To adventurous children everywhere,
with monster-loads of thanks to my family– C. B.

The publishers and the author would like to thank Mrs Keiko Holt
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JANETTA OTTER-BARRY BOOKS

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FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Chapter One



My hands were sweaty and I realised I was clinging to the bag. “Ready?” I whispered.

Cait nodded, and Alex curved both hands round his body as if they were blades.

We were standing outside Alex’s bedroom door, so close to Alex that I could hear him breathe. A few months ago, this would have been my worst nightmare. I guess Alex would have felt the same way. For a start, there was a big sign on his closed door that said PRIVATE: NO GIRLS in enormous, black letters.

Cait was standing next to me in what she called her work uniform: jeans and a jumper, one size too small so the enemy couldn’t get a good grip. She looked ready for action.

Alex looked ready for bed. He was still in his pyjamas.

I cleared my throat. "Alex, are you ready?"

Alex circled his hands through the air, then he nodded without taking his eyes off the door. Our team was set.

I swallowed and started the count. "One."

The previous night, Alex had been forced to scramble from his bed and sleep with the Filth Licker in the bath. "Something in my room is alive," he had reported this morning. "And it's hungry."

"Two…"

So that's why we were here. To hunt the thing and catch it. Only I wasn't sure that Alex hadn't dreamed it all up. But then, at two-and-a-half, the bedroom door handle started to jitter and jump by itself. Slowly, it began to turn.

"Three!" I yelled, grabbing the door handle and trying to shove the door open. I leaned with all my weight, forcing the handle down.

Something clicked inside the lock, then, with Alex and Cait pushing beside me, we forced the door open – just a crack, but enough for me to see it, wrestling and thrashing behind the door. It was enormous, moving too fast to see properly, but I thought I saw a flash of baby blue with caramel blobs. Were they pictures of teddy bears?

"Yaaa!" Alex cried, squeezing through the gap ahead of us. He whirled his karate hands as if he was in an action movie. "Ha! Ha!"

The baby blue thing whooshed backwards on to Alex's bed and the door fell open. Cait and I tumbled into the room. Even before we hit the ground, I knew we were in trouble.

The thing was rippling high above us. It had reared up on the bed, blocking the light from Alex's bedroom window, but I could see it more clearly now. It had no arms, no legs, no head, no eyes, though it seemed to know exactly where we were. And it was definitely a quilt.

I rolled on top of Cait, then rolled her over me. I could feel the quilt moving closer, ready to flop to the ground and smother us completely. But Cait and I kept rolling and we spun free from its reach.

"Ya!" Alex's voice echoed above us. He was standing on a set of drawers and now launched himself into the air. With a sound like a beaten carpet, he thumped on to the creature's back. It crumpled under his weight, its top half pinned to the floor while its other half billowed like a sheet in the wind.

"Quick." Alex flung both arms wide, holding the quilt down. "Where's the bag?"

The bag was big enough to be a tent, and made of clear, heavy plastic. Mum used it for spare futons and winter clothes, but that was obviously a waste. A bag this big and strong was destined for greater things….

Only…where was the bag?

I was supposed to have it in my hand.

The quilt monster reared. It looked like its bottom became its top, and its top became its bottom, but since it didn't have a head, it was hard to tell. The result was that even though Alex had half of it pinned to the ground, the other half was looming above him. If it attacked he would be just seconds away from suffocation, trapped and twisted in its folds, never to escape.

Where was the bag?

Cait leapt up and ran at the quilt. She smashed into the moving wall of fabric, crashing with it to the ground. Then she rolled on top of it, struggling as it writhed beneath her.

The plastic bag. Where was the bag?

I must have dropped it when Cait and I fell through the door.

I looked around at the chaos of Alex's room and my heart skipped a beat. In my room it would have

taken five seconds to find anything, especially a bag that enormous. But this wasn't my room. It was more like an uncharted ocean.

The floor of Alex's room was awash with dirty clothes and wet towels and old shoes. It even smelled like old shoes. How could one person have so many shoes?

"Hurry, Miku," gasped Cait. "We can't hold it much longer."

Cait and Alex had the quilt pinned at both ends, but now its middle was billowing, threatening to roll both of them off. Alex was being tossed back and forth like rain on windscreen wipers, but still he hung on.

I fell to my knees to sift through the dirty clothes. The bag had to be somewhere. Then I saw something, just a corner of plastic. It was trapped under Cait and Alex and the writhing baby blue quilt. I looked again at the bizarre, caramel blobs. They really were teddy bears.

"Teddy bears?" I gaped. "You have teddy bears on your quilt?"

"Forget the bears," Alex gasped, his face bright red. "Where's the bag?"

"Under the quilt. We'll have to roll it. Just half a roll, towards the bed. Ready?"



Cait and Alex nodded and I dived in to help them, grabbing a handful of thick, patterned fabric in my hands.

"Now!" I yelled, and together we heaved, forcing the quilt on to its back. The bag came free and I grabbed it, loving the feel of tough plastic between my fingers. "Got it! Let's pack!"

Cait swung round, grabbing an armful of the struggling fabric. I opened the bag and together we strained and shoved and stuffed, forcing the quilt inside. With each handful, I could feel phantom muscles pulsing, seams drawn tight as cords while it twisted and heaved to get away. The bag was a strong one, but I wasn't sure it had ever been used to imprison a quilt spirit before. Especially one that was fighting all the way.

Alex joined us and together we shoved and wrestled until just one corner of the quilt remained free. It wrung itself in and out like an old sheet, flapping like a bird. I could see its pattern clearly. Definitely teddy bears.

Alex saw me looking and shoved the last corner inside the bag, forcing the zip closed. From the outside, it looked like an ordinary futon bag, stuffed to the brim with an old and very dirty quilt. A quilt

covered in teddy bear pictures. I could have laughed if I wasn't breathing so hard.

The others were puffing too. I stood up and dusted my hands, as if the mess of Alex's room might disappear once my hands were clean. "That was close."

Cait grinned, flopping down on Alex's unmade bed. She didn't seem worried about the mess. "Yikes," she said, blinking at the ceiling.

Alex shrugged. "It was fine. We had it under control."

"It was strong," I said. "When was the last time you washed it?"

Alex shrugged.

Cait sat up. "Serious," she said. "When?"

He shrugged again. "I didn't know you had to wash them."

"That is so gross." Cait made a face.

"Doesn't your mum hassle you?" My own mum made me bring all my bed sheets to the laundry every week and she aired my quilt on sunny days. In Japan, she used to beat our futons with a bamboo stick, so the dust and dirt would fly out and fresh air and sunshine could come in.

"Mum's not allowed in here," Alex said, pointing

at the NO GIRLS sign on his door.

"Didn't you think it was weird?"

"What?"

"Your quilt trying to kill you."

Alex nudged the bag with a foot. "It wasn't like that all the time."

Cait skipped off the bed to inspect the bulging bag. "Can it breathe?"

"It's only a quilt," I said. "It doesn't have lungs."

"What do we do with it now?" Alex asked. "Do I have to keep it in my cupboard for the rest of my life?"

"You have to stick it in the washing machine," I said. "It doesn't like being washed, or being clean."

"Won't it be angry?" Alex didn't look too happy about being washed or clean either.

"It'll leave," I explained. "It can't live in a clean quilt."

"But where will it go?"

"To someone else's quilt."

"It won't come back?"

"It might. Just keep your quilt clean, and your eyes open. If your quilt ever moves in the night, or it seems to hug you extra tight, then that's your warning. It's cleaning time again."

Alex gulped. “Oh, man. I don’t even know how to use the machine.”

“That’s easy,” Cait said, jumping up. “I’ll show you.”

Cait and Alex each grabbed one end of the futon bag and carted it out of the door.

“Hang on.” Alex stopped in the hallway and looked right at me. I thought he might have been going to say thanks for saving his life. Instead he pointed. “You!” he ordered. “Out. Didn’t you read the sign?”

Chapter Two



I could hear the steady hum of Alex’s washing machine, tumbling and churning as it washed the quilt spirit away. We were in Alex’s kitchen, celebrating a successful mission with a bottle of lemonade and Alex’s mum’s home-made cookies, straight from the jar.

“Mum won’t mind,” Alex insisted, shovelling a cookie into his mouth. “If she did, she would have hidden the jar.” Then he sucked down an entire glass of lemonade with his straw.

Alex was part of our team now, and the quilt spirit in his bedroom was just the latest of our worries. Every day we walked to school with our eyes peeled for anything strange. We talked to our neighbours and checked the newspapers for unusual stories, and the last few months had been madness. There had been

weird noises, Oscar's talking shoes, a fire-breathing chicken in the school letterbox.

It all pointed to one thing: demons. And they were unusually busy. Too busy, if you asked me.

"The fruit-pickers are on strike again," Cait said, poring over that morning's newspaper.

"Who's haunting them this time?" Alex asked, looking up from his lemonade to strike a karate pose. Lately he had been obsessed with karate. He seemed to think it was a compulsory skill for demon hunters and kept teaching himself new moves from the Internet.

I didn't know any karate, but I knew other things. Important things, from the stories my baba used to tell me.

"Talking fruit," said Cait, still reading from the paper. "In the shape of human heads, and apparently…"

I was only half-listening, nibbling on the chocolate chips in my cookie as I tried to work it out. According to Baba, we had always shared our lives with monsters and demons. They lived all around us, she said, most of them staying just out of sight. As a kid I would search in cupboards or hide under my bed, hoping that one day I might meet a demon or fight a monster.

I thought it was a game. But it wasn't. Back then it was *han-shin, han-gi*, a kind of half-belief, half-doubt, like knowing that there's no such thing as ghosts, but still trembling when something goes bump in the night.

"And here." Cait stabbed at the paper. "A man dressed only in mud was taken to hospital last night with injuries to one eye. Witnesses say he was gone by morning, leaving a pile of dirt on his pillow…"

Mud men. Head-shaped fruit. Demons who should have been minding their own business were showing up all over the place. There were noppera-bō in Hawaii. Tanuki sightings in Paris. Even sea-monsters on tour of the Scottish lochs. Most of them appeared to be harmless, just tourists really. But not all demons could be washed away with detergent and sunshine.

Since Baba died, the borders between our worlds had been changing. Our supply teacher had tried to eat us, our school camp had been a demonic trap, and now Alex shared his bathroom with a Filth Licker and his bedroom with a quilt spirit.

"It was never like this before," I said.

"That's for sure." Cait flicked through the newspaper. "You know, I blame you." She grinned.