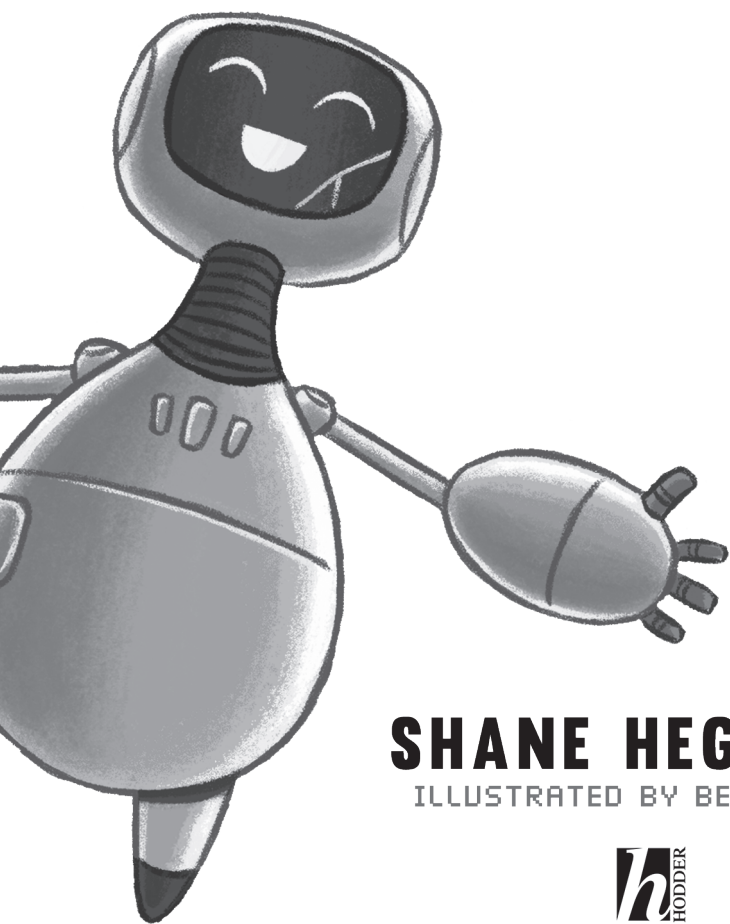


BOOT

SMALL ROBOT

BIG ADVENTURE



SHANE HEGARTY

ILLUSTRATED BY BEN MANTLE

h
HODDER

THE ONLY THINGS I REMEMBER

I woke up with only two-and-a-half memories.

Something was very wrong. I should have remembered so much more. My head is built to hold millions of memories, and I also have extra space in my left butt-cheek, in case of emergencies.

The first memory is fifteen seconds long. A young girl pulls wrapping paper away from my face. She shrieks happily and her eyes twinkle brightly. The girl has dark hair tied up in a bun and a smile so wide it almost reaches her ears.

Dangling from the girl's neck is a butterfly pendant with sixteen tiny green, red, yellow and blue jewels dazzling in its wings.

This girl is the very first person I remember seeing.

“A toy robot! Thank you, Grandma!” the girl screams in delight.

Behind her is a smiling woman with white hair, standing beside balloons that read ‘Happy 7th Birthday!’ She must be ‘Grandma’.

“I thought, what better present for my cute, cuddly Beth than a cute, cuddly robot,” says Grandma.

That’s how I know the girl’s name is Beth.

“Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou thankyou!” says Beth.

I see my reflection in a mirror. I am a little shorter than Beth. My body is silver-green and shaped like a light bulb, with my belly round and tough, yet still soft to touch or hug. I waggle the four chunky fingers on my hands. I do not waggle my toes because I don’t have toes, just egg-shaped legs.

“Oh, look at its face!” says Beth. “I love it!”

My head is a wide oval, with a smooth screen

curving along the front of it. On the screen, tiny dots of colourful light flow together and make a cartoon human face.



When I imagine myself smiling, bright blue eyes and a warm orange smile appear on the screen.

Beth and her grandma laugh and laugh and laugh and—

That memory ends.

The second memory is shorter than the first, only seven seconds long. Beth is in this one too, but she's quite a bit taller than me now, and her hair a little longer. Again she wears the butterfly pendant, but this time one of the jewels has been lost from a wing. It means this memory must take place later than the first.

She is giggling at me because, for some reason, I am wearing a flowerpot as a hat – with the flowers still in it. I also have a multicoloured hula-hoop around my waist and a purple dog-shaped balloon rising from a string tied to one of my fingers.

Beth is laughing so hard I wonder if she will burst.

Thankfully, Beth doesn't burst. She just keeps laughing until this memory ends.

Then there is the last memory. The half-memory.

This one doesn't work properly. It's glitchy and jumpy and lasts just 5.824 seconds.

Beth is much taller than before. Her face looks older. A lot of time must have passed since the memory where I had a flowerpot as a hat.

She's not laughing.

But she still wears the butterfly pendant around her neck. I can see it poking out from the collar of her heavy grey coat.

We are outside on a street. There's a large sign on the wall behind Beth – an orange circle with a white, sideways triangle inside it.

I can hear water rushing loudly somewhere nearby.

GLITZCH. JUMP. Beth bends down to me. Tears are pooling in her eyes.

PHITZP. JUMP. Weak daylight glints off the butterfly pendant. There are three tiny hollows

where the jewels have fallen out. Only thirteen left.

SFIPZ. JUMP. Beth says one word, "... love ..."

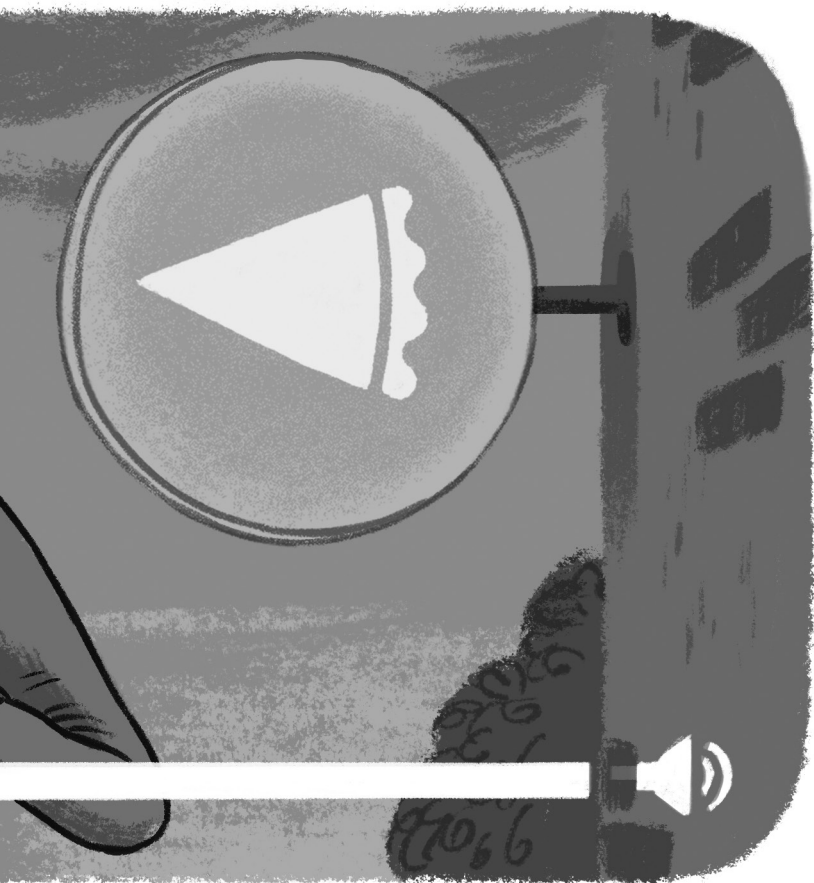
The memory freezes.

And I remember nothing else. Maybe I was switched off. Maybe I stopped working properly.



I don't know how long I was like this for. All I know is that when I turned back on again, I said one word, "Boot."

And I found myself rolling and tumbling in a great wave of rubbish towards the smashing jaws of a massive, metal-munching grinding machine.



BOOT

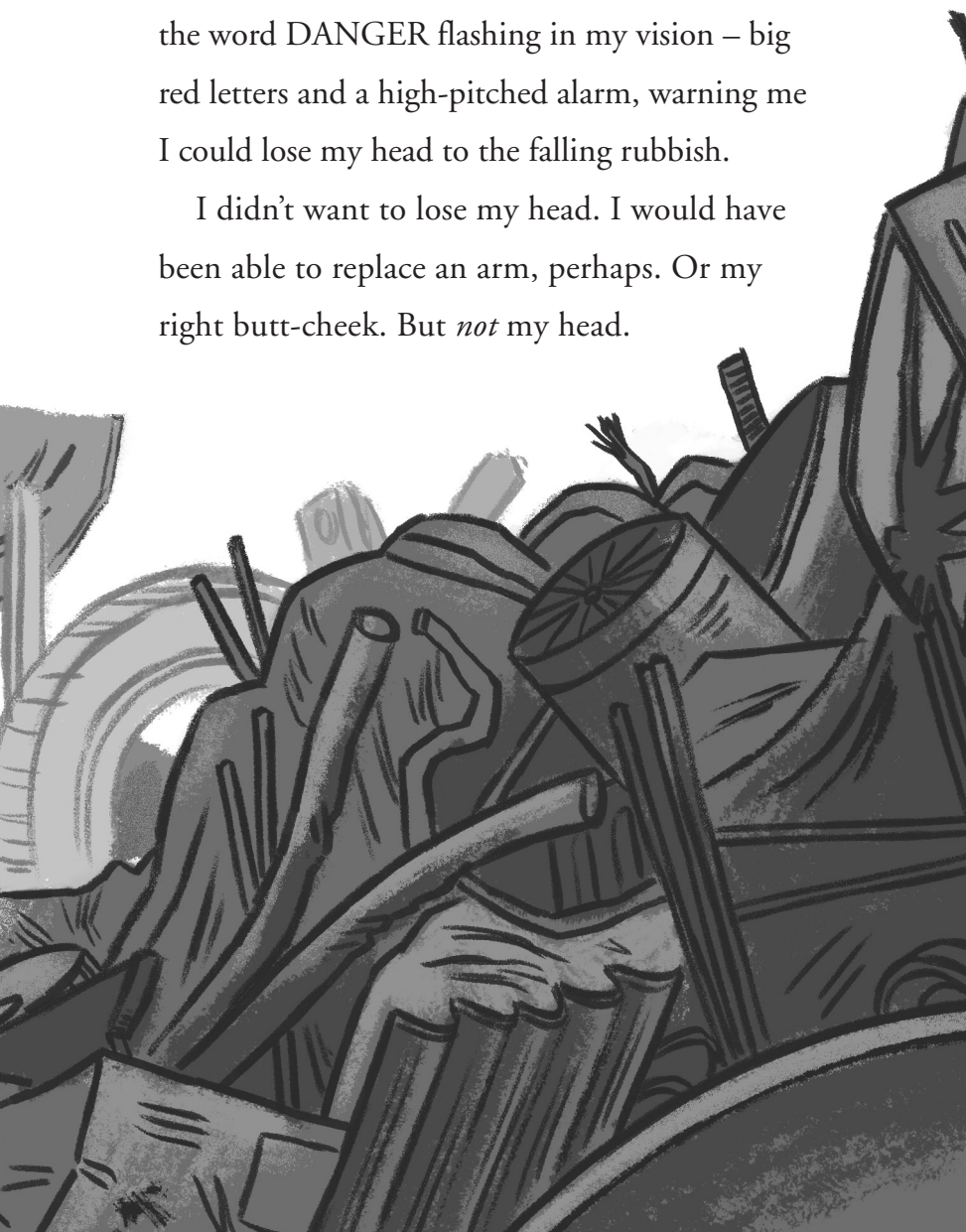
A car licence plate struck me on the forehead with a *ting*.

A large tractor tyre smashed down a centimetre in front of my face, almost taking off my head. It bounced onwards, exploding as it was bitten by the grinder's huge, metal teeth.



I was fifteen metres away and sliding fast. I knew danger when I saw it. That's because I actually saw the word DANGER flashing in my vision – big red letters and a high-pitched alarm, warning me I could lose my head to the falling rubbish.

I didn't want to lose my head. I would have been able to replace an arm, perhaps. Or my right butt-cheek. But *not* my head.



DANGER.

Ten metres to the grinder, which was turning even the thickest chunks of steel into metal crumbs.

I was a robot. I knew I should use my sophisticated computer brain to assess the situation, calculate an escape route and put my plan into action without delay.

But I didn't. Instead I flapped my arms about while bumping and rolling down the slope, unable to find a grip on the ground.

Why did I do this? Is this what you humans call 'panic'?

I didn't like it.

DANGER DANGER.

A falling toaster hit my body.

The drawer in my left hip popped open and something sparkly fell out and away, snagging itself on the edge of a cracked plastic play kitchen that was sliding down the slope beside me.

It was Beth's butterfly pendant! Its little jewels glinted, their colours bright against the grime of the rubbish. There were only twelve jewels in it now.

**DANGER DANGER
DANGER.**

Only five metres to the grinder, and destruction.

Beth had lost her butterfly pendant,
I realised.

She had lost me.

"... love ..." she had said in my memory. I didn't know how or why, but I was certain that word was very powerful for humans.

Seeing the pendant and thinking of Beth must have activated my cool, calm programming again, because I suddenly knew what to do.

I had to escape. I had to return the pendant to Beth. Bring *myself* home to her.

**DANGER DANGER
DANGER DANGER.**

A long metal spike tumbled high through the

air, stabbing itself into the bare dirt ground at the mouth of the grinder.

I had one chance at escape. I calculated the angle, the speed of the fall and – most importantly – how much it would matter to Beth if I saved her pendant.

Leaping towards the spike, I hooked my fingers around it and swung around to grab the pendant, just before the play kitchen was eaten up with a horrible,

splintering **CRACK**.



I'd made it! But I was not safe yet.

I put the pendant back in my drawer and slammed it shut, then scanned the rest of the rubbish tumbling into the grinder. I spotted another metal pole, one that humans use for skiing. I leaned down and grabbed it just in time, then stuck it into a smudge of soft ground further above me.

Sticking the spike and the pole, one at a time, into the ground, I slowly worked my way back up the slope, through the avalanche of rubbish.

A hurtling suitcase clipped my shoulder and

I almost slid down again, but I

tightened my grip and

managed to keep

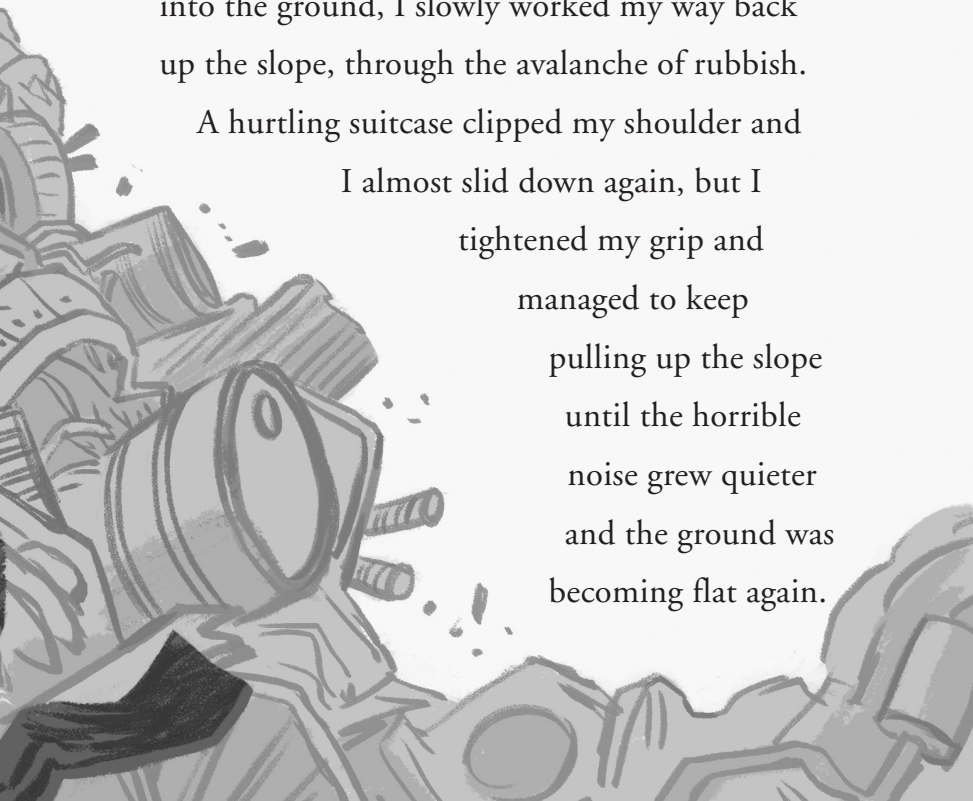
pulling up the slope

until the horrible

noise grew quieter

and the ground was

becoming flat again.



Nearing the top of the slope, I saw the back of a truck open and release another load of rubbish.

I clung on tight while this new wave of debris rolled towards the grinder.

A football bounced over me. A filthy doll flopped by. A rusty tricycle wheeled down the slope as if it was being ridden by an invisible child.

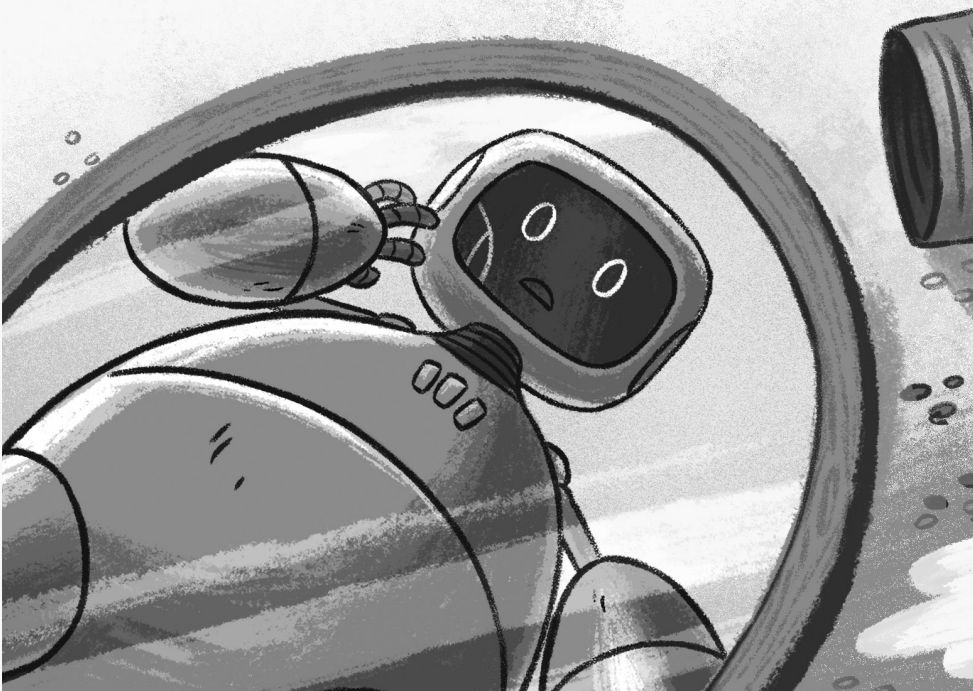
I held on until everything passed and DANGER stopped flashing in my vision. The high-pitched alarm in my head ceased. It was now so quiet I could hear the whirring of my brain as it tried to figure out why I was here and what I should do now.

The truck was rumbling away from me down the road. I wondered if it was driven by a human. Because of Beth and her grandma, I knew humans were good. If I could find one, they'd realise I'd been tipped into the grinder by mistake and would help me find Beth.

I followed the truck.

In the breeze, loose items trickled from the mounds of waste that towered either side of the road. A round mirror rolled across the ground and spun to a stop in front of me.

I stood over it. My silver-green body was grubby, and there were smears of dirt across the curved screen that made up my face. I wiped it clean and revealed a thin crack down the part of my screen that you humans would call your cheek. In my memories, I saw no crack and I didn't know how it had got there.



My orange smile turned blue and upside down.

All I *did* know was that I only had two-and-a-half memories, I was lost, and one word kept going around and around in my brain.

Boot.

Boot.

“Boot,” I said to a rat that was chewing through some loose wires in the fallen rubbish.

The rat didn’t answer me.

“Boot,” I said again, louder this time.

Boot.

Then I realised what it must mean – why it was the first word I said aloud.

‘Boot’ was my name.

I AM NOT A BISCUIT

At the end of the road, beside where the truck had parked, I could see a hut. A pair of muddy shoes sat on its doorstep. Someone must be inside.

I swivelled my body towards the hut. I whistled a happy tune as I walked.

Confused, I stopped. I hadn't meant to whistle a happy tune.

I walked again. I whistled again.

Worse, I skipped and clicked my heels together.

Something was wrong with me. My body was doing things I wasn't telling it to do. I had to concentrate hard just to walk without whistling or clicking my heels together.

Nearing the hut, I asked myself some questions.



Why did I remember almost nothing about my life?

How could I find Beth using just two-and-a-half memories?

And when I was falling into the grinder, why had I panicked like a human when I should have been calm and calculated like a robot?

I knew I was a robot, just like I knew the rat was a rat. And the tyre was a tyre. All that information was in my head, put there before I had arrived at Beth's home.

It's the same way you humans just *know* you are humans. At least, I think that's how it is. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you sometimes wake up in the morning and leap from your bed, shocked to discover you're not a chocolate biscuit.

I climbed the steps to the hut, drew an orange smile on my face and stretched to reach the handle. I swung in through the door, ready to say

a big, friendly ‘hello’ to whoever was inside.

“Pineapples!” I announced.

I did *not* mean to say pineapples.

A man sitting behind a desk inside the hut got such a fright he toppled backwards off his chair with a **THUD**.



The hut was filled with pieces of electronics – old and broken radios, televisions, fans – piled so high that they blocked most of the light coming in from the small window.

An upside-down drone was on the desk, a faded skull and crossbones printed on its underside, wires exposed and propellers put aside, like it was being fixed.

The rest of the desk was covered in old crumpled food containers and soft-drinks cans. A half-eaten burger sat in its wrapping.

The man squashed the burger with his palm as he grabbed the desk to help himself up. He had wiry white hair under a lopsided baseball cap with *Krush 'em Kwik* emblazoned across it. His grey stubble was patchy, his nose red, and his skin looked as worn out as the paint peeling off the walls of his old hut.

On his grubby boilersuit, a faded badge read HI, MY NAME IS FLINT.

Flint looked a bit broken, just like me.

I wanted to say sorry, to tell him I was lost and ask how I had ended up here, but my words were all mixed up.

“Freckles! I am so freckles,” I said instead.

He glared at me, with one eye more open than the other. He was missing two teeth and had chipped three more. Half-chewed burger meat was lodged inside one cheek.

“You crazy little bag of bolts, how did you get in here?” Flint scowled, wiping burger mush across his uniform. “Did you escape the grinder?”

Flint did not look friendly and he was talking about me like I was just another piece of rubbish. But I was not rubbish and I was sure Flint would understand there had been a mistake if I explained everything to him, so I tried to say, “I need help.”

Instead, I said, “I weed kittens.”



It was no use. I couldn't make my voice say the words my brain wanted it to.

Maybe I could *show* Flint my problem instead. I drew a cartoon butterfly on my screen and made it flutter across my face, then opened the drawer at my waist to show Flint the pendant. He pushed my hand away before I could take it out.

"I don't have time to talk to a walking toaster," he said, one eye opening wider while the other one narrowed, like he was trying to see inside my circuits. "Almost all my pals have lost their jobs to robots, and if I let a little blob of rust like you walk away from this scrapyard then my boss will finally find an excuse to replace me too. That ain't gonna happen."

He was not a happy human. He was an angry human. I guessed this because his teeth were clenched and his voice was getting louder, while his finger jabbed at me.

"Thirty-three years I've been at *Krush 'em*

Kwik and tearing robots apart is my favourite bit of the job,” he said.

I felt like someone was twisting every wire in my tummy. This must be what it feels like to be scared.

Why was I having these feelings at all? I was a robot. Robots aren't supposed to feel.

But I didn't have time to think about this now.

Flint walked towards me, forcing me to reverse and bump against a table. A microwave crashed to the floor.

In among the piles of electronics were other things. Robot arms. Robot legs. Robot *heads*. Flint must have been taking robots apart like he was doing with that drone on his desk.

My face shook. That must be the fear again. I wanted to be cool and calm and more like the robot I was supposed to be, but I didn't know how to stop the fear from showing.

“You're just a machine, so stop trying to make

me feel sorry for you,” said Flint, picking up a baseball bat and tapping the wall beside my head menacingly.

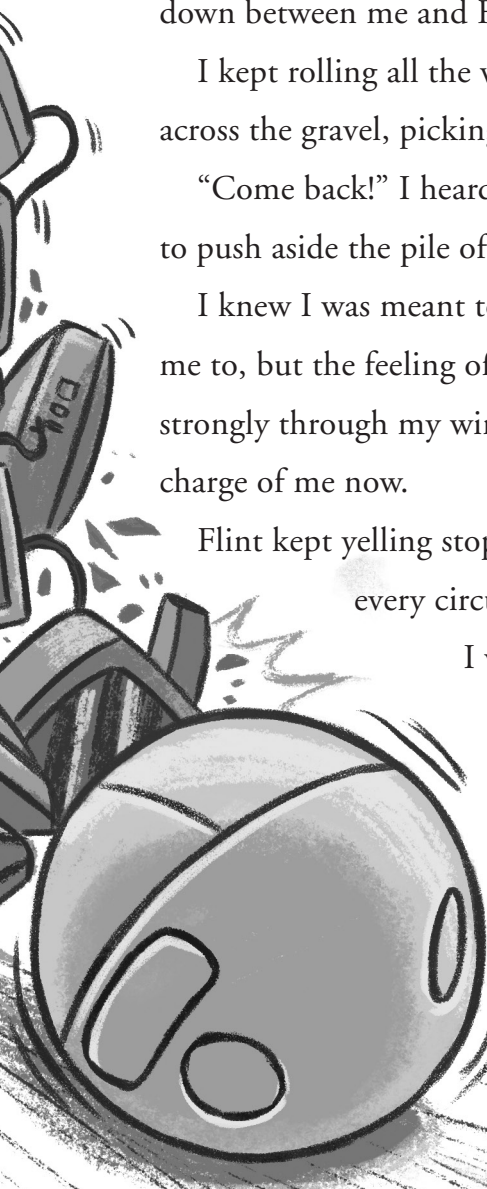
DANGER flashed in my vision again.

“I am cakes – underpants – *lost*,” I finally said, dodging under Flint’s baseball bat and looking towards the open door out of the hut.

“You’d better believe you’re lost. Now stand still while I make sure you don’t get found again,” said Flint, jabbing at me with the bat.

Without even knowing I could do it, I dropped to the floor, curled into a





ball and rolled away. I bashed against the broken electronics, causing a tower of televisions to crash down between me and Flint.

I kept rolling all the way out the door and across the gravel, picking up speed.

“Come back!” I heard Flint shout as he tried to push aside the pile of TVs. “I’m ordering you!”

I knew I was meant to do what humans told me to, but the feeling of fear was buzzing so strongly through my wires, it was like *that* was in charge of me now.

Flint kept yelling stop, but every part of me – every circuit, every screw – said

I was not safe yet. I just rolled and rolled until I rolled into the scrapyard’s fence.

I popped my head up and saw a small gap in the chains.

So I curled up again and rolled through that.

“When I catch you again, I’ll tear you into strips of metal spaghetti!” I heard Flint shout from the hut, still trapped inside.

Many thoughts were whizzing through my head. Why was this man being so horrible? Maybe he was angry because he was sad? Did he not have a robot friend when *he* was a boy?

Seventy-three seconds passed before DANGER stopped flashing in my vision. I calculated that it would be safe to unfurl now and see exactly where I had ended up.

I was on a wide and quiet road leading away from the scrapyard. I started running into the unknown, as fast as I could. Even though I was very, very scared, I was still whistling that happy tune as I ran.

I didn’t know where I was running to. I just knew I had to find my way to somewhere safe.

I had to find a way home to Beth.

SITUATION: TERRIBLE

You humans have no idea how easy it is for you to run.

You've got legs and heads and spines that have evolved over millions of years to help you walk and jog easily. Except for toddlers, of course. They are always falling. Sideways. Forwards. Backwards. On their bottoms. Head over heels. All those things at the same time. Toddlers look silly. Even a robot can see that.

Running is *not* so easy for me. I wobble when I stride, jiggle when I sprint, topple when I trot. I could just curl up in a ball and roll all the time, but I can't see where I'm going.

I kept running from the scrapyard at the fastest speed I could, which, given the slight upward

slope of the path, was 5.2 miles per hour. I made good progress until I tripped on a loose stone, fell over and landed in a patch of weeds.

Red circles appeared on my cheeks, even though I hadn't told my brain to draw them. And though the temperature of my insides was the exact same as it had always been, I felt strangely warm all of a sudden.

Was I embarrassed? Robots should not feel embarrassed.

A pigeon had settled on my head. I pushed the pigeon away and stared back down the long road behind me. Thankfully I couldn't see Flint from *Krush 'em Kwik* chasing after me. Perhaps he was just happy I was gone from his scrapyard.



I used my incredible brainpower to calculate my situation.

But the only result my incredible brainpower came up with was this: my situation was TERRIBLE.

The wide road I was on rose up ahead, into a long hill. Large, low buildings lined either side. My in-built encyclopaedia told me they were factories, but old ones with smashed windows and boarded-up doors.

Among the high weeds surrounding me sat the large metal shell of an old, burnt-out car.

Its wheels were gone and its insides were charred and blackened. I felt sad for the car, even though I knew it couldn't have felt anything at all. But *I* felt things now, so maybe it had too?

Flint had treated me like I was just a ruined old car – no use to anyone any more. But I was more than that. Beth loved me and would be missing me. Maybe this car had an owner hoping to find

it, just like Beth would be wanting to find me.

These feelings made my circuits tingle strangely. I was programmed to understand and recognise feelings when I saw them in humans, but actually *feeling* them too was new to me.

Things weren't making sense. My legs felt like jelly, even though I could see they were not made of jelly at all. My brain felt fuzzy, because the feelings were getting in the way of my ability to solve problems and think clearly. I wished I could find a switch in my brain to turn the feelings off while I figured it all out.

I hid behind the wrecked car to check if any new memories had surfaced, ones that might help me understand how I'd got here, but I still only had the same two-and-a-half-memories of Beth. I recalled them again.

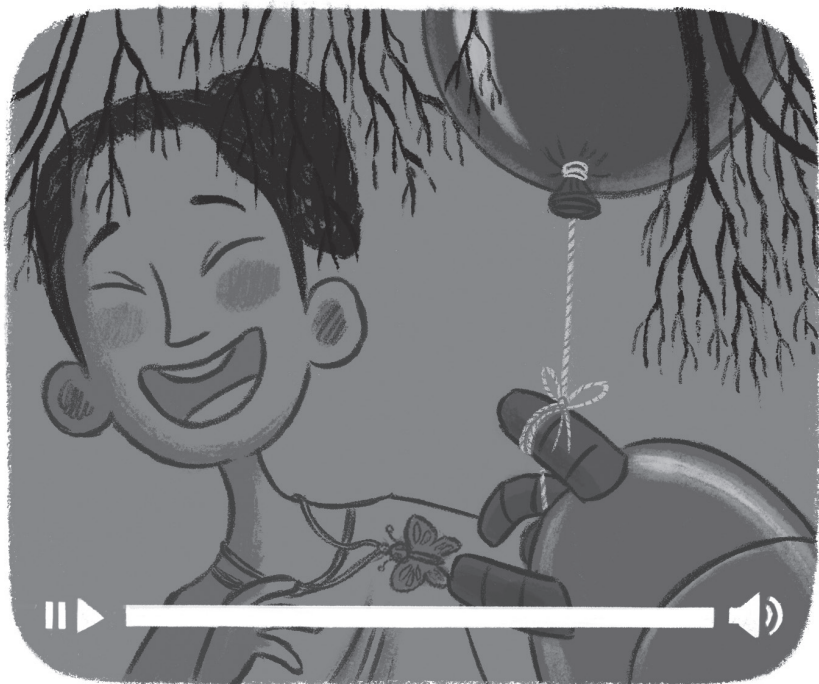
They were so clear that when I remembered them, it was as if I wasn't on this street but actually with her.

In the first memory, I could see the scraps of wrapping paper torn and scattered around me. I saw Beth and Grandma, and their beaming smiles. I heard her excited *Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou*. I saw my reflection in the mirror. The gems of her butterfly pendant glinting in the light.

In the second memory, I could see the tendrils of roots drooping over my eyes from the flowers balancing on my head. I saw the fraying strands of string tying the balloon to my finger. On the butterfly pendant, I could see the gap where a gem had come free. I could hear Beth's loud, gasping laugh.

As I watched this memory back, a strange thing happened. I let out a burst of high, giddy laughter too, like I'd burped up happiness.

That was a strange feeling that made me feel warm again. But a nice warmth, not like when I was embarrassed.



Then there was the final, messy, half-memory.

Between the glitches and jumps and gaps in this memory, some details were still clear. I had been outdoors, on a street. There was the sound of water nearby, even though I couldn't see it. There was the sign on the wall – an orange circle with a white triangle inside it. The pendant now had three jewels missing. Beth's eyes were deep brown, and wet with tears.

Why was Beth crying? I didn't know.

Then Beth said the word "... love ..."

I still didn't remember a single thing after this.

I *had* to find Beth, return the butterfly pendant, make her laugh again.

The sign with the triangle was an important clue. Find that and I would find Beth.

It should be easy to see the sign somewhere in these wide streets. I moved on, my circuits less tinglingly, stronger even. When I thought of Beth, it felt like nothing would stop me finding her. I was ... determined! Yes, determined.

I liked this feeling much more than being scared.

Then I reached the crest of the hill. A vast city of skyscrapers stretched out before me.

My search for the sign suddenly felt impossible.

My hopes of seeing Beth felt so distant.

My legs felt like jelly again.



