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opening extract from

Monster Republic

written by

Ben Horton

published by

Corgi Books

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Cameron looked down at his arm. He could see metal. Mechanical components exposed through tears in his skin. The emotionless O of the mouth of a gun barrel.

There was no pain.

There was no blood.

His head swam as he watched strange mechanisms snick neatly back into place like the blades on a Swiss Army knife. He felt sick. Maybe it was the smell of gunsmoke, but he didn't think so.

What had been done to him?

MONSTER REPUBLIC

Ben Horton

illustrations by Christian Scheurer

CORGI BOOKS

MONSTER REPUBLIC
A CORGI BOOK 978 0 552 56057 3

Published in Great Britain by Corgi Books,
an imprint of Random House Children's Books
A Random House Group Company

This edition published 2010

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Illustrations by Christian Scheurer,
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Set in Century Old Style

Corgi Books are published by Random House Children's Books,
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA

www.kidsatrandomhouse.co.uk
www.rbooks.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

THE RANDOM HOUSE GROUP Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in the UK by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

prologue

Even though it was well past midnight when the phone call came, Dr Lazarus Fry answered it before the second ring.

'Hello.'

'Is that you, Fry?'

'Yes, it is.'

Dr Fry didn't need to ask who the other voice belonged to. Only one person knew the number for the special hotline from London.

'Is it true?'

Dr Fry suppressed the urge to sigh. Like most scientists, he despised guessing games.

'Is what true, Prime Minister?'

'What I've just heard about the Divinity Project. That you've been spending government money on some sort of animal experiments.' The Prime Minister's voice

was brimming with anger. His hatred of animal cruelty was well known. 'One of your lab technicians claims that you've been doing something with dogs.'

Dr Fry's narrow mouth twitched angrily.

'Who has been telling you this?'

'Some chap called Quinn. He says what you're doing down there in Broad Harbour is unethical. Illegal even.'

'Prime Minister,' said Dr Fry smoothly, 'let me assure you that everything that goes on in this laboratory is entirely within the law.'

'And have you got anything to do with these reports from the Broad Harbour police about strange creatures in the storm drains?'

Dr Fry laughed. 'Like the alligators in the New York sewers? Rumour and fantasy, Prime Minister. There is nothing amiss in Broad Harbour.'

The Prime Minister's voice sharpened.

'I'm afraid I don't share your opinion on that. You are to suspend work on the Divinity Project at once. I'm going to arrange for a team of independent investigators to come down

next month and check out what's happening. If they find any evidence of wrongdoing, you will have me to answer to. Good night.'

With a sharp click, the line went dead.

Dr Fry sat quite still for a moment. Then he reached for another phone.

'Hardiman? I think we need to put the special contingency plan into operation. Oh, and Hardiman – pay Jason Quinn a visit, would you? Someone's been telling tales to the Prime Minister.'

Replacing the handset, Dr Fry picked up his scalpel and looked down into a pair of wide, terrified eyes.

'Now, where were we . . . ?'

chapter one

the technology of the future

The school trip was a disaster waiting to happen. Cameron Reilly just had no idea how big.

'Race you!' he shouted as he leaped off the coach. The journey from school hadn't been a long one but Cameron hated being cooped up, even for a few minutes.

Stretching his long, athletic legs, he sprinted off across the car park. His best friend, Darren, gave chase, but he had no chance of catching up. Although he was only fourteen, Cameron was already school football captain and could run the 100 metres in 12.5 seconds. He skidded to a stop at a set of automatic doors. A few

seconds later, Darren arrived, puffing and blowing. Cameron was barely out of breath.

'You're going to have to do better than that if you want to make the team this season!' Cameron grinned, his blue eyes twinkling.

Darren took a moment to recover his breath – then punched Cameron's arm. 'Yeah, well, not all of us are pretty-boy wingers,' he retorted.

Cameron laughed. 'Who are you calling "pretty-boy"?'

'Don't pretend you didn't see Jane Chapman making eyes at you on the coach. Reckon she fancies you, mate.'

'Well, she can't have him,' interrupted a third voice. 'He's mine!'

The boys turned to see a tall, long-haired figure standing watching them.

'Oh, hi, babe,' said Cameron, slipping his arm around her slender waist.

Everyone agreed that Marie Lyons was the fittest girl in their class, and Cameron counted

himself the luckiest guy in the school to have her for his girlfriend. They'd only been going out for a few months, but that was long enough for him to know that she was funny and smart as well as pretty. She hadn't even complained when he was late for their second and third dates because football practice had overrun. Cameron couldn't think of many girls who were so chilled about stuff like that.

'Mr Reilly!'

The sneering voice could only belong to Mr Hackford, the science master; an oily little man with a ratty moustache who took pleasure in trying to make his pupils feel as small as he was. He was the worst kind of teacher – the sort who always make really sarcastic 'jokes' that nobody else finds funny.

'I thought I had made it clear that this is a physics field trip, not a biology lesson. So kindly take your greasy paws off Miss Lyons and join the queue.'

'Yes, sir,' said Cameron obediently, dropping Marie's hand as they slipped into the line of

students stretching back from the entrance to an ugly concrete building marked VISITOR CENTRE. Just ahead of them, a burly, shaven-headed boy used Mr Hackford's temporary distraction as an opportunity to barge in at the front of the queue, shoving a small kid sprawling to the ground and sending his glasses flying.

Mr Hackford spun round. 'Now, now! Settle down there!'

Eyes brimming, the boy got to his feet, rubbing a bleeding knee. Cameron vaguely recognized him from his computer science class. Nigel something.

'What's going on?' snapped Hackford.

Nigel looked back at his attacker, who just grinned menacingly, revealing a set of crooked teeth.

'Nothing, sir.' Nigel sniffed. 'I just fell over.'

The boy obviously didn't want to cause trouble. That figured – people who told tales on Carl Monkton usually regretted it. He wasn't afraid to use his fists to dole out

punishment, and he had a reputation as a dirty fighter.

'Monkton's such a jerk,' hissed Cameron to Marie. 'Someone should take him down a peg or two.'

'Yes, but not you. Remember what happened last time?'

A few weeks earlier, Cameron had come across Carl picking on another nerdy boy behind the gym block. They had been squaring up for a fight when one of the PE teachers turned up and put them all in detention. But that had only postponed the inevitable. Cameron and Carl had hated each other ever since their first day at Broad Harbour High School. Sooner or later there would be a scrap. They both knew it was only a matter of time.

Cameron's intervention did have one unexpected side effect, though. The nerd he rescued spent the next two weeks trailing around after Cameron, imagining that the whole business had somehow made them friends. Although he did nothing for

Cameron's street cred, he did provide a couple of useful hints on homework assignments.

'Anyway,' continued Marie, 'let's just stay out of trouble and try to have fun.'

'Yeah, right,' grumbled Cameron as the queue started shuffling in through the doorway. 'A school outing isn't really my idea of fun. It's going to take a *lot* to make this trip exciting . . .'

'Welcome to Broad Harbour Nuclear Power Plant. In the event of a reactor core failure, please make your way to the nearest exit.'

Cameron shook his head. The recorded voice sounded so chirpy it could have been advertising washing-up liquid rather than warning about nuclear meltdown.

'In the event of a reactor core failure,' muttered Marie, 'we'd probably all be dead.'

'Or worse.' Cameron chuckled. '*In the event of a reactor core failure*,' he continued in a pretty good imitation of the announcer's inanely cheery voice, '*please make your way into town and eat as many brains as you can, because you'll all be radioactive zombies.*'

Marie giggled. 'Come on.'

The Visitor Centre was filled with scale models of the power plant and computer animations of how a nuclear reaction worked, as well as a load of other boring-looking displays on huge boards. It was all part of a major exhibition on sustainable energy paid for by the Fry Foundation, Broad Harbour's biggest charity. It was called 'The Technology of the Future'. As far as Cameron could make out from a quick skim, that meant things like harnessing the waves and geothermal energy. And he suspected that it was no coincidence that 'The Technology of the Future' was also the title for the project they were supposed to be working on in science that term. No wonder Mr Hackford had been so excited about the trip. All around him, Cameron could see his classmates digging into their bags for pads and pens. Some of the swots had already filled more than a page of their notebooks.

Well, that suited Cameron fine. So long as someone was making plenty of notes he could borrow, that meant he could relax. Besides, as

well as being drop-dead gorgeous, Marie was super bright, so she was probably taking in lots of facts even while they were laughing and joking around.

'Hey, look!' She pointed. Nearby, Mr Hackford was trying to explain the process of nuclear fission to a blank-faced Darren. 'Looks like someone needs rescuing . . .'

Marie led the way over. 'Sir? Mr Hackford?'

'Yes, Marie?'

'I thought this exhibition was about the future. Who gets excited about nuclear power any more?'

Cameron bit his lip and concentrated on keeping a straight face.

'I mean, it's not very safe, is it?' she continued. 'What about that place that blew up and created all those mutant sheep? Chernobyl.'

'That was many years ago. And it was in Ukraine. Nuclear power stations are much safer and much cleaner than they used to be.'

'Yes, but they can still explode, can't they?'

'Yes, Miss Lyons,' snapped Hackford. 'They can, and so can I. And you and Mr Reilly have

already tested my patience quite sufficiently today. Do I make myself clear? Now, if you'll excuse me . . .'

The trio waited for Mr Hackford's retreating form to disappear behind a huge plasma screen before bursting into laughter.

'Thanks, guys,' said Darren.

Marie grinned. 'Saved you from death by boredom!'

Cameron loved Marie's wicked sense of humour. She'd already made the day's ordeal a lot easier to bear. He didn't mind science, even found some of it interesting – especially practical experiments – but it wasn't really his thing. He was much more into sports and activities. And his race with Darren in the car park was probably going to be the most activity he'd get today.

'Come on,' said Cameron. 'Let's go and look at the upper level.'

They walked over to the winding metal staircase that led to the high gallery. From the ground floor, it looked as if the upper level contained more of the same sort of exhibits.

A few students were already up there, and there seemed to be some sort of commotion. It was no surprise that the familiar figure of Carl Monkton was at the centre of it. He had pinned Nigel against the gallery railing and, as Cameron stared, he hoisted the smaller boy up by his lapels and leaned him backwards as if he was going to tip him over.

'Reckon you can fly, Smith?'

The kid whimpered and sobbed.

Cameron swore and glanced around. Mr Hackford was over on the other side of the exhibition, talking to a small group of students. There were no guides or other adults nearby. But somebody had to do something . . .

'Darren, go and get Hackford, quick. Marie, you stay here.'

As Darren ran off, Cameron grabbed hold of the banister and raced up the stairs. Behind him, he could hear Marie's feet clanging on the metal steps. He should have known she wouldn't stay behind. Marie hated bullies.

'OK, Carl,' said Cameron levelly as he

reached the gallery. 'Put him down. Here, on the upstairs level, if you don't mind.'

'All right, Mr Perfect,' said Carl, shooting Cameron an ugly look and shoving Nigel roughly aside. 'Come on then, Reilly. Want to have a go yourself?'

Cameron stood his ground, but refused to take the bait by getting any closer. 'Leave it, Carl. You're meant to be learning stuff today, not getting yourself a bloody nose.'

As soon as he'd said it, Cameron winced at the mistake. That was tantamount to a challenge, making it harder for Carl to back down.

Sure enough, Carl took a step forward, fists bunched.

'Come on then, Reilly,' he repeated. 'You want to learn something? I'll teach you.'

Cameron shrugged tightly. He couldn't see any way out of this now. Where the hell was Darren with Mr Hackford?

'Cameron,' warned Marie, from somewhere behind him.

Cameron raised his own fists, waiting for

Carl to make the first move. Ready for the first punch, and ready to give as good as he got.

The punch never came. The fight never happened. The day had bigger things in store for Carl and Cameron. Huge, life-changing things.

Starting with a massive explosion.