



Book One

Monster Problems

By

R.L. Ullman



Monster Problems

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To Esther and Lillian,
thanks for looking out for me

PRAISE FOR MONSTER PROBLEMS READERS' FAVORITE BOOK AWARD WINNER



“I absolutely loved *Monster Problems*. The story is action-packed and fast-paced. The characters were unique and lovable, as well as great role models. I was hooked by the first page and never wanted to put it down.” **Rating: 5.0 stars by Kristen Van Kampen (Teen Reviewer).**

“Ullman spins a monstrosity of a tale in the first book of his new series. It reminds me of *Harry Potter* with a twist. Hilarious and so unexpected. This book is one to believe in.” **Rating: 5.0 stars by Gail Kamer.**

“From the first sentence it draws you in and doesn’t let go until you’ve come to the very end. Ullman hits all the bases with this one. I can’t recommend this supernatural adventure highly enough!” **Rating: 5.0 stars by Sarah Westmoreland.**

“All the characters are portrayed so well they’ll remain fresh in the minds of readers. Like me, readers will be keen to grab book 2 to see what happens next.” **Rating: 5.0 stars by Mamta Madhavan.**

“*Monster Problems* is a grand romp that will thrill kids and forever-young adults alike. I’m thrilled it’s just the first book in Ullman’s new series. Most highly recommended.” **Rating: 5.0 stars by Jack Magnus.**

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CHAPTER ONE

MY LIFE BITES

Clearly, I won't be getting any sleep.

Not after the thundering crash of my door against the wall. Or the snap of my window shade, which is now rapping annoyingly against the glass pane. Or the bright light shining in my eyes as daylight streams over my face.

Note to self: stop sleeping in rooms that don't lock from the inside.

"Well, well," comes a nasally voice. "This must be the special one himself."

Okay, here we go. I roll over reluctantly, squinting at the two goons hovering over me. Needless to say, their expressions are less than warm-and-fuzzy.

The first guy reminds me of a shark, with his pale, unblinking eyes and long, thin nose. He's short and wearing the most disturbing Christmas sweater I've ever seen, featuring a snowman swallowing a reindeer. For some reason, he's studying me like I'm some kind of a zoo animal while frantically scribbling notes on his clipboard.

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The second guy could pass for Mr. Clean's stunt double, minus the earing and the charm. He's bald, dressed in all white like an orderly at a psychiatric hospital, and his biceps are twice the size of his head.

After our awkward three-way staredown, shark-face finally puts down his pen and says, "Mr. Abraham Matthews, I presume?"

"My friends call me Bram," I say. "So, you can call me Abraham."

Shark-face doesn't crack a smile. Instead, he looks down at his clipboard and presses on, "I see, Mr. Matthews, that you arrived in the wee hours of the morning. The night guard informed us you were hand-delivered by the police."

"Yep," I say. "They were in the neighborhood. Nice of the boys to give me a lift."

"I also understand," he says, "that you ran away from your group home three weeks ago—in Arizona."

"Ah, Arizona," I say. "Quite an interesting place. Did you know they'll arrest you for cutting down a cactus? Or that crazy roadrunner bird from the cartoon is actually real? Dynamite-carrying coyotes, however, not so much."

"You do realize, Mr. Matthews, that you are now in Massachusetts? That's over two-thousand five-hundred miles away."

"Really?" I say, faking a shiver. "No wonder I'm so darn cold."

"You're a funny guy," shark-face says. "But we can

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be funny too. Isn't that right, Mr. Snide?"

"Hilarious," the bald guy says, cracking his knuckles.

"Do you know where you are?" shark-face asks.

"Well, I'm no detective," I say, taking a look around, "but I think you just told me I'm in Massachusetts." Other than these bozos and the giant daddy-long-legs hanging from the ceiling, the place has an all-too-familiar sparseness. There's a bed, a desk, and a closet, but that's about it.

"I'll be a little more specific," shark-face says. "You are at the New England Home for Troubled Boys. I am Mr. Glume, the Director, and my esteemed colleague here is Mr. Snide, the House Manager."

"Honored to make your acquaintance," I say. Truth be told, I've bounced around group homes like this my entire life. There was the one in Arizona. And before that California. And before that Oregon, and so on. I've been in so many of these joints I've lost count.

And they're all the same. They claim they'll find you a loving family. They claim you're just one step away from enjoying family movie nights and roasting marshmallows over a fire. But trust me, it never happens.

Not for kids like me.

Don't worry, there's no need to break out the violins. I'm a realist, so I know the odds are against me. After all, I'm twelve now, which means no first-time parents would touch me with a ten-foot pole. Think about it. Why would any wide-eyed, bushy-tailed couple looking to

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adopt take on a troubled teen when they could drive off the lot with a brand-new baby instead? Trust me, they wouldn't. As soon as you're out of diapers, you're considered damaged goods.

Plus, I've got my, well, other quirks...

As Glume flips through the mountain of paperwork on his clipboard, his whisper-thin eyebrows rise higher and higher. Clearly, he's got my whole case file.

"You've been in the foster system since you were an infant," Glume says.

"Yep," I say. "Guess that makes me the poster child."

"It says your parents died in a house fire," he continues. "What a shame."

"I've come to grips with it," I say quickly.

"I'm sure you have," Glume says. "But it also says you have quite a long history of causing trouble. Lots of trouble. In fact, the director of your former group home doesn't want you back. She says you have... unusual habits?"

"Like she should talk," I scoff. "She didn't get the nickname 'Beast of Bourbon' for nothing."

"She says you stay up all night. You refuse to go to bed during mandatory lights out."

"I'm a night owl," I say. "I catch my 'z's' during the daytime. Otherwise, I get cranky. Like now, for instance."

"She says you avoid sunlight."

"I burn easily," I say. "I'm delicate."

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“And you only eat food that is red in color?”

“Okay, now even I have to admit that’s a weird one. She’s got me there.”

Glume flips through more pages. “It seems several reports are accusing you of property damage—like flooding the basement.”

“Not true,” I say. “I walked in just as some kid threw the fire extinguisher into the washing machine. No one expected it to go off like that. The bubbles were insane.”

“And the broken windows on the second floor?”

“Purely an accident,” I counter. “They told us to do a craft project. Who knew taping worms to glass would attract so many birds?”

“And the bed bug infestation?”

“A complete misunderstanding,” I say. “I was the one warning those kids to leave their pillows in the garbage dumpster.”

“Mr. Matthews, you are not taking responsibility for your involvement in any of these incidents.”

“That’s right,” I say. “Because I wasn’t responsible.”

“Clearly,” Glume says. “In fact, you don’t seem to be responsible for anything.”

“Whew!” I say, wiping my brow. “I was worried we wouldn’t understand each other.”

“Well, you’re in luck,” Glume says. “I do understand you. I understand you perfectly. And fortunately for you, you’ve come to the right place.”

“It sounds like it,” I say relieved. Just then, my

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stomach rumbles. I can't remember the last time I ate. "Hey, this has been a great kumbaya session, but how about we wrap it up and head to the kitchen for a hearty breakfast?"

"Excellent idea, Mr. Matthews," Glume says. "We shall adjourn to the kitchen where we will begin your education."

"Great, I could eat a—wait, did you say education?"

"Oh, don't panic, Mr. Matthews," Glume says with a sinister smile. "Here at the New England School for Troubled Boys, you'll get a steady diet of exactly what you need."

"And what's that?" I ask suspiciously.

"Responsibility," he says.

"Is this the hilarious part?" I ask.

"I guess that depends on which side of the clipboard you're standing on," Glume answers. "Now you can choose to get up on your own or, if you would like, Mr. Snide would be more than happy to assist you."

The bald guy steps forward and I realize this could get real ugly real fast. But I'm not looking for any trouble.

"Okay, hold your horses, cue ball," I say, throwing my legs over the side. "There's no need to get personal. Let's get this education thing over with so I can eat."

I don't think I've ever seen so many dishes in one

kitchen sink before. They're piled sky-high like Glume had been waiting for my arrival for weeks. And it isn't just plates. There are stacks of dirty cups, and hundreds of used forks and spoons scattered all over the place. At least they know enough to use plastic knives.

"Your first lesson begins now," Glume says gleefully. "Every one of these items needs to be hand-washed, hand-dried, and returned to its proper place."

"Hand washed?" I exclaim. "You mean, there's no dishwasher?"

"We just got a new one," Snide says, throwing a dish towel over my face. "Have fun."

"But... this will take hours," I say. "What about food?"

"Oh, you'll find plenty of leftovers," Glume says, "if you *lick* the plates clean. You'd best get started, Mr. Matthews. And please, no spots on the silverware."

As they exit, I hear them snickering down the hall. Well, this is a major bummer. I had hoped this would be a longer stop—get in a few square meals, sleep in a warm bed—but now I need to rethink my plans. After all, I didn't volunteer to be the resident Cinderella.

As I turn on the faucet, I catch my reflection in the stainless tea kettle. Not surprisingly, I look as tired as I feel. My skin is thin and pale, my dark hair is a tangled mess, and my eyes look like brown half-circles.

I take in the ceramic carnage around me and exhale.

I'm in no mood to do this chore the conventional

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way, so I open the cabinets to see where everything is supposed to go, and peer over my shoulder to ensure the coast is clear.

Then, I get busy.

Remember those quirks I mentioned earlier? Well, sometimes they come in handy. Like right now.

You see, I have some strange abilities.

Super speed happens to be one of them.

Now I'm not claiming to be the Flash or anything, but I can really motor when I need to. I've never told anyone about it. I mean, people think I'm weird enough already. But when a situation calls for it and no one's around, I like to indulge a little.

The only problem is that using my super speed wipes me out. Especially if I haven't eaten in a while. But this task is simply too inhumane not to go for it.

So, despite some ear-jarring dish clinking, I manage to wash, dry, and put away every item in less than two minutes with no spots on the silverware. I stand back and admire my handiwork.

Even though I'm feeling drained, it was worth it. And the best part is that no one will be the wiser.

At least, that's what I think.

Until I turn around.

That's when I find a blond, curly-haired kid standing behind me with his jaw hanging open. He looks a few years younger than me, and he's holding a dirty plate.

I curse under my breath for being so careless.

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Time to play it cool.

“Thanks,” I say, taking the plate out of his hands as if nothing happened. “I must have missed that one.”

I turn back to the sink and begin washing it—at normal speed. Okay, don’t panic. Maybe he didn’t see anything.

“D-Do you have superpowers?” he stammers.

Or maybe not.

“What are you talking about?” I say, grabbing the dish towel to start drying.

“Y-You just cleaned that mess up ridiculously fast,” he says. “I-I saw you do it.”

“Really?” I say, putting the plate away. I hate lying to the kid, but what choice do I have? “So, let me ask you something. If I could move like that, do you think I’d be hanging around this joy factory? Believe me, I’d take off so fast all you’d see is a cloud of dust.”

“Well,” the boy says, thinking it over, “I-I guess that’s true.”

“Believe me, I wish I had superpowers like that. Yet, here we are. Hey, are you feeling okay? You look kind of green. Maybe you need to sit down?”

The boy looks confused. “I... but... I... Maybe I’m not feeling so well.”

“Here,” I say, pulling over a chair from the table in the corner. “Take a load off.”

As he slumps down, I fill a glass with water and get him some ice. “Drink this. Maybe you’re dehydrated.

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Kids today don't drink enough water."

"Thanks," he says, downing half the glass in one gulp. "Sorry, I... must be losing my mind."

"No problem," I say, taking a seat beside him and reaching out my hand. "My name is Abraham. But you can call me Bram."

"I'm Johnny," he says, shaking my hand. "You're that kid who came in late last night. With the police."

"The one and only," I say. "Sorry if I woke you."

"No big deal," he says. "I sleep with one eye open anyway. Have for a while."

"Yeah," I say. "I get it."

"So, how'd you end up here?" he asks, taking another sip.

"Incredible luck?" I say, causing Johnny to spit take.

"Seriously," I continue. "I don't know. I've been in foster care as long as I can remember. I've probably lived with twenty foster families. Eventually, no one wanted me anymore, so now I just kind of go from group home to group home."

"Twenty families?" he says, either shocked or impressed. "That's a lot of foster families."

"I guess," I say with a shrug. "I never really thought about it. I mean, it's all kind of a blur now. I just remember it was hard to keep track of all the different rules. What was okay in one house would be against the law in the next. I guess I never felt settled, you know? How about you? How'd you get here?"

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“I got labeled a ‘bad kid’ a few years back,” he says, sitting back. “I had just gotten to a new family. Nice couple who already had a biological son. At first, I thought I had a chance. Well, I guess the kid wasn’t so happy I was there and claimed I stole his mom’s necklace. It was ridiculous. I’ve never stolen anything in my life! Anyway, he wasn’t going anywhere so I got the boot. Been here ever since.”

“That’s rough,” I say. “I can’t even tell you how many times I’ve been blamed for stuff I didn’t do. I actually had one parent tell me if her daughter and I were hanging off a cliff and she could only save one of us, she’d save her kid every single time. Like, isn’t that obvious? But I always wondered why she had to say it. It’s just cruel, you know?”

“I guess kids like us don’t get to have real families,” Johnny says, his face falling.

For some reason, his words hit me hard.

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess so.”

We sit in silence for a minute when I notice a newspaper on the table. The headline reads:

GRAVE ROBBERS EXHUME BODY OF MILITARY HERO

“Well, that’s creepy,” I say.

“Yeah,” Johnny says. “It was all over the news. It was the grave of some old military sharpshooter who

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helped win a bunch of wars. Someone dug him up and took all his bones. I think it's the second grave robbery in the last two weeks. People are weird."

"Totally weird," I agree, wondering why anyone would even think about doing something like that.

"Well, it's not so bad here," Johnny says, trying to change the subject. "As long as you follow the rules."

"Guess I'm in trouble then," I say. "Because I'm not much of a rule-follower."

"I wasn't either," he says. "Until I got here."

Just then, the door bursts open, and Snide barges in. "How're the chores go—What?"

The ogre stops short, taking in the scene.

"Oh, I'm all finished," I say quickly. "Guess I'm more of a Type A personality than I thought. I was just using my free time here to meet some of my fellow inmates."

"But that's impossible!" Snide says furiously. "You couldn't have done it all alone." Then, he wheels on Johnny. "You helped him!"

"No," I interject. "He didn't lift a finger."

"I think I'll be going now," Johnny says, standing up quickly. He shoots me a look, mouths 'good luck,' and makes a brisk exit.

"I don't believe you," the brute says.

"It's all in the magic of the suds," I claim, holding out my arms. "And look, no dish-pan hands."

"That's it, wise guy!" he says. "You're coming with

me!”

“To where?” I ask, as Snide opens the kitchen door and waves me into the hallway.

“You’ll see,” Snide says, as we walk down the hall and past an office where Glume is on the phone.

“Oh, yes, Officer Smith,” Glume says into the receiver. Then he catches sight of us and breaks into a weird smile. “Mr. Matthews is having a great time. He’s learning the ropes quickly.”

Snide chuckles and leads me down a flight of stairs.

“Hope you’re not afraid of the dark,” he says.

Well, he’s right about one thing, wherever he’s taking me is dark—pitch dark even. But not for me. For some reason, I’ve always been able to see perfectly in darkness. It’s like my eyes never need time to adjust. Of course, I have no idea why. I guess it’s just another one of my strange quirks.

But when we reach the bottom, Snide flicks on a dim light, and my stomach drops. The basement is totally creepy, with cement-block walls and a way-too-low ceiling. It smells musty down here, like mold has been brewing for centuries.

Then, I notice a row of steel doors lining the walls.

What are those for?

Snide reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a set of keys. As he jingles them around the ring, they echo through the narrow chamber. Finally, he finds the one he’s looking for.

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“Um, is this some kind of a kid dungeon?” I ask. “Because I don’t think state-sponsored group homes are supposed to have kid dungeons.”

“You think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you Matthews?” he says, unlocking the steel door to our left. “Well, keep thinking that way and you’re gonna have problems around here. Serious problems.”

“C’mon,” I plead, “you’re not really gonna—”

But before I can finish my sentence, he nudges me inside the tiny cell. And then he slams the door shut behind me.

Suddenly, a small slat opens at the top of the door, and Snide presses his ugly mug into the opening.

“Do you know what we do with problems here at the New England Home for Troubled Boys?”

I’m about to provide an eloquent response when I realize the question is rhetorical.

“We keep ‘em down here in solitary,” he says. “Until one way or another, they aren’t problems anymore.”

Then, he slams the slat closed.

And I’m locked inside.

Foster Care Profile

Case No: 66649666

Name: MATTHEWS, ABRAHAM
Nickname(s): BRAM
Yrs in Care: 12 years
Difficulty: HIGH



VITALS:

Height: 4'10"

Weight: 95lbs

Hair: Black

Eyes: Brown

FOSTER CARE R

ARIZONA, PHOENIX

CALIFORNIA, SACRAMENTO

OREGON, SALEM

IDAHO, BOISE

NEVADA, RENO

CALIFORNIA, SACRAMENTO

UTAH, LOGAN

WYOMING, CASPER

NEW MEXICO, ALBUQUERQUE

PENNSYLVANIA, ERIE (ran away after 3 mo.)

(Please see pages 2-4 for additional foster locations)



Matthews, Abraham (Bram)

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