



## A MAP TO THE STARS

I've always wanted to be a Star Hunter.

Everyone else calls them astronomers, but I think 'Star Hunter' sounds much better, so that's what I'm going to call myself. But I'm not going to be the kind of star hunter that looks for old stars. I want to find the brand new ones – the ones that have only just been born and are searching for the people they've left behind. I read in a library book once that stars can burn for millions and billions and even trillions of years. I hope that's true, because there's one star I don't ever want to stop burning. I don't know where it is yet, but I know it's out there, waiting for me to find it.

Back in my real house where I lived with Mum and Dad, I had three whole shelves of books in my bedroom,

and at least half of them were all about stars and space travel. The walls and ceiling were covered with posters and glow-in-the-dark stars that I'd begged Mum and Dad to get me. But the best thing in my room was my special star globe which sat right next to my bed. From far away, it looked like a globe of the world – but it wasn't. It was a globe of the night sky, and instead of countries and oceans, it lit up with all the different star constellations you could ever think of. There was a different constellation every time you switched it on, and I knew all of them off by heart. That's why new stars will be easy for me to spot when I'm a star hunter – if you know a picture off by heart, it's easy to tell when something about it is different.

I wish Mum hadn't forgotten to pack the star globe. Sometimes I miss it so much that I wonder if I'll ever stop missing it. I miss it even more now that Noah and me have had to move to the strange new place we're living in right now.

We've been here for two days, and even though the house is much nicer than the last one we had to hide in with Mum, I'm not sure I like it here. It's full of creepy noises. Like floorboards creaking when there's no one

there, invisible things tapping on the window at night as if they're trying to get in and tiny squeaks and scratchings coming from behind the walls. My little brother Noah thinks the house is haunted – he gets so scared at bedtime that I have to make him lie down with his head under the covers and I hug him tight until he falls asleep. Noah's only five. It's OK for a five year old to be scared of ghosts, but it's silly for a ten year old to believe in them, so I won't. No matter how much the noises make me want to hide under the covers with him.

But it's not just the noises that make this house feel strange. It's the people in it, too.

There's a boy called Travis who doesn't speak. He's eleven, tall and skinny, and looks like an elastic band that's been stretched too far. His teeth stick out from under his lips because of the big silver braces on them – his mouth looks like a builder has tried to squeeze lots of bits of metal scaffolding inside and didn't know when to stop. Most of the time he just stares at me with his huge grey-brown eyes that stick out like ping-pong balls. I don't like people staring at me. My cheeks turn bright red and it makes me feel like running away. But he keeps doing it, even when I stare back at him.

Then there's Ben, who has huge, fluffy black hair that looks like it's been put on his head by a giant ice-cream scoop. He's ten years old like me, with bright brown eyes that look like they're asking you a million questions, and a shiny round pimple on his left cheek that he keeps poking when he thinks no one is looking. He always wears a Newcastle United hooded jumper the wrong way around, and eats popcorn and crisps from inside the hood as if it's a bowl. Ben says strange things and asks me lots of questions – as if he's a detective on a TV show and I'm a criminal. Questions like, 'Hey! Why are you here?' and, 'Do you guys need to get adopted too?' and, 'Holy big-fat-goalie, Aniyah! Don't you like fish fingers? Can I have them instead then?' I hate being asked questions almost as much as I hate being stared at – especially when I don't know the answers and my voice isn't working. So whenever he asks me anything, I just look at the floor and shrug.

Finally, there's Sophie. Sophie's thirteen which makes her the oldest out of all of us, but she's still shorter than Travis. Sophie has long, straight, bright red hair and exactly twenty-seven brown freckles across her nose.

I counted them as soon as I met her, because I like freckles. I think freckles and stars look nearly the same – all tiny and fiery – and it’s fun to see what shapes you can make out of them. I wish I had freckles, but I don’t. Not even a single one. If Sophie and me were friends, I’d tell her that her freckles make the shape of a blue whale or a ship with three sails, depending on which way you connected them. But Sophie doesn’t like me or Noah so I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to tell her that. I know she doesn’t like us because whenever Mrs Iwuchukwu isn’t looking, she gives us lots of I-Hate-You stares, and narrows her eyes and grits her teeth. Getting one of those stares always makes my hands and feet go ice-cold.

Mrs Iwuchukwu is the woman who owns the house we’re all living in, and is one of the strangest grown-ups I’ve ever met. She wears lots and lots of necklaces and beads and bracelets so that whenever she moves, she makes clunking noises like marbles moving inside a bag. She also smiles so much that I think her cheeks must hurt all the time. I’ve never seen anyone smile as much as she does. Most of the time I have to look around to see what she’s smiling at, because usually you need a reason to smile. But Mrs Iwuchukwu doesn’t

seem to need one. When I first met her, I thought she was Ben's mum, because they have the same kind of hair, all big and bouncy, and the exact same colour skin. She has bright pink, shiny lips and wears lots of glitter around her dark brown eyes and her accent makes her sound as if she's half-singing and half-telling you off. I don't know if me and Noah like Mrs Iwuchukwu yet. But we have to try, and we have to try to make her like us too because she's the only one who can keep us together now that everyone else has disappeared. That's what a foster mum does – they keep kids like me and Noah together when their mums and dads have disappeared.

I never knew what a foster mum was until two nights ago. I had a real mum until then, so I guess I never needed to know. But when Mum left, a tall woman in a black suit and two policemen came and said we had to go to a foster home so that we could meet our new foster mum. I didn't like the sound of a 'foster' anything – they sound like pretend things, things that try to make you believe they're yours when they're not. Noah didn't like the sound of them either and began to cry and scream and hiccup straightaway.

Noah only ever hiccups or cries when he gets really scared. Mum said it was my lifelong job to look after him, so when he started crying and hiccuping in front of the policemen and the woman in the suit, I tried to tell him with my eyes not to be scared because I was there to protect him. But I don't think he saw my eye-words because he cried and hiccupped the whole time we were sitting in the back of the police car, and then all through the night too. I wish I could have said nice things to him with my real words instead of just invisible ones, but my voice vanished when I heard Mum leaving us, and it still hasn't come back yet. I think it will come back just as soon as I find out where Mum is for sure.

That's why I can't wait until I'm a grown-up to become a star hunter – I have to become one right away so I can find out which part of the sky Mum is in now. Every star in the sky has a name and a story, and extra-super-special stars become part of a constellation and part of an even bigger story. I know, because Mum explained the truth about stars to me properly after we watched *The Lion King* together.

*The Lion King* is my most favourite cartoon film of all time. Mum let me and Noah watch it whenever Dad

came home from work and needed to move furniture around the house. Mum would wink and lock the door, and pointing the remote control at the telly, say, 'Let's drown out the world, shall we?' Sometimes Dad would bang on the door and call for her and she would have to leave us alone but we didn't mind watching it on our own too. Noah loved Pumbaa and Timon the best and always giggled and danced whenever they came on.

But my most favourite bit is when Simba's dad tells him that all the great lion kings of the past are looking down from the stars above and that because of them, he doesn't ever have to feel alone. When I heard Simba's dad say that the very first time, I asked Mum if it was only kings that could become stars. It didn't seem fair that queens couldn't become stars too, and what happened if you didn't know anyone who was a king or queen in the first place? Did you have to be left all alone? Mum had frowned and looked down at me with her chocolatey-brown eyes. Then, after thinking about my question for a bit, she said that of course queens became stars too. And not only that, ordinary people who had extra-bright hearts sometimes went on to become the biggest stars in the sky – even bigger than



the stars of the kings and queens! So everyone was bound to know at least one of the stars looking down on them.

I'm glad she told me that. Because if she hadn't, I wouldn't ever have known what the noise meant, when I heard Mum leave us to go and turn into a star.

As soon as Noah falls asleep and his arms go floppy enough to let go of me, I'm going to make a map of all the stars I can see from our window. I'll work on it every night until I've found all the new stars in the sky. I've got to try and find the brightest, newest star there is, because that one will be Mum's. I'll know it's hers when I see it, because Mum had the biggest, brightest heart out of anyone I ever knew. And people with the biggest, brightest hearts never end up in the ground. They end up in the sky.