

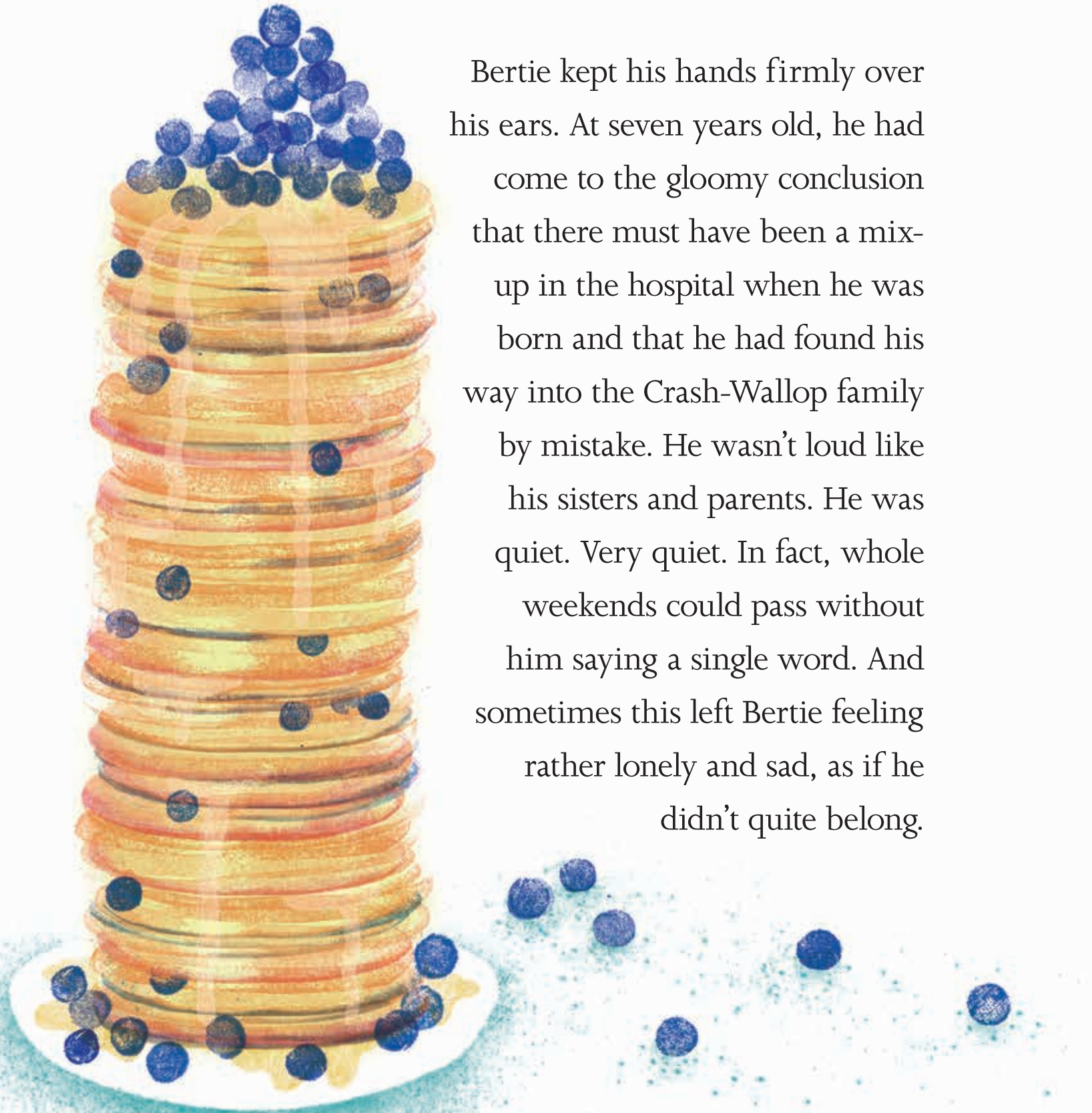
Stories, like children, never sit still. And the story I am about to tell you is one of the most fidgety of all. It is the story of the deepest frost of the year. The one that tiptoes into your garden in the middle of the night and turns your whole world silver. The one that, if scattered in just the right way, sparks magic.

Some people say that behind all this lies the mischief-maker, Jack Frost. But tales of him arrived long after the very first story about frost had twisted and turned and changed shape entirely. You see, the real story has nothing to do with Jack Frost. And everything to do with goblins . . .

Bertie Crash-Wallop, of 33 Muddle Lane, sat cross-legged under the kitchen table with his hands over his ears. It was Friday evening and dinner was over. He'd made it through another week. Possibly the loudest one yet.

His older sisters, eleven-year-old triplets known in school as The Hurricane, had recently joined the debating club and they had loud views on absolutely everything. Tonight they were arguing about what laws they'd introduce if they were prime minister: homework-free birthdays, school trips to space and the immediate banning of broccoli. And they weren't the only ones making a racket in the kitchen. Bertie's mother was a singer, the best their little town of Clatterstomp had ever seen, and she was warbling her way through a crossword. Bertie's father, meanwhile – a sports teacher at the local primary school – was refereeing The Hurricane's argument, whistle and all.





Bertie kept his hands firmly over his ears. At seven years old, he had come to the gloomy conclusion that there must have been a mix-up in the hospital when he was born and that he had found his way into the Crash-Wallop family by mistake. He wasn't loud like his sisters and parents. He was quiet. Very quiet. In fact, whole weekends could pass without him saying a single word. And sometimes this left Bertie feeling rather lonely and sad, as if he didn't quite belong.

Indeed he was starting to wonder whether his family knew even the most basic things about him.

Like the fact that his favourite breakfast was pancakes heaped with blueberries and honey, with a banana milkshake on the side.

Every now and again, Bertie felt so out of place, and so awfully alone, his heart wobbled and he felt the need to leave the house completely. And so it happened that while the debating raged, the refereeing ramped up and the warbling reached its crescendo, Bertie shuffled out from beneath the kitchen table, slipped on his warmest coat and stole into the garden.



It was dark outside and the December air was so cold it stung Bertie's cheeks. For a while he simply sat on the swing watching the moon. It was round and bright and it hung in the sky like a giant marble.

It was the sort of moon, Bertie thought, that looked as if it might have secrets.

The silhouette of an owl glided across it and Bertie felt his eyes drawn to the wall that separated his family's garden from the one next door. It was just a wall covered in ivy but as Bertie looked, he couldn't help thinking there might be a bit more to it. The moonlight throbbed and Bertie blinked. Halfway up the wall, almost lost in the ivy, was something small, black and round. Bertie stood up and took a step closer. Then he frowned.

It was a door handle. One he had never noticed before.