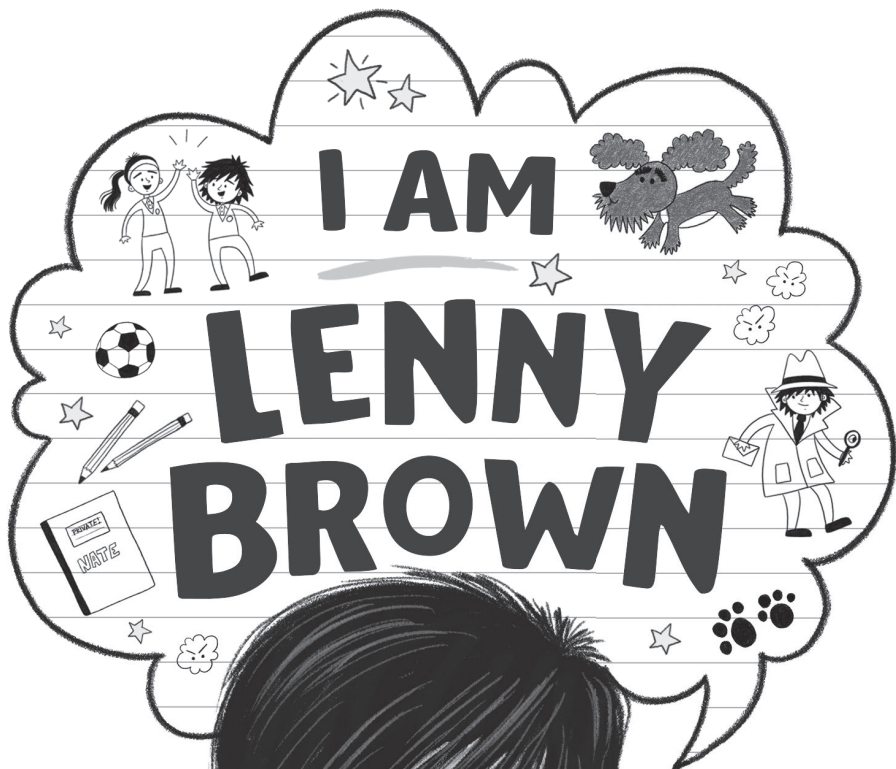


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For my mum, Judy, and my stepdad, Ivan

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TUG OF WAR

‘Rah!’ Lenny roared as he pulled on the stick with all his might.

He was still in his lion costume from fancy-dress day at school, even though he was now back at home and playing tug of war in the garden with his dog, Rocky.

‘I’m going to win!’ yelled Lenny, pulling even harder. Rocky growled playfully, tugging back in the other direction.

Finally the stick snapped and Lenny fell over, laughing. Rocky jumped on top of him, licking his

face, and the pair of them rolled around in the grass, play-fighting.

‘Lenny!’ Mum called from the house. ‘Can you come inside, please? There’s something I need to speak to you about.’

Lenny and Rocky stopped playing and looked around. Rocky’s ears were pointing upward, and his head was tilted to the side as if he was thinking about what Mum had said. He barked softly and ran into the kitchen.

Lenny didn’t move. His stomach tightened.

Although Mum had called him gently, Lenny could tell by the tone of her voice that this was not good news.



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THE NEWS

Panic rushed through Lenny.

‘No way, Mum!’ he said, dizzy with worry. ‘I *can’t* change schools. They understand me at Westside. Mr Robbins is there!’

He started to walk very quickly in circles round the room. His stomach was in knots and tangles. His thoughts were muddled and jumbled. Surely his mum didn’t mean it.

But he could see it in her eyes. She was telling the truth.

‘I need you to understand that I don’t want

this either,' she said, keeping her voice even.

'We're moving because we *have* to.'

Lenny didn't want to hear what Mum was saying. He started to rip off his costume. He was boiling hot, and everything was itchy.

'Now that the library has closed, I need a new job,' Mum continued. 'And I've found one – but it's on the other side of town. That's why we need to move, Lenny.'

Lenny looked up at Mum. He could tell that, inside, she was feeling sad too.

'Anyway, this house has always been a bit big for just the two of us,' she said. 'I've found us a lovely little flat – it's not too far away – and your new school looks great. Once you get started –'

'But they'll make fun of me in the new school,' Lenny whispered as he slumped to the floor. 'I know they will.'

His mind was already fast-forwarding to his first day. He knew how the other kids would look at him. How they would talk about him behind his

back. He didn't want to, but he could feel himself starting to cry.

Rocky came to lie next to him and licked the salty tears from his face. Lenny stroked his silky ears.



Mum sat down beside him too. They were both leaning against the fridge. Sometimes the noises that it made helped to soothe Lenny.

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’ he asked.

‘I wanted to be sure that there was no other way,’ said Mum. ‘And there isn’t.’

She held him tightly.

‘When?’ asked Lenny.

‘Well, there’s only a few months left of the school year,’ Mum said. ‘And the new school really wants you to join as soon as possible.’

Lenny knew he was not going to like what was coming next.

‘They’ve been really kind and made a place for you to start on Monday,’ she said.

Lenny stood up with a jolt.

‘But that means . . .’

Mum nodded. Her face seemed to be saying sorry.

‘Yes. Tomorrow will be your last day at Westside. You’ll have a chance to say goodbye to

everyone. And then we'll move over the weekend, my little lion. So you're all ready for Monday.'

'No, no, NO!' shouted Lenny.

He reached out and grabbed a plate from the kitchen table, flinging it to the floor. It shattered with a loud crash.

3

HOME TEAM

That night, Lenny was sitting with Mum in his bedroom. She was resting her hand on his forehead while they did breathing exercises together to keep his breaths slow and deep.

After Lenny had said sorry and helped clean up the bits of broken plate, they had sat down and watched his favourite movie. But he still had wriggling worms of worry in his tummy. This was the only house he had ever lived in. This bedroom – they called it his den – was the only one he had ever slept in. He didn't want to leave it. Ever.

Mum had told him that the removal van would be coming over the weekend to take everything – all their furniture and books and clothes – to the new flat.

But what about my memories? Lenny thought to himself. *Will they come with me or will they all stay here?*

Looking around his room, he tried to take pictures in his mind so that he could always remember it.

‘Maybe it’s time for you and me to make some new memories,’ said Mum, as if she was reading his thoughts. ‘But, you know, the most important things won’t change.’

She looked at Lenny’s favourite drawing, which was stuck up on the wall. He had done it at school when he was six. It was of his family.

‘This is really what home is,’ she said, pointing to the picture. ‘You, me and Rocky. Our little team. We’ll always be together, and that means – no matter where we go – we’ll always feel at home.’

Lenny nodded. The worms were wriggling a bit less.

Sensing that Lenny was feeling a little happier, Rocky – who had been dozing on the floor – got up and wandered over to say hello. Lenny bent down to stroke him. Then Rocky took a small step back and did a giant sneeze right in Lenny's face.



‘Eughhh! That’s disgusting, Rocky!’ said Lenny, laughing.

‘OK, go and have a shower and wash this mane,’ said Mum, ruffling Lenny’s hair. ‘Then we’ll do a quick story together before bed.’

But Lenny couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that tomorrow would be the last time he would ever wake up in this house and go to Westside Primary School.

‘Mum,’ he said quietly. ‘The thing I’ll miss the most about Westside will definitely be Mr Robbins.’

‘I know – he’s been incredible with you,’ Mum said, smiling. ‘We’ll make sure we say a special goodbye to him.’

Lenny nodded. He would say goodbye to Mr Robbins, but he would do his best to make sure that it was not forever.