FRANKIE GOES WILD
It was sunset and the sky was zombie goldfish orange. I flipped open the lid of the water canteen hanging around my neck and whispered, ‘Look, Frankie, it’s your colour.’

Frankie, my pet zombie goldfish, peered out of the canteen and snatched a quick peek at the sky. Then he swished his tail and went back to swimming in tiny circles. He was not impressed.

The next thing I knew, I face-planted into the mud on the trail as I tripped over my stupidly long bootlaces for about the fifth time today. I wasn’t impressed with this ‘weekend trip’ either.

‘I think I’ve changed my mind about wanting
to go camping,’ I huffed as I wiped the mud off my chin.

Frankie thrashed a fin as if he was saying, ‘Yeah, right, sure. Now you tell me.’ When did Frankie learn how to be sarcastic in fin sign language?

‘Cheer up, Tom,’ Pradeep said as he held out his hand to pull me back up. ‘It’s gonna be the best weekend ever. I can’t believe you nearly didn’t come!’

‘Yeah . . .’ I began, snapping shut the lid of the canteen. I thought about how I’d tried to back out of the trip, but Mum said that I needed some fresh air so I was going and that was that. Then I looked at Pradeep’s super-excited face. ‘It’ll be great,’ I said, and forced out a smile.

‘I’m still not really sure why you brought Frankie though,’ Pradeep whispered.

‘I had to,’ I sighed. ‘Mum said that she was going to do a mega-spring clean. What if Frankie thought the Hoover was trying to attack him again and went all zombie-thrash-fish in front of Mum? I couldn’t risk it!’

‘Listen up, campers!’ the group leader shouted. ‘There’s a fork in the path ahead. Can anyone use their wilderness skills to work out which way to head?’

‘Past the knife and spoon,’ I yelled, and giggled at my own joke.

No one else laughed. If there was tumbleweed in the woods, it would have blown past me at that exact moment.

Then Pradeep spoke up. ‘Wind blowing westerly. And it’s blowing the campfire smoke towards us, so the camp must be due west.’

‘Good work, camper,’ the leader shouted back.

‘Let’s get moving then.’

Pradeep took his camping very seriously and he was good at it. He’d been camping with the Cubs lots of times. He knew how to read a map
and use a compass. He could make a tent out of a sheet and a couple of sticks, and it would stay up all night too!

‘I told you this camping trip was going to be epic!’ said Pradeep, as we started walking again. ‘Meeting Sam Savage from Savage Safari AND Grizzly Cook! It’s going to be BRILLIANT!’

I had just started to feel the beginnings of a corner of a real smile creep across my face when all the wind was knocked out of me as I was hoicked up by my rucksack and dangled above the grass.

⚠️

CHAPTER 2

HAPPY ZOMBIE TRAILS

‘Right, morons,’ said Mark, my Evil Scientist big brother, as he grabbed me and Pradeep and pulled us out of earshot of the other kids. ‘This weekend, I don’t know you and you don’t know me.’ He glared at us. ‘You look at me, you talk to me, you even say my name, and I will pound you into the ground so far that they’ll need a digger to get you out? Got it?’

‘Got it!’ Pradeep and I gulped at the same time. Mark let go of our rucksacks and our feet sank back into the mud. Then he strode off towards the front of the line.

At that moment, my canteen flung itself over
my neck and started bouncing around on the ground. Frankie must have heard Mark’s voice and gone all zombie mega-thrash fish. Frankie has held a grudge against Mark ever since he tried to murder him with his Evil Scientist toxic gunge and then flush him. Luckily Pradeep and I shocked Frankie back to life with a battery, and he’s been our zombified fishy friend ever since.

I walked over and picked up the furiously bouncing canteen. ‘It’s OK, Mark’s gone now, Frankie,’ I whispered, popping open the lid.

‘Hey, that kid who keeps falling over at the back of the line is talking to his water canteen again,’ one of the other campers shouted.

‘Maybe he’s just talking to the “medical alert” kid,’ another kid suggested, laughing.

‘It’s not like anyone else would talk to them,’ I heard Mark yell as he strode to the front of the line.

Pradeep looked down at his trekking boots.

See, when all the mums and dads were saying goodbye in the car park a couple of miles back, they were all pretty embarrassing . . . but Pradeep’s mum probably managed to break the Most Embarrassing Parent EVER world record. First she kissed Pradeep on the head and hugged him until his eyes almost popped out, right in front of all the other campers. Then she looped a huge plastic wallet with his permission slips, emergency contact numbers and huge medicines list around his neck. He looked like one of those kids being shipped off on a train somewhere in the Second World War!
Worst of all, she practically yelled, ‘Right, my little soldier, I have packed the motion-sickness tablets and the sick bags, the diarrhoea medicine (as you know how campfire cooking gives you a funny tummy), the insect repellent, the suncream, the bee-sting lotion, the hayfever tablets, the calamine lotion, and twelve extra pairs of socks. You can never have too many clean pairs of socks.’

Pradeep of course whipped off the plastic wallet as soon as his mum was out of sight. But it was too late. Everyone had seen it.

I slung Frankie’s canteen back around my neck and pulled a squashed peanut-butter sandwich from my pocket. I took a bite and passed Pradeep the rest. ‘Mmmo mkeep mmoo mgoooming,’ I mumbled through my peanut-butter-filled mouth.

‘To keep me going? Thanks,’ Pradeep said, easily translating my peanut-butter mumble.

That little energy boost gave Pradeep what my gran would call a spring in his step. His feet easily found the places in the path without stones or roots sticking up. He didn’t even have to look down. I trudged along and tried to put my trainers in his footprints so I didn’t fall over again.

That was when the mosquito got me right on the neck. I turned and swatted it with my hand, and immediately banged into Pradeep, who I hadn’t noticed had stopped dead in his tracks.

‘Sorry!’ I began. ‘I was just squashing a pterodactyl-sized mosquito that chomped me—’
‘Shhhhhh,’ he whispered.
The other campers were a good twenty paces ahead of us now.
Then I heard a rustling off to our left.
‘What was that?’ Pradeep said.

I turned towards the sound.
Frankie’s eyes started to glow bright green as he peered out of the top of the canteen.
His zombie fish senses must have told him something wasn’t right.

Then we heard the rustling again. It was closer this time.
Pradeep and I both instantly shot each other a look that said, ‘Whatever it is, I don’t want to find out right now!’

I got a spring in my own step after that, for sure. Drops of water sloshed from Frankie’s canteen as we ran to catch up with the other