friend Sitara spoke up, one hand raised as if we were in class. "It was me that found the chalk, sir. The Primary One kids were drawing Easter eggs in the infant playground. They're dead colourful. Just over here..."

But Mr Connon didn't move.

"You found a piece of chalk? And gave it to Luca Verani?" His tone was scathing, as if he thought Sitara had done something really dumb, like given a sharp knife to a toddler. Pretty rude, really, but I figured it was better to stay quiet. Not the time to remind him of all the BE KIND posters round the school.

My other pal, Kamal, stepped forward, slicking down his dark hair, straightening his glasses, swallowing nervously. "Mr Connon, we were planning to take the chalk back to Mrs McIvor in the infants' block."

Mr Connon blinked with surprise, and I could imagine his thoughts.

Surely Kamal Ghauz, our 'Most Likely to Succeed at High School' pupil, isn't involved in this hideous crime?

Shooting a warning frown at Kamal, I shook my head. "Yeah, we were on our way when, um, inspiration struck.

Writing the poem wasn't Kamal or Sitara's idea. It was *all* mine."

But Kamal seemed determined to get involved. He swept a hand across the writing on the tarmac, pulling Mr Connon's attention back to it. "It is a great poem! And outdoor learning's a really important part of the curriculum, isn't it, sir?"

Sitara nodded enthusiastically and gave Mr Connon an encouraging smile. "And the rhyming's excellent, don't you think? 'Gangster' and 'hamster'?"

I closed my eyes.

You're not helping, guys…

Don't get me wrong – it was great that my pals had my back. But if they got into bother because of something I'd done, then it would cause issues at home. I'd been warned by Mum only yesterday that if Kamal's dad came to our door *one more time* complaining about my behaviour, then Christmas was cancelled. And we were just back at school after the Easter holidays. Christmas was a long, long way off. I didn't mind taking the flak for stupid stuff I did at school. It was worth it for the laugh. I wanted to be the guy who made things more fun. But I didn't want the flak to explode in my house.

At the mention of rhyming, the head teacher scowled, his eyes fixed on the words scrawled in green chalk. Horrifyingly, he started to read them aloud.

CONNON'S BEARD'S A PURE DISASTER.
HIS STRIPY SUITS ARE LIKE A GANGSTER'S.
HIS JOKES ARE A BORE
THEY MAKE US ALL SNORE
AND HIS TEETH ARE YELLOW AS A HAMSTER'S.

Mr Connon stroked the unkempt fur on his face.

"The rhythm is poor. And there's nothing wrong with my beard," he muttered, then gave me a hard stare. "Right, Verani. My office. *Now!*"

Head down, I trailed after Mr Connon as he strode across the playground. While he fumbled for his key fob, I turned and gave Sitara and Kamal a quick wave. They waved back, probably relieved that, this time, being my pal hadn't got them in trouble.



Once in his office, Mr Connon gestured at me to sit down. The swivel chair was set too high and my feet dangled. I decided this was a power move and, for a millisecond, thought about slinging both my feet up on his desk. But I concluded it was best not to make the head teacher actually froth at the mouth with fury.

Back in his comfort zone of big desk, framed diplomas and comfy chair, Mr Connon's anger seemed to be

dissolving, his complexion returning to its normal grey. He gave me his 'I'm really disappointed in you, Verani' look, began the all-too-familiar lecture about responsibility, then finished with a chat about high school.

"You're in your final term at primary school, Luca." His voice was gloomy, but probably not because he would miss me. "What are your plans for the future?"

I scratched my nose, to buy myself some time.

Do I tell him my actual plans: that I'm going to take over Verani's Café, so I don't need any stupid exams or boring college?

I knew my thoughts wouldn't go down well. Not in this building, where *education is everything*. Not in this room, where Mr Connon is king.

So I told him a fib instead.

"I'd quite like to be a car mechanic. Fix cars and stuff." It was a calculated lie: I knew Mr Connon fancied himself as a racing driver. There was a photo on his desk showing his visit to a racing circuit: he was casually leaning against a sports car, pretending that he owned it. I considered picking up the photo and asking 'Who's the saddo in the sunglasses?' but what was the point of winding him up when there was no audience? Instead, pointing at the car in the picture, I gave an approving nod.

"Nice car. Did you know the Testarossa was the last Ferrari with a flat-12 engine?"

Within a minute we were discussing the merits of Ferraris versus Lamborghinis. We stuck with Italian makes – because I'm half-Italian, he probably thought I wouldn't rate Porsche or Mercedes. He was wrong – Mr C was wrong about so many things. Like his beard, for instance. Mr Twit had less disgusting facial hair. And those stripy suits were horrendous.

But the main issue with Mr C was impossible to fix: the man was utterly boring. Being so mind-numbingly dull was unforgiveable in somebody who held weekly assemblies to inspire the next generation. At last week's effort I thought I'd actually died from boredom and was walking back to class as a zombified corpse.

The bell rang for the end of break, and Mr Connon clicked his tongue, realising he hadn't doled out a punishment yet.

"Tomorrow, you'll come to my office at ten thirty and sit outside it until the end of break. And the day after." He glowered at me, daring me to argue.

Smiling, I nodded. "Okay. That seems fair. I'll bring a snack, so if you're hungry, pop out and I'll share my crisps. Salt and vinegar or plain?"

"Luca, get out of here. And no more al fresco poetry, do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Mr C." Leaping off the chair so fast it spun, I headed for the door. "Your Italian's coming

on brilliantly, by the way. You'll be fluent in no time. Ferrari … Lamborghini... Al fresco. I'll teach you how to say *la tua barba è orribile* next time we chat."

And I scarpered, letting the door slam behind me, before he could check what I'd just said on Google Translate.



At lunchtime, I regaled Sitara and Kamal with the comedy version of what happened in the head teacher's office.

Sitara's hand flew to her mouth. "You told him his beard is horrible? Jeez, Luca. You're unreal."

"It's okay, he didn't understand. He's not bilingual like us guys."

Kamal raised an eyebrow. "Your dozen words in Italian don't really qualify. At least I'm fluent in two languages. And Sitara's an actual polyglot."

Sitara looked affronted. "What? I am not."

"Yes, you are. You speak Dari, English and some Hindustani."

She grinned, as understanding dawned. "Only what I picked up from Bollywood movies. An ma Scottish isnae bad." She turned to me, frowning. "You should be trying to keep on Mr Connon's right side, particularly now, in our final term. You don't want to start high school with a bad reputation."

"Aw, come on!" I felt genuinely shocked. "It's not my fault Mr Connon's got no sense of humour. He worries too much about my future… Doesn't know I've got *un futuro brillante* all mapped out."

Sitara smiled at me, but there was sadness in her eyes. "A brilliant future. Lucky you." She sighed. "There was another one of those horrible Go Home flyers stuck on our flat's door this morning. Just as well Mum and I scrubbed it off before Dad saw it. He's struggling as it is." Biting her lip to stop tears, she picked up her bag from the floor. "I really thought I knew what my future held, until everything fell apart."

I gulped, hardly knowing what to say. "I'm sorry, Sitara. It makes me sick that some people think it's okay to be horrible to refugees."

Kamal put his arm round Sitara's shoulder. "There's no reasoning with that racist shower of numpties. Just ignore them and their stupid flyers. I mean, you're doing amazing. You'll show them all, bet you a quid."

"Let's hope so. Wouldn't want to lose a whole pound." Sitara laughed, but we knew she wasn't joking.

We started walking towards the door and Kamal tugged at my sleeve and pointed to a big colourful poster. "Hey, check this out. Sitara and I thought you might be keen to enter, since you're planning a future in the hospitality business."

I sauntered over to read it.



The small print at the bottom blathered on about a new alliance for the hospitality association and city council blah blah, and 'recipes reflecting the impact on Glasgow from cooking cultures around the world' (nae problem, I mean *nessun problema*), and how the heats would be held during our high school transition days (okay), and all the finalists would cook for the judging panel next September (yikes, but yep…). Entry forms were in the school library.

Excitement bubbled in my stomach. Cooking was my thing. Well, it was Nonna's thing really, but I'd been

helping her in the kitchen for years, buttering rolls for square sausages and chopping tomatoes for ragu sauce. "Sounds fun," I said casually. "Though they don't actually specify how much the prizes are."

Sitara nudged me in the ribs. "Well, are you going to enter?"

"Yeah, definitely. And since Italy has the best food in the world, it should be an easy win."

As I strolled back to class, my head was buzzing with ideas. Pizza and pasta were the obvious choices, but my family's speciality was ice cream, so I figured I'd focus on that.

I liked the idea of a competition that might give me a chance to show off. But when I filled in the entry form that afternoon, I had no clue how much might hang on the result.



3

ICE CREAM DREAMS

"You pair are as thick as thieves," Mum said, as me and Nonna set off on one of our regular trips to the café a few weeks later.

I spun round, genuinely scandalised.

"Woah! What do you mean, thick? I got 79 per cent in my spelling test last Tuesday, I'll have you know. And Nonna can count faster than a blooming calculator."

"Calm doon, son." I'd grown so tall Nonna could no longer comfortably fling an arm round my shoulder, so she hugged me round my waist instead. "Your maw's no sayin we're daft. Thick as thieves is an expression. It just means you an me are dead close. Which is true."

Mum gave a rueful grin. "Yes, it is. Also, you always look as if you're up to something… scheming away together." She sighed. "Right, have fun. I've got a super-exciting sales call to make."

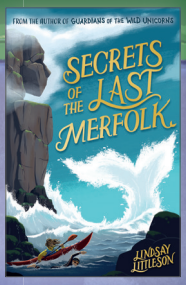
‘An amazing, heartwarming tale of fractured families, dementia and delicious secret ice cream recipes!’

Maisie Chan, author of *Keep Dancing, Lizzie Chu*

Twelve-year-old Luca Verani has big plans for his future: he’s going to take over his family’s Glasgow ice cream café. But when his aunt announces she’s selling the failing business and his nonna’s mind starts to wander, Luca’s dreams seem to be melting away...

Moving and gently funny, this is a hopeful, involving novel from the Carnegie Medal-nominated author of *Guardians of the Wild Unicorns*.





Kelpies
£7.99
US $11.99
ISBN 978-178250-889-2
51199
DiscoverKelpies.co.uk

WANT A TASTER?
Try p. 43

Cover illustration: Cathrin Peterslund