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# **Chupa Chavez Saves the World:**

**Feathers Catches a Cold**

Malarkey's Exotic Pet and Toy Store Series

Book 1

**By Doug Johnson**

*Dedicated to:*

*Mateo Mejia*

# **Nobody**

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Who am I kidding?

Who will I be?

I'm always nobody

Will I ever be me?

Who am I kidding?

Ever alone

Wandering streets

What is a home?



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# One

## Malarkey's Exotic Pet and Toy Store

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“Chupa sucks! Get it?!” Amanda Rodriguez’s belly rolled as she laughed and her crew rolled up on Sally. Sally clutched her backpack closer, retreating toward the dumpster behind Maya Angelou Elementary. Living on the streets meant you needed a dumpster to have your back. Nobody else did.

Sometimes not even the dumpster. “Hold still, little Chupa... Or should I say *Sucks to Suck?*” Amanda laughed again. Crouching in low, in one quick movement, she snagged Sally’s left pigtail and clipped it off. Sally’s eyes went wide, as she watched her pigtail get waved in the air like a trophy. “Should I hack the other one, girls?” Amanda’s crew jeered and cackled. “Nah...Let’s see how she looks in the light tomorrow at school. One pigtail! That will be epic!!” With that, her sea of dingy, red-dressed crew members swaggered out of the alley. Amanda wasn’t much of a gang member yet. She was still in training by her older brother who ran crews in Tacoma. Sally had seen her brother. He always had on new clothes. Jordans

that ran over two hundred bucks a pop. No wonder Amanda wanted to be just like him. No wonder she kept practicing on Sally.

Sally sighed and decided to walk out of the alley and find shelter for the night. At least it was still fall, so if she couldn't find a safe place to crash, Yakima had a few parks she could hide in. "Where are you going?" Amanda snarled just as Sally slumped into the street. Her crew waited for more entertainment. More cackles, fist pumps in the air and howls.

Sally scrambled. Her only advantage was that she was faster in a sprint. Amanda huffed at a good pace, but didn't run very fast. Lost, Sally clambered down a grimy street, and zigged and zagged over broken fences until she reached the warehouse district. She recognized the faded Tinkerbelle painted on one of the farmer's huge warehouses. No Amanda. Sally slowed down. She remembered an antique shop that had a handicapped ramp to a platform about a block away. The ramp was about three feet high. She just needed to peel away the plastic trellis. Easy job. She was small enough to hide under that until morning. Sounded like a plan. Glancing around every corner, she still stuck to the shadows until she made it to the platform. A light clicked on. Sally froze.

Just as she was about to duck under her new shelter she heard a voice, creaking like a door. "Why don't you come inside here, Deary?" Sally put her hand up to shield her eyes against the light coming from the little store front next to the antique dealer. A shadowed hump repeated herself. "It's warm inside. I've got something you need."

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Sally figured being inside was always a plus. What would the old lady do? Sally clutched her bag, making a mental note to run if anything went sideways. Besides, maybe it would give Amanda time to get tired and go home to her crappy apartment. The shadow waved her in. Once inside, Sally's eyes adjusted. An ancient hunched over woman with a wart on a hook nose wore a white lab coat. Her eyes were kind, even if the rest of her was...well creepy. She wore a long flowing dress under the lab coat. Oh, and a mouse kept blinking at Sally. "You sure about this, Boss?"

"Did the mouse say that?" Sally blustered.

"Lester. My name is Lester. I'd shake your hand, but you look filthy...and that's coming from a lab rat who eats droppings for-."

"That's quite enough, Lester. Deary, just look at you. Why did you cut your hair like that?" Her kind eyes made Sally feel a touch better. "Lars!" the lady yelled. Sally jumped.

"Yes, Boss." A huge Doberman Pincher with floppy ears lumbered into the room.

"Get Oodles out here, on the double." Then she pointed to a dentist chair a red vinyl seat. Old smartphones were duct taped to the armrests. Sally glanced up to see a wall full of vials, gears, computer parts and pictures of animals. Awestruck by all the gadgets, books and toys forced her to obey.

"What is this place?" Sally whispered.

"Well, for you humans, it is Mrs. Malarkey's Exotic Pet and Toy Store. You can buy a toy robot up at the front for \$7.95. A few other

odds and ends to keep the kiddos happy. You happened to enter through a...side door.”

Oodles arrived. The huge poodle suddenly stood up on its back two legs, and slipped off its front paws, which Sally guessed were gloves. “You’ve got tiny hands!” Sally yelled, jumping out of the chair.

“You sure about this, Boss?” Oodles asked.

“I asked the same thing,” Lester moaned.

“You’re the teacher’s pet. Doesn’t count.” Oodles growled.

“You couldn’t fit two curls into her pocket, Puffball.”

“Boys, boys...Later.” The old lady said. A loud crash came from another room. Muttering curses under her breath, she limped toward the source of the crash. Crash.

Paying no mind, Oodles picked up his beautician scissors and commanded, “Sit. Boss said to clean up your hair. It’s ghastly.” The large dog dramatically flung a pink nose to one side. A bat flew through the air toward the room the old lady was in. A foot high robot wheezed by, with a cane, in pursuit of the bat. “Give it up, Igor. You’ll never catch Hilda. Boss gave her too much power. You shouldn’t have made her mad.” The robot, Igor shook his cane at Oodles and wheezed on.

“What’s her name? It can’t just be Boss.” Sally asked, hugging her backpack and sitting down in the chair.

“Tsk, tsk. You put the name *dirty blonde* into a whole new category.” Oodles took her chin in his hand looking from one side to

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the other. First, he framed an “L” over her face from a distance, and then he just stood back, tilting his head one way and then another. Like magic, a pair of scissors appeared from the other hand and he launched in.

Sally ducked and whipped behind the chair. “What are you doing?” Dodging cars to find a place to sleep didn’t qualify her to listen a robotic poodle. It scared her that that sentence even came into her head.

“Look, Princess,” the poodle sighed. “Boss said you needed a haircut. *I belong* to a hair stylist.” He used air quotes around the word belong. “I know a thing or two about hair.”

“I’m guessing your owner doesn’t know about your gloves.” Sally said from behind the chair.

“You’re pretty smart for a sixth–.”

“I’m in fifth grade. Tall for my age.”

“Skinny for your age.” Oodles snarked. Another loud crash. More muttered curses. The bat flew back through. An exotic Persian rug hung like a door swayed between the rooms. Igor wheezed by. “We’ll keep the pigtail. I’m going to make you look like an Amazon warrior princess. Deal?”

“Deal. Don’t make me look like a boy.” Sally eased back into the chair.

“Something wrong with boys?”

“They smell,” she mumbled. Oodles gently tugged a comb through the rest of her hair.

*Doug Johnson*

“We all smell, Darling,” Oodles quietly replied.

“No. Homeless people smell. Don’t make me look like a boy. Boys smell.”

“Understood.”

## Two

### The Moon Meows

---

“Meow.”

Must be a cat in her dreams. Sally felt the cold cement under the antique store platform. “I must have lost track of time. Crap. I needed to get to school.” Sitting up, Sally heard it again.

“Meow.” She rubbed her eyes. “Mew.” Bright blue eyes blinked at Sally from under a ball of *neon green fur!*

“You’re green!” Sally backed up on her butt and bumped her head on the platform.

“You’re homeless. We’re even.” The kitten tilted its head to the side and yawned. “I’m hungry. Get me some milk. Get me some food. Oodles did a good job.”

“You talk!” Sally shouted.

“Neon green, alien kittens will do that on occasion.” The kitten licked its paw.

Sally shook her head and ran her fingers over her temple. She would have to look in a mirror, but from what she could tell the kitten was right. Oodles had done a good job. The side of her head where Amanda had chopped the pig tail was shaved. Oodles had blended the rest of her hair into the pigtail. She stroked the pigtail. Rubbing her eyes again, it was all starting to feel less like a dream. Insane, yes. Dream, no.

The pigtails reminded her of the last time she slept in a warm bed. Her mother put her blonde hair into pigtails to stop her from crying. If your name is Chavez and you have blonde hair in a tough neighborhood, life gets rough during kindergarten. OK, so Sally's hair leaned to the brown side. Oodles was right about Salley being a dirty blonde. Didn't make it easier having the name Chavez. Even if you speak Spanish.

If only Sally's mother just hadn't gotten sick and died.

At first, Sally did what the courts said. The first foster home proved how broken the system was and she found life on the streets, with her backpack, safer. She kept a picture of her mother. Safe. Well. That and school. School was safer. That was a couple of years ago. Besides, she could eat at least twice at school. Three times if she timed it right during lunch.

"Hey, Princess!" the kitten yelled. "I said I'm hungry. You need to pack me up, put me in your bag and get us to breakfast."

"How do you know I go to breakfast?"



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“Boss makes us watch all sorts of videos on you people. Drives us nuts. You know that you’re my *owner*.” Like Oodles, he tried to use air quotes around the word owner.

“Kittens are cute when they try to use air quotes. Makes you look like you are waving at me.” Sally teased.

“Shut up. The videos gave me the details. Not much on you. You’re a homeless kid. You go to school. Schools feed kids. I’m a kid. Let’s get a move on.” With that the kitten climbed in the backpack.

“What’s your name? I’m not Princess. I’m Sally.”

“From the recon tapes, your name is Chupa at school. What’s that mean?”

“It’s Spanish for *It sucks*. Amanda gave me the name. At school you’ll hear, Chupa Chavez. *Sucks to be Chavez*. They’ll laugh their butts off.”

“Want me to melt their eyes out with my lasers?”

“You can do that?”

“I’m a kitten. Not here. Not on the moon. All these brains and my entire vocabulary in front of your people remains different versions of the word *meow*. I’m hungry. Get a move on.” He snuck back into Sally’s backpack. She hiked it up on her shoulder. Confused? Frustrated? Lost?

“Streets are miles and miles of cold cement. Sleep wherever you want on a pillow of concrete. Try it sometime.” Sally muttered to herself, squinting into the morning light. Might as well go to school with a neon, green kitten. Same difference.



## Three

### Battle in the Bathroom

---

**F**eathers. His name was Feathers. Not Fluffy, George, or Tabby. Feathers. A neon green kitten named Feathers, who lived in her backpack all day at school. Sally sighed. As if she didn't have enough problems. After school she didn't head back to the antique store platform right away. She knew Amanda was lurking about. The new haircut didn't give Amanda near enough mileage for taunting Sally, but she took in plenty of punches by shouting "Chupa Chavez for president! The President sucks! Chupa sucks!" Her crew got half the cafeteria to cheer, "Chupa sucks! Chupa sucks! Chupa sucks!"

It was a long day of hiding in the bathroom.

"She does that to you every day?" Feathers asked while they were waiting for everyone leave at the end of the day. Bells ring.

Rumble, rumble of chattering kids. Sally hiked her knees up on the toilet in case an adult came by to inspect. Quiet. Sally came out of hiding, putting Feathers on the counter and pulling out her clean shirt.

“No. Somedays she steals my lunch money.”

“You have lunch money?”

“You’re pretty stupid for an alien cat.”

“Got me there. I got the name Feathers because I used to be able to eat a pterodactyl in one bite.”

“What’s a tear a duck...”

“Flying dinosaur...Never mind. Story for another day. Now I’m a kitten. We need to save your school.”

“No. Right now, I need to wash the one good shirt I have, so I look presentable tomorrow.” The bathroom didn’t smell that bad, and the quiet school offered Sally a moment of peace.

“If Ms. L was still around, I’d say she could help you out.”

“Mrs. L?”

“My boss in the lab coat that left me with you under the platform. We’ve got a mission.”

“We’ll just go back to her exotic pet store.” Sally said, distracted, dousing her shirt in a sink full of water.

“Doesn’t work that way. The shop is gone. We’ve got a mission.”

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“What do you mean the shop is gone?!” Sally asked, panicked. The shirt was dripping and out of habit she draped it over the stall to dry. A janitor in another hallway was rattling chains on doors to lock them with a padlock. She knew that was the “All Clear” sign, meaning they were leaving out of the front and alarming the building. They only locked and alarmed the major doors in case somebody wanted to drive a Jeep through the gym. Guess it could happen.

“You’ve seen the movies. Heard of the space ships? Shop is gone. On our own for a while. I’m your pet kitten.”

“You’re green!” Sally whined.

“You’re homeless,” Feathers grumped. “We’ve been over this.”

“Shut up. I’ve got to think. Let me do my laundry in peace.”

“I’m hungry,” Feathers whined.

“Join the club. Think of it as a fashion statement. All the models are starving themselves on the covers. We might as well do the same.”

“Pretty dark for a fifth grader.”

“You’re pretty green for a kitten.”

“Fair enough.”

They listened a bit longer. Sally poked her head out and glanced up and down the hallway. Crickets. The hum of the furnace could be heard rumbling. It was modern times and all,

but Maya Angelou Elementary still had an alley door that didn't quite latch. Well, especially if Sally Chavez kept putting duct tape over the latch every day when she left school. She scored the duct tape from the janitor closet one night when they were gone. Came in handy.

If Mrs. Gutierrez, Sally's teacher, noticed, she didn't let on, and Sally did her best to remove the tape every night. The building was old enough that there were no security cameras. It was run down enough that there was nothing left to steal. Between the drive-by shootings and the thug life that kept the drugs running, Maya Angelou might be sad.

Sally would have to make it quick. She had two shirts. Stepping into the stall, she changed into her matching, dry shirt.

"Oh, crizzlezits," Feathers hissed.

"Crizzlezits? I'm almost done, just a second."

"Crizzlezits. Mrs. L. says we can't curse in front of children, so we use our native language from our home planet. We're in a situation. ...It's not you. Don't look now, but our mission is scouting us. I think it heard the bell around my neck."

"What?" Sally stepped out of the stall. She checked out into the hallway and ducked her head back into the bathroom. "That's just a giant floor buffer... that's coming here on its own... How did that happen?" She slammed herself back into the stall.

Feathers was still sitting on the bathroom sink. "Great. Leave the alien kitten to battle the floor buffer."

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“Do you even hear yourself?” Sally moaned, slamming her wet T-shirt off the stall wall and shoving it into her backpack. Tears filled her eyes. It meant she would have to wear a wrinkled shirt to school tomorrow. On top of that her notebook papers would be wrinkled and smudged and Mr. Prinkles counted down for pages that were smudged, wrinkled or had the wrong heading. Amanda would have a field day. Mr. Prinkles would sniff down his long nose and barely accept the soggy report entitled, “How humans catch a cold.”

The next thing Sally knew, her arms were covering her head in defense, as she sat on the toilet with her legs up on the seat. Lights. Loud noises. Bangs. Yowling. Growling. Tiger roars. Brighter lights. Groaning gears. Wheezing. Electric pop.

“You can come out now. It’s safe.” Sally peeked one eye out from the stall door. A neon green kitten was licking his paw and grooming himself. A floor buffer looked the same except for a little burnt spot next to the On/Off switch. Well, and it was in the bathroom. Sally took a quick look and wondered if it would make it out. Feathers noticed. “Yeah, we dabbled in a little portal work. Nasty business. One thing is certain, though. Your little report on how a human catches a virus? That has them downright grumpy. Best we pack up and get back to that platform under the antique store. Harder for them to track the homeless. I want chocolate milk tomorrow.” With that, Feathers walked over to Sally’s open backpack. She zipped it up and they headed out the side door. Sally took the piece of duct tape. Amanda was nowhere to be seen. Bullies can’t thump on people every night. Even the trolls needed to sleep in the *Harry Potter* books.

*Doug Johnson*

Feathers made Sally's step a little lighter. If he could do that to the floor buffer, imagine what he could do to Amanda. Sally ignored that little voice in her head that screamed, "Amanda versus the Floor Buffer! An MMA extravaganza!!" She didn't remember much about television, but she had spent a day in Walmart trying to get warm and that had been what the guy next to her was watching. She'd need to scrounge up a coat soon.



## Four

### Feathers v. Mr. Pinkles' Nose

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**N**ose. It dripped. He sniffed. It dripped. He dabbed. It dripped. He blew. It dripped. He sniffed. The cycle continued for the entire class period.

If you had to sit in the front row of Mr. Pinkles' class, you rarely heard what he was saying. It didn't matter. A round, short man with a tuft of brown hair sticking up on the front of his balding head, he was the most disgusting show in school. During the math rotation he started coughing into his handkerchief. Not coughing up a lung up for an anatomy demonstration would be a miracle. Hack. Cough. Nose. Drip. The show continued.

His coughing fit would have him bending down at the waist. He would hold up one index finger to let the kids know to wait just a minute. Then he would slightly bend his knees, cross one ankle over the other and hack and hack and hack from the back of his throat. George said he crossed his ankles so he wouldn't pee. George was an expert. He said his mom had five kids and she did it

all the time. Sally had no idea if George was right, but he said it with such authority, it had to be true. Whatever was true for a fifth grader. She had a neon green kitten in her backpack.

Sally always sat in the front row in Mr. Pinkles' class. She wasn't a nerd. She just had learned that if Amanda's friends used straws to shoot spit wads at her, they would miss once in a while and hit Mr. Pinkles. A spit wad always sent him into a tizzy. For all the nose dripping and lung hacking, he was a neat freak. Maybe that was why. His bow tie balanced perfectly under his double chin, trapped into place by the extra fold of skin. His plaid shirt had not even a hint of wrinkles.

Sally's mind wandered. With a front row seat, she had to look up his nostrils when he talked. It dripped. He sniffed... You get it. "*Achoo!!*" His nose exploded. Well, that's what it sounded like. Not ready with a handkerchief, Mr. Pinkles stood up after the sneeze, his face flushing red. "Sorry." He mumbled. "Sally, you might want to...um..."

"Clean the snot out of your hair!" Imelda yelled from the back. The class erupted in laughter. Nobody had to tell Sally twice. She bolted out of the room to get away from the laughter. She felt the side of her shaved head. Gross. Sticky.

"Well that went well," she heard from her backpack.

"Shut up. We're in the hallway," Sally muttered. "He's never sneezed like that before. Gross." She barreled into the bathroom and pumped out a bunch of paper towels to wet under the sink. She was homeless. It didn't mean she had to be dirty all the time. Her day had started bad enough with the wrinkled shirt she had to wear.

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Feathers hopped out of her pack and onto the counter. “He must be allergic to cats.”

“Somebody will see you! Get in the backpack,” she scolded.

Feathers kept licking his paw. “I’ll use my laser eyes to melt them.”

“You said you can’t do that,” Sally muttered.

“I’m invisible to everyone but you?” He offered with a yawn.

“Is that really true? That would make my life easier?”

“Not at all. I’m an alien. Not a wizard. I’m neon green. On my planet we get to pick a costume. Mrs. L. has limited options let me choose being a kitten. Meow. Aren’t all aliens neon green?”

“Shut up. I’ve got teacher snot in my hair.”

“Could be a Malaysian Proboscis Monkey. Could be worse.”

“A what?”

Feathers yawned again. “Monkey snot. Could be monkey snot. You don’t get out much do you?”

The door burst open. “There she is! It’s all over school. Imelda just texted me. Chupa gets Pinkles boogers in her hair! I had to see for myself. *Hey! That’s a neon green—*” Lasers shot out of Feather’s eyes. Amanda dropped like a rock and started snoring.

“You said you couldn’t do that!” Sally protested, her hair dripping wet.

“I lied. Just makes me tired. Why do you think cats take so many naps? You’re welcome by the way. I’m going to snooze in

the backpack. Snag me some food at lunch. I'm not pulling that trick twice in one day. She's going to have a huge headache and not remember a thing...Oh, except that you were the last thing she saw before the headache came on. Might think you clonked her or something and be mad later." Feathers yawned and slinked into the backpack.

"Great. Teacher snot, *and* Amanda probably thinks I hit her in the head. Why have a neon green kitten if you can't shoot its laser eyes at all your problems?"

"We have a mission. Be quiet so I can sleep," Feathers mumbled.

"Whatever, your royal pain in the buttiness," Sally muttered, hiking the pack over her shoulder, and stepping over Amanda's snoring body.

"I heard that." Feathers snarled.

## Five

### Amanda's Revenge

“**H***appy Birthday, Dear Perla! Happy Birthday to you!*” Perla blew the candles out on her cupcakes. There were no peanuts involved. Maya Angelou Elementary has warning labels about ever bringing peanuts as snacks. It started with a huge lecture on the first day of school. There were signs posted in classrooms. Sally didn’t care about the warning labels. Sally would eat anything to keep her stomach from gnawing at her. The warning label about bringing peanuts to school escaped her. She ate school lunch, so it didn’t matter. She ate whenever there was free food. An empty stomach means you aren’t choosy. It didn’t matter most days.

Today mattered. Some mothers still had nothing to do during the day, so they hovered around their kid’s classroom. Perla’s mom did the hovering in Mrs. Gutierrez’s fifth grade Language Arts class. It was home base. There were horror stories about middle school never having recess or birthday parties. Time would tell. Sally wouldn’t miss recess. Amanda tortured her during recess.

Oh, Amanda. Sally felt her eye again. It would be green in a couple of days, but it was coming in a nice shade of purple at the moment. At least Amanda's crew hadn't torn her shirt during the beat down. She only had two.

Daydreaming and eating her cupcake, Sally didn't see Mrs. Martinez walk up to her. "Oh, dear! What happened!" Perla's mom spotted her.

"Crap....Crizzlezits...Didn't mean to curse. Great. Now Feathers is rubbing off on me." Sally thought. She'd already been to the nurse. She hadn't confessed. Counselor. Hadn't confessed. Principal. Didn't confessed. No way she was giving up Amanda to the adults. Amanda had her crew. Sally? No back up. Mrs. Martinez reached out and took Sally's chin in her hand, "Your face! It looks awful! Who did this to you?!" she demanded. Perla looked at Sally and frowned. Perla ran with Amanda when she was at school, even though Mrs. Martinez didn't know it.

"I fell down some stairs," Sally mumbled, wanting to get back to her cupcake.

"You did not! I demand you tell me who did this to you. I'm going to report them." She stood up and crossed her arms. Sally looked up at her. Perla's eyes went wide, looking up at her mother. She bolted out of her desk and started walking over.

"I fell down some stairs. I'm clumsy." Sally showed her a scar on her arm where a guy had burnt her with a cigarette. She wouldn't give him her backpack. He was strung out, so when he started laughing about the burn, Sally skittered away and hid in some old person's house where they had bushes. Sally had been through

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worse with adults. She tossed her chin in the air, and dared Mrs. Martinez to keep up the interrogation.

“Mom! We’re missing the party!” Perla blurted, out of breath, yanking on her mother’s sleeve.

“This girl is hurt!” she blustered.

“That’s just Chupa. She’s always in the principal’s office.” Perla sold it, shaking her head and winking at her mom. Sally didn’t care. It worked. Whatever. The cupcake didn’t taste as sweet anymore, but food was food.

After school, hiding in the bathroom, and reading a library book, Sally heard a “Meow.” Hefting her backpack onto the sink, she undid the zipper. “Wow. Your eye is purple.”

“Your fur is green! It’s been three days! I could have used your help.” Sally hissed at Feathers.

“I told you the laser trick took it out of me. Ever see a cat on a treadmill? We eat. We hunt. We nap.”

“You said you were an alien.” Sally put her hands on her hips.

“You’re a homeless student. I’m an alien cat. See how that works?”

Pointing to her eye, she hissed, “No. I don’t. Amanda beat the crap out of me for the laser eye trick and you slept through the entire thing!”

Feathers yawned. “You survived. I should tell you about the Russian peasant boy I helped in the circus once. See I was a dancing bear and he was a....”

“I don’t care!” Sally stomped.

“Got enough to eat today?”

“Why shouldn’t I just dump you on the street somewhere and let a dog eat you?” She leaned over Feathers with her hands still on her hips.

“Kind of drafty in here.” Feathers went to licking his paw. “You need me. We have a mission. I zapped Amanda.”

“She beat me up!” Sally’s fists clenched and she straightened up in frustration.

“Two out of three. I’m told that’s pretty good on your planet.” Feathers went back to licking his paw. “Anyway, I was a dancing bear and boy was I good. The boy was okay—.”

“Shut up. I have to wash my shirt. It needs to dry before we leave for the platform.

“It’s getting colder. You need a coat.”

“I said, shut up.” Feathers yawned circled around himself three times and laid down for a nap. “Unbelievable.”



## Six

### Double Trouble

Sally dreamed of the old TV show Walker, Texas Ranger. He kept kicking her in the head. They were on the North Pole. Santa was holding Feathers and laughing...So maybe it was more of a nightmare. She woke up under the platform, staring, cold and with a pounding headache. Amanda's beating yesterday took a toll. "Morning Sunshine," Feathers nodded. "Time to get to work. We need to recon the mission. You probably need some aspirin for that headache"

"Recon? What does that even mean?" Sally held her pounding temple. "How did you know I had a headache?"

"Reconnaissance...Look around. Headache? I scanned your head with my laser eyes...You were rubbing your temples."

"Why didn't you just say that?" Sally moaned.

Feathers climbed in the backpack. "Move' em out, soldier! I want chocolate milk today."

Stiffly, Sally peered through the plastic lattice that kept them hidden under the platform. It wouldn't be much of a hiding place, if people saw them coming and going. "I'm not a soldier. I thought chocolate was bad for animals."

"Can be. I'm an alien. I'm not a cat. I love chocolate. Get over yourself. Be whatever you want. Today you're a soldier. We've got a mission."

"I'm starving."

"Great! Let's recon the cafeteria. Chocolate milk! Chocolate milk! Forward march! Chocolate milk!"

Sally peeled herself and her backpack out of the hiding place with Feathers chanting away, zipped into the bag. "Shut up. We're headed into public."

"I want chocolate milk."

"I heard, you big baby." Sally grumbled.

Breakfast was uneventful. Well, almost. At least Amanda laid off yelling, "*Chupa Chavez*" the entire time. Perla must have told her about Mrs. Martinez at the class party, so Amanda was on the lookout for adults hunting for who had beaten her up.

"Walk around the walls." Feathers ordered from the backpack, as Sally sat by herself in the corner.

"I'm starving. I'm going to eat."

"Well, hurry up. We need to look around."

"Shut up. Somebody might hear you and think I'm nuts."

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“Meow.” Sally ate. “Meow.” Sally slumped and sighed. Plopping her backpack down, she unzipped the top a little bit. “Ouch. Don’t plop me so hard.” Sally dropped some egg bites into the backpack. “Chocolate milk.”

“They were out.”

“Walk around.”

“I’m eating,” Sally hissed.

“Eat faster.” More kids rumbled into the cafeteria for breakfast. Mrs. Gutierrez said when they renamed the school, they bought the newer round cafeteria tables. Sally never understood what Maya Angelou had to do with tables. “Walk. We’re almost out of time.” Frustrated, Sally shoved the last of the egg and toast in her mouth and gulped down her milk. “Leave the zipper open a little bit.” Sally tried to act natural, like she was interested in the burnt orange tile that lined the walls.

“What are you doing, Chupa?” Jose asked as she passed his table. Jose was like Amanda... the light model. He wasn’t trying to get into her brother’s gang. He still needed to front like he was a little thug. At the end of the day, he wasn’t really that mean and he didn’t want to get caught beating up a girl.

“Just counting the tiles,” She lied. “It’s for a math project.”

“I heard you fell down the stairs and into Amanda’s fist.” He grinned at his buddies.

“Something like that.” Sally kept walking

“Meow! Don’t look the Coke machine in the eye!” Feathers yelled.

“What did you say?” Jose got up to follow her, but she hadn’t noticed. His khaki pants kind of sagged. The school was strict about gang clothes. He did have on an oversize Raiders jersey. Sally paused a minute, pretending she was counting tiles and daydreaming back to the first day of school assembly. It was kids like Amanda and Jose that made the principal warn them the first day in the assembly about the dress code.

“If too many people break the dress code, we will adopt a policy of using uniforms. We will keep it in your budgets. Simple black T-shirt for a top, for both boys and girls. So before you think you want to run with the *Norteños*...”he drawled, pausing for affect. “Think again. We have the school board’s approval to make this move. Don’t push it.”

Uniforms would just make us like a bad version of a *Harry Potter* book. Picture it. Uniforms without robes. Without a business man’s tie. Without wands. Without magic.

“Hey! Chupa! What did you say?!” Jose stepped in to her ear, popping the bubble of of her daydream with a mock threat. OK, so black T-shirts on poor kids is nothing like *Harry Potter*. Before she could answer, a yowl came from her back pack. Jose jumped back.

“Meow! Don’t look the Coke machine in the eye! They take your picture and upload it to the Internet! Fact!” Sally didn’t know what to do. Feathers was just going to keep shouting from the backpack. She bolted out of the cafeteria. Looking over her shoulder, right before the door, she saw Jose twirling his index finger in a circle near his temple. The table was all laughing. She ran to the bathroom

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to regroup. The cracked small window at the top let in a little breeze. She was trying to catch her breath.

“Now they think I’m crazy. Thanks, Feathers.” She would have yelled at him, but her side hurt from running that fast after gulping down her food.

“You sure spend quite a bit of time in the bathroom” a voice creaked, echoing off the walls.

“Who said that?” Sally looked back and forth at the stained drop ceiling.

“Third stall over, open the door. Don’t worry, I’m decent,” the voice creaked.

Sally slowly opened the stall door. The lid to the toilet went up and down. “That’s better.”

“Hey, Boss,” Feathers chimed in.

“Boss? Mrs. L.? You can change into a toilet?” Sally blustered.

“No, Deary. The only thing on my to do list would be a Number one and a Number two. Get it?” A cackling sound of laughter echoed across the bathroom. “Update me on the mission Feathers,” the toilet ordered.

“Well, got into it with a X1-5.”

“Overhead projector?”

“Floor buffer.”

“What about the—.”

“Achoo!!” Feathers let out a cute little kitten sneeze. Sally’s pigtail tinged green at the bottom, and some kind of blue halo glowed about her head. Sally gasped, looking at herself in the mirror.

“Oh, dear...Feathers has caught a cold. Not good. Not good at all. You two need to finish the mission, quick or things will get messy,” the toilet warned.

## Seven

### Feathers the Furious Furball

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**A**choo! A centimeter of green crawled up Sally's braid. So much for cute and cuddly. After much debate with Mrs. L, the toilet, it was decided to attempt the mission right away, in case Feathers got any worse.

"What could be worse?" Sally whimpered, as they made their way to Mr. Prinkles' room.

"End of the world. Big monsters taking over. Standard yada, yada, yada. Achoo!" The green, neon green, like Feathers, crawled up her pigtail by a centimeter. The halo flickered and then came on a little stronger.

"Feathers!" Sally hissed.

"Oh, yeah...and you could...change..."

"Into what?" Kids were bumping her in the hallway.

“Talking to yourself again, Chupa?” This time it was Joey. He wasn’t so bad. Hair drooped in his eyes and he wore ratty rock band shirts that were too big. “Cool hair. You should dye all of it that color. That would rock!” Joey whipped his hair out of his eyes and threw her a *hang loose* sign with his thumb and pinky waving at her. He bounced into one of his buddies and let her move along.

“Not now. The mission. You have to sit near the robot vacuum.”

“You told me a thousand times in the bathroom. Sit near the robot vacuum. I’ve seen it. Looks like a cheap hockey puck that grew too big. After I sit down, I put this kitten sticker on the vacuum when Mr. Prinkles takes attendance. What could go wrong? It’s just a dumb vacuum.”

“An XZ-37 may be dumb, but they are extremely effective at finding a host to replicate their viral payloads.”

“English. I’m in fifth grade,” she whispered.

“Cool hair, Chupa!” Juana was okay. She clicked a photo of the pigtail and moved down the way.

“Um...I’ve got this cold...The X1-5 had a germ on it. I caught the germ...That’s why you should always wash your hands.”

“I’ll remember that the next time I fight a floor buffer. I’m just about to walk into class. English, please.”

“A virus contains bad things. They don’t have factories. They invade a factory, have bad thing babies and grow up to do bad things.”

“It’s just a stupid robot,” Sally muttered, pushing on the door to Science.



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“Mr. Prinkles’ student computers work?”

“No. Shut up. I get it.”

“I rest my case. Sit next to the—.”

“Can’t.” Sally slid into a desk in the back. Luckily, Mr. Prinkles didn’t have a seating chart. He made you yell your name.

“Why not?” Feathers hissed.

The stupid robot vacuum was hard at work, wandering the classroom. Bonk. Zoom... Bonk...Whirr...Bonk...Zoom. Mr. Prinkles had the vacuum running in the classroom to tidy up the dusty floor. He started taking attendance.

“Alvarez.”

“Here.”

Sniff. Drip. Wipe. “Benitez.”

“Here.” Sniff. Drip. Wipe. Sally’s name was next on his list. “Chavez.”

“TO THE DEATH CALIXUS 1!!” Feathers jumped out of the backpack and onto an empty desk. Bonk...Zoom...Bonk... Whirr...Bonk... “I said to the death! DRAW your Weapon!” Bonk...Zoom...Bonk... Whirr...Bonk...”

Bolting up, Mr. Prinkles yelled, “Miss Chavez, I am horribly allergic to cats! It’s a nasty joke to spray paint a kitten and start yelling in my classroom. Stand up! Now! And get that—.”

Flash. Lights. Bang. The vacuum became a six-foot black cylinder. Red light and glowing eyes... Arms started to bust out of each side. Feathers yelled at Sally, diving at the monster.

“A little portal work! See you on the other side!” Poof. A flash of blue light and the two aliens were gone. The lights flickered, went off, and then came back on.

“ACHOO!!” Mr. Prinkles’ fury ripened his head into a bright red tomato. Trembling with rage he shook his finger at the door. “CHAVEZ! OFFICE!!” Without waiting, he stomped out the room, sneezing his head off. Oh, and he didn’t cross his legs at all. George was right. Sally’s timing was off, but all she could think about was writing Mr. Tinkles on the board.

“What the heck. What else could go wrong?” She marched up to the board and scribbled.

*Mr. Tinkles had a stuffed cat*

*Mr. Tinkles wasn't really, really fat*

*Mr. Tinkles couldn't keep her*

*Mr. Tinkles had to eat her.*

*ACHOO!!!!* Sally underlined it. Kids had their phones out, taking pictures of the board. She picked up her backpack and looked down at her pigtail. Great. Two more centimeters of neon green.

## Eight

### Martians, Sadness, and Madness

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That didn't take long. Mr. Prinkles wanted to stay for the principal's frowning lecture, but his sneezing fit kept him in the bathroom. Well, that was Sally's guess. That was also where she wanted to be. Hiding in the bathroom, not sitting at the big conference table with Mrs. Gutierrez, Mr. Juarez, the counselor, and Principal Greene.

"I see you dipped your pigtail in green paint to honor me. I'm touched." Crickets. Sally looked at the table. It was a huge table. Fake wood top. Nice chairs. Nice carpet. "Did you hear me, Sally?" Sally looked up and nodded. Principal Greene glanced at his phone. "Thanks to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and all your friends at school, I see you spray-painted a kitten a neon green color, brought him to Science class, even though you knew the teacher was deathly allergic to cats and then wrote a poem on the board, before marching down here. Oh, and we can't forget how you had Mark run to the light switch and flick it on and off. Jose took credit for the exploding powder for

the smoke...At least he claims credit.” He put his phone down and squared his shoulders towards Sally. She was on the opposite end with Mrs. Gutierrez. Mr. Juarez sat next to the principal. Mr. Juarez was a balding middle-aged guy. Wore his white T-shirt under his polo every day. Fashionable glasses.

“Principal Greene, it’s my professional opinion that we are looking at a deeply disturbed young-.” Principal Greene probably played football because he did a small linebacker stiff arm to the counselor to shut him up. He pointed at Sally.

“Why’d you do it?”

“Honey, find your words,” Mrs. Gutierrez coached. “We’re just trying to understand. We want to help. You’re not in any-.”

Stiff arm again. “We’re not quite there, yet, Mrs. Gutierrez. If you read this out loud this it is a mountain of trouble to be in for fifth grader. Who gave you that black eye?” He asked, pointing at Sally’s face. “Why is your left ear lobe the same color as your pigtail?”

Sally stiffened. She hadn’t had time to look in the mirror. “I fell down the stairs. I didn’t paint the cat,” she blurted.

“Which lie am I supposed to believe? I’ve got to replace a teacher’s \$300 dollar vacuum. You should pay for it. You destroyed it, wherever it went. Can you pay for it?” Sally nodded, no. She looked up at the motivational poster with Maya Angelou. *I’ve learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*

Sally looked back at the principal. “I can’t pay for it.” She wanted to cry, but she was trying to hold back the tears. “I fell down

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the stairs. If I tell you something else, I'll get beaten up again. I didn't paint the kitten. He just showed up that color one day."

"We can protect you, if you tell us—." Mr. Juarez started.

Sally lost it. "Really?!" she yelled, pointing to her eye. She wiped away a tear. "This was done by one of your students. I'll get beat up again if I tell which one!" The tears streamed down her cheeks. "I didn't ask for a green alien cat to climb into my backpack! I got snot in my hair from Mr. Prinkles sneezing on me last week. Were you there? No!" Mrs. Gutierrez patted her back. Sally flinched away from her touch, turning away.

A crumpled piece of paper. Sally became a crumpled piece of paper, crying in the chair, hiking her knees up around her chest, sobbing.

"Mrs. Gutierrez. Mr. Juarez. You are dismissed. I need to speak with Miss Chavez, alone." Sally's sobs filled the room and the adults melted away. Clearing his throat, Mr. Greene leaned back in his chair and tapped his pencil on the table. "Your school address says, 317 Birch. You still live there?" Sally nodded, yes. Mr. Greene spoke softly. "I drove by there this afternoon to talk to your mother. They tore that house down five years ago." Sally looked up horrified, still sniffing and sobbing. This couldn't be happening. He looked out the window instead of at Sally. His voice softened even lower. "You ran away from your first foster home. We didn't notice because we sent a change of address form. You snagged that form, didn't you?" Sally nodded yes. "When you were seven?" She nodded again. He

*Doug Johnson*

shook his head. “*Mi’ja*, where have you been living?” The crumpled heap pulled her knees to her chest tighter and just kept heaving with sobs. Principal Greene just sat with her, staring out the window.

As Sally sobbed and sobbed, she thought, “Yep. Things can get worse.”

## Nine

### Back from the Portal

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Sally didn't remember when she stopped crying. She had fallen asleep somewhere along the way. She woke up in the nurse's office. She was sweaty. Principal Greene had carried her to the cot in the back with strict orders not to wake her up, or pelt her with questions. She didn't know that. There was a curtain drawn in front of the cot. Sally figured it was there so students didn't have to watch someone puke. Feeling around, she panicked. Ducking her head around the curtain, she said, "Where's my backpack?"

"Principal Greene has it in a safe—"

Sally bolted up and ran out of the nurse's office, busting into the main office. "I need my backpack! Where's my backpack!"

Miss Marple gave her a constipated smile. The kind where your lips are thin and it looks like you're straining. "Principal Greene has it in a safe—."

Sally bolted for his door and knocked herself backwards. The door was locked. “Where is he?! I need my backpack!” Miss Marple offered her a sad look.

“Honey, he’ll be back. It’s safe. Why don’t you head back to the nurses station before classes change over and kids start to fill the hallway?” Sally got the hint. Kids were worse than a missing backpack. One problem at a time. She tried to lay back down, but she was too agitated. Principal Greene knew her secret. What was she going to do? School was the only place she could get food. The teenagers wanted to beat her up and the adults claimed all the best dumpsters behind the restaurants. Before Feathers, it wasn’t the greatest, but it had been working. Keep her head low, eat the school food and wash one of her shirts at night. She was surviving. She’d even learned how to read and do some math. She didn’t have a phone, but who cared. If she needed to watch TV, she’d wander into a Walmart for a little bit and pretend to be some family’s lost kid. She was so little it was amazing how much she could watch before they got suspicious. She learned to rotate stores. She could watch TV almost twenty-fours a day during the school year, if you counted all the educational videos and YouTube they assigned on the computers.

If she ever got her hands on Feathers, she was going to...how do you threaten a kitten? He was annoying, but nobody can be mean to a kitten. Well, Amanda could, but she didn’t count. “Ready?” Principal Greene jolted her out of her daydream. She blinked up at him. He chuckled. “I hear, you are quite fond of a certain, little satchel.”



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“What’s a satchel?” He grinned again and pulled her backpack from behind his behind him, and offered it to her. “My backpack!” Sally screeched. First, she hugged it like a Teddy Bear, and then she searched the front zipper pocket to see if the picture of her mother was still there. She zipped the picture back into its pouch and slung her pack on, standing up.

“Why is more of your ear, green? Did you find a marker?” Principal Greene pulled her hair away. Sally shook her head, no. Her confused look brought the nurse nearby.

“She might have a condition. I noticed that earlier. I did a small exam while she was asleep. Her arm hair is faint, but if you shine a pen light on it, you can see it green, like the cat she spr-painted.” Not waiting for Sally’s approval, the nurse rolled over on his chair, and yanked up Sally’s sleeve. “That and she’s been burned at least two times. From my experience these are cigarette burns.” Sally moaned inside. She didn’t want to be the only homeless child in America to be dissected at school like a frog. Burns, green hair, no food. What was new? It was called Tuesday if you are homeless every day. Remember?

“Did you color your arm hair, Sally? Tons of kids scribble on their arms when they are nervous, but only the hair? How did you do that?” Principal Greene’s questions weren’t the dangerous adult kind of question. She sensed a touch of kindness. A touch of curiosity. Like Mrs. L in Malarkey’s Exotic Pet and Toy Store that first night. Sally shrugged, nodded her head, no, and pulled her arm back, rolling the sleeve down. He let it go. “I’ll be straight with you, Sally.” After Science today, there’s no way we can let you go back

to that house.” Sally cocked her head to one side, and finally figured out he was trying to keep her homeless status to a minimum of adult ears. She nodded. “Good. So, I’m going to take you to Rod’s House. It’s a safe place. Mostly teenagers, but it will be better than that apartment you have been living in.” She played along and nodded again. “Tomorrow we’ll figure out a better plan.”

Sally hadn’t ridden in many cars. Principal Greene must be making tons of money because he had a shiny Subaru with all-terrain tires. She didn’t know where he was going to go besides school, but he looked prepared. He didn’t talk much. She was glad. School was over. He had waited just long enough until all the kids had left, and she could follow him out the back door behind the cafeteria. The cafeteria kitchen sparkled, and Sally wondered if she could get a job, cleaning their floors or something for extra food.

“Here we are. New kids come in through the back door to make sure things are safe. The older kids use the front door, and come and go a bit more. You’ll meet Rod here in a minute.” Principal Greene rang the bell on the massive steel screen door. A nice Black man with white hair and big teeth answered the door.

“Tyler!”

“Rod!” Thanks for having us. We have another cherub for you to take care of for a few days.” Sally peeked out from behind Principal Greene. She knew this was a step closer to foster care, but she was stuck. She’d have to think of a way out of it later. The adults did all of their talking, and even though Sally had taken a nap, after they fed her at the little kitchen table her eyes were drooping. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been in four walls with

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heat. Everything had a yellow tint with the lamps buried under their shades.

In the haze, she scoped out the other kids. Great. Teenagers. Not a good mix. At least the ones she met on the street were never a good mix. The nice talk was all formal and they finally let her sit in the kitchen. She wouldn't let them take her backpack, but she couldn't resist the food. It was weird to have food cooked from a home kitchen, but she didn't protest. A simple mac and cheese with hot dogs was incredible.

Her eyes kept drooping. She finally woke up startled when she heard her fork clink against the plate. She must have dropped it, falling asleep.

Rod chuckled to Principal Greene. They'd been chatting about the progress of the kid's shelter. "Looks like we have a winner. Ariel?"

"Yes?" A petite Filipino girl appeared.

"Can you help Sally to her bed? She'll be sleeping next to you, tonight."

"Yes, Sir." With that, Ariel tugged at Sally until she was awake enough to walk to the bed. Sally clutched her backpack to her chest. She fell into the bed and instantly started snoring. Clothes and all. She hugged her backpack, to make sure it wouldn't get stolen. Just how it worked. The bed was a bit soft, though, and as Sally drifted off, she thought she might have to try sleeping on the floor. Beds were too soft, and she was used to cold concrete. Whatever. This was dreamy. Ariel clicked off the light and closed the door. Dreamy, dreamy, dreamy.

“Wake up.” It was Feathers. Sally rubbed her eyes and sat up. All the lights were off. Just a neon green *glowing* kitten to light the room like an ancient computer screen.

“What do *you* want?” Sally demanded, discovering who was there.

“The mission isn’t over. We need to move. Open your precious backpack. I need to hop in.”

“WHAT HAPPENED?!” Sally half whispered and half yelled.

“I told you. A little portal work. *Achoo!* Oops. We *really* need to move.”

Sally moaned. “What now?! Hey! I can see in the dark!”

“No. You can see better in the dark. That’s thanks to me.”

“What?” Her door suddenly creaked open. Great. A teenager. He smelled, but it was more like too much body cologne on top of body odor. Probably in middle school or something. He had stringy, greasy hair.

“My name’s Pablo. I think we’re going to be—” Pablo slumped forward and landed on his face.

“Um...I’m going to nap for three days... You need to find a way back to the platform.” Feathers started climbing into the backpack.

“Why can I see better in the dark?” Sally hissed.

“You have cat eyes!” came a muffled yell.

## Ten

### Befana to the Rescue

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“We’ve got a runner!” a random teenager yelled from the living room. Sally muttered the few curse words she knew from the street but still kept running toward the back door. Rod, who was sitting at the table sipping coffee jumped up and crouched like a football paper in front of the back door. Not thinking Sally jumped. She ducked because she almost bumped her head against the chandelier, clearing Rod by about a foot and a half. He stood there, too shocked to move. Landing in a superhero pose with one knee down and a fist laid out in back, she didn’t wait. She yanked the back door open and sprinted down the dark alley. Back to square one. She zigged and zagged over broken hurricane fences.

Problem was she knew the landmarks around the school, so it was easy to find her hiding spot under the platform. Now she was lost. All she could think to do was run. She slowed up a bit when she didn’t hear shouting or footsteps. Snoring. Great. Feathers was out. She was on her own. Out of habit, she ducked behind a bush

to get her bearings in peace. She could see First street. Most of the homeless loved to hang out south next to the YMCA behind the World War I statue. Nobody knew their names. Nobody knew the homeless. Sally felt stupid for getting noticed. It was safer when they didn't notice you. Now she was turning green, had cat eyes and was carrying a neon green cat. More snoring.

She pictured the hiding place. She had to be there by morning. If Feathers woke up and sneezed again, she might be sprouting a tail. She licked the back of her hand, and then used the back of her hand to stroke her head. Crizzlezits. Now she was grooming herself like the kitten. Picturing the hiding place, she started moving through the shadow. Yakima wasn't that big. She had to avoid the mission on north First. The bums that didn't survive the sermon for the meal were just hanging around smoking bad cigarettes. They were really mean. She avoided north Yakima at all costs, if she could. She looked at the lights and saw the Jalisco. A Mexican restaurant off of north First. Well, maybe Sally's new cat eyes would protect her.

Shadow. Zig. Wait. Zag. Dog bark. Shadow. *To the right.*

"Who said that?" Sally whispered. *Down that street.* The night couldn't get worse. Scratch that. Sally knew that wasn't true. It could get worse. What the heck. Sally turned right down the next street. *Crack!* Sally jumped back and covered her eyes from the lightning strike.

"Over here, Deary. Quick." A hunched shadow frantically waved at Sally. She jogged up to a tiny store front squished between a Crumpkins Liquor and Yakima Tropical Fish. *Malarky's Exotic Pet and Toys* was painted in a chipped golden arch on the window.

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Sure looked old. Not at all like a space ship. Sally rushed inside and Mrs. L closed the door.

“Hey, Girlfriend!” Oodles yelled. Puffs of orange and blue were mixed in the poodle’s hair. “Love the green!” Sally was nervous. She licked the back of her hand and ducked her head under her left hand.

“Deary, this is worse than I thought.” Mrs. L. said. “Tsk. Your forearms. Now.” She pointed. Sally pulled up her sleeve. More green hair was filling in. “Show me your nose.” Sally bent down to let her look up her nostrils.” Mrs. L patted Sally on the cheek. “Good. There’s hope. No whiskers. Lars!”

The Doberman with the floppy years appeared. For some reason, Sally found his presence comforting. A Hindu wall hanging draped over a bench. An old Apple computer housing, spray painted blue and yellow, held a gold fish bowl. The gold fish was back lit and seemed happy. His bowl was labeled like a dog dish and said “SPOON.” He chatted with a smart phone duct taped to an antique iron they used to iron clothes with in ancient times. Lars lumbered in. “Yes, Boss,” the Doberman sat.

“Feathers needs a decongestant. Third shelf. Don’t bump the phoenix feather distillery. The flying pig needs to quit molting.”

“Yes, Boss.” The Doberman loped away. Hilda, the bat flew by. Igor wheezed by a couple of second later. Crash. Mrs. L. shook her head. Crash, crash.

“Ismael! Yes, I call you, Ismael! Knock it off!” she croaked in the direction of a Persian rug. Different room. Different rug than what Sally saw earlier when Oodles cut her hair. “Lars! Hurry!” She

fumed. Sally had a crooked finger wagging in her face. “Here’s the deal, Deary. Feathers is sick. He fought off the XZ-37, but they’ll be sending a new one, soon.”

“But he said something about a viral load and blah, blah, blah...”

“Deary. Enough. I have to stop Ismael from tearing my space ship apart. Lars is going to give you some medicine. You have to make it to the platform. You have to nurse Feathers back to health, or things could get worse.”

“You said that before! I’m turning into a cat! I can’t go back to school. What am I going to eat?” Crash.

“Lars! Figure it out, Deary. Three pills a day. Water. Feathers likes tuna. Stay out of sight.” Mrs. L. limped away. “Ismael! Stay out of my chocolate!”

Lars bounded back into the room. The pill bottle had dog slobber. He dropped it at Sally’s feet. “She give you the instructions?” Sally nodded. “We’re taking off soon. Can’t really stay in one place long down here. Besides, it smells. Best you go.” Lars hooked his head to the door. Sally picked up the pills and put them in a small side pocket in her backpack. Head down, she headed out the door. Poof. Instant darkness. There was just an alley left between Crumpkins and the Tropical Fish. Sally sat down against the alley wall when a police car roared by, screaming with a siren and lights. She looked up. If she jogged down Fruitvale for a bit, she would be home in about twenty minutes. Platform in twenty minutes. She’d been safe there for two weeks. Might as well put out some flowers and paint the shutters.



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Twenty minutes. Huffing and puffing. Finally. Home sweet plastic lattice. Sally looked both ways, and pulled down the plastic. “We’re home, Feathers.” Clank. Something glinted in the moonlight. Sally settled in and felt around for the clank. It was a metal box. She shook it and wondered how it had gotten there. Gently, she opened it up. She brought it to her face, trying out her cat eyes. Squinting she read a note someone had left behind in the box. “Here’s some sandwiches, Honey. I won’t give your secret away. Push on the lattice three times. Watch.” Sally was too curious. She pushed the lattice three times. The third floor of the Sunset Apartments had a solitary window. Somebody clicked a lamp off and on three times. Sally looked back down at the note. “I’m Belfana. I live in apartment 357. It looks like you could use a friend. Come when you can. Belfana can help.” Sally tested it again. She pushed the lattice out three times. The lamp clicked on and off three times. She sniffed the sandwiches. They weren’t tuna, but Feathers would have to make do. Maybe Belfana had some chocolate milk. Tomorrow. Sally opened a sandwich and munched. Peanut Butter and Jelly. Her favorite. She scrounged around. A juice box. She definitely needed to visit Belfana. She couldn’t go back to school for a while. Maybe ever, if this green fur didn’t stop growing.



# Eleven

## Partners

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357. Sally considered her options. The front door was locked. You had to buzz in, which would make her stand around too long with somebody's camera looking at her ever-changing green skin. Scouting it out around two a.m., she discovered that even the front step smelled like bleach. Feathers snored in her backpack. That wasn't going to work. She walked around the building, careful to watch for other night creatures. She'd done the night walk before. There was a silent beauty where everything went to sleep. If you slept during the day, then the night walk was a piece of cake. She didn't have much time. Feathers needed his medicine, even if he was napping. Bingo. Fire escape. Now if Sally hadn't been just a fifth grader, it would have all been peachy. She couldn't reach the bottom rung. Wait! Sure enough. Success. The cat-like jumping trick worked again and she grabbed the bottom rung. 357.

She scrambled to what she thought was the third floor. New problem. What window was 357? She sat down and sighed. "*Psst!*" A

window creaked open. “Over here! Go to the front door. I’ll buzz you in.” So Belfana had been looking for her. Sally needed a friend right now. She hoped Belfana wasn’t just a stinky cat lady. Feathers would flip when he woke up. On instinct, she jumped down like she was a cat and jogged around to the front, trying to stay out of the street lights. A quick buzzing noise told her to pull the door, and she rushed into the lobby. There were carpeted stairs straight ahead. Gloomy light blue carpet with flower swirls covered the floors. Dirt. Dirt in the threads of the carpet. Dirt in the light blue stains. Sally didn’t want to know what color brown was just off to the right when she entered the lobby. It smelled old. Not bad. Just... It didn’t smell like the street with passing restaurant smells of food or snow biting your nose. The smells on the street changed. This smell stayed the same day in and day out. Sally had been to school. School smelled the same every day. Sometimes bleach. Sometimes socks. This place smelled the same too. Different, but the same.

Looking up and down, she guessed that 357 was higher up, so she started climbing the stairs. Nobody came out. She heard muffled television laughing from inside different apartments. 357. Odd. Sally felt scared, but she knocked anyway. “There you are, Honey!” An old woman looking her square in the face clapped her hands together in glee. “Come, come, come. Come inside. Oh! How I’ve been waiting for this day.” Glancing from side to side, as if Principal Greene was there to trap her, Sally crouched and slowly stepped inside. “Oh, Honey. They’re not here. Don’t worry. Come, come. Do you like soup? I made some chicken soup.” Sally looked up to see ceramic chickens... and robot pictures? Ceramic robots?

“Do you know...”

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“Mrs. L? Her full name is Laurme. She’s my older sister. I should say I know her. There was this one time she hung me on the doorknob by my underwear. Talk about a wedgie of epic proportions.”

“Did she send me to you?” Sally blurted.

“Not in a manner of speaking. Laurma is busy saving the universe, experimenting, and collecting her zoo. Important things, you know. When we grew up, I needed to stay in one place... Well, kind of. Anyway, as far as it matters, I’m here for you. Now.”

Growl. “Unbelievable. You let him in here!” A purple cat launched itself onto the coffee table.

“Not now, Nerissa. We have guests,” Belfana scolded. A yellow finch came out of a complicated wooden clock that looked like a cabin. It screamed. Sally ducked. “I’ve been meaning to change that ring tone. Keeps Emily from across the hall calling 911. Nerissa. Behave. I need to take this call.” As if nothing was wrong, Belfana reached over and plucked a ceramic chicken head off a cookie jar. Nodding she pursed her lips. “Yes... I understand... Three a day... Yes... Tuna...”

“He’s not getting my Chicken of the Sea!” Nerissa yelled. Belfana put her hand up like a traffic cop to shut up the purple cat and nodded her head a couple of more times. Out of nerves and habit, Sally licked the back of her hand, ducked her head and stroked it against her hair.

“Stop that,” Nerissa ordered. “He’s a moron. Stop acting like him.” Sally looked up confused. The clock with the screaming finch clicked seconds by. A scratchy song warbled in the back room. Belfana wasn’t around. “Oh, good grief. Harry Belafonte. Now,

you've done it. I'll never hear the end of this," Nerissa whined. "Follow me." Sally followed the purple cat into the tiny kitchen. It smelled amazing. She hadn't realized how hungry she was. She didn't know what time it was, but the hazy four wall effect was getting to her. Yellow warm lights from a heated building. Belfana waved her to a squat table. Sally ate her soup. For all she knew, she fell asleep at the table.

## Twelve

### Recovering for the Mission

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“**W**akey, wakey, eggs and bakey.” Belfana smiled. Oh. Sally really did sleep at the table. She wiped drool off her face and squinted in the sunlight. “Sleep well, Honey?” Sally sat up, stiff. She felt for her backpack and stiffened. “Don’t worry, Honey. Feathers had his medicine. He’ll wake up soon.”

“His name is Ivan. Feathers is his *street* name. Dork,” Nerissa snarled. Bacon was sizzling. The kitchen smelled beautiful. Sally barely heard the purple cat.

“Oh, give it a rest, Nerissa. It’s been 400 years. He was a teenager. You were smitten. You broke up. It happens.” Belfana smacked the pan with her spatula. She was standing on an ancient wooden stool. She stepped down. A faded flower was painted on the floor. Sally couldn’t get over the smell. The pure gorgeous smell of food.

“He broke my heart!” Nerissa moaned.

“Eat your breakfast. Be quiet.” Sally licked the back of her hand and stroked her head. “Honey, eat your eggs.” Belfana put a plate in front of Sally. “Nerissa is right about one thing. You need to resist the urge to groom in public.”

After swallowing a mouthful of eggs, she mumbled, “Well, who cares? I’m turning green. School wants to lock me in fifth grader jail with a nasty foster mother. Not happening. Might as well take a shower with my tongue.”

“No, Honey. We go back to school tomorrow.” Belfana was back up on her stool stirring something else in a pan.

“Looking like Ivan?” Nerissa giggled. “Can I come?”

“You’re purple. Not a good look,” Feathers grumped, stuffing his nose in her food dish.

“Hey! You had a full can of tuna with your meds, Ivan!” Nerissa yelled, jumping to the table to protest.

“Honestly, you two. This is why people prefer robots to cats,” Belfana moaned, banging the skillet and stirring the pot. The sun was pushing through the faded bedsheet that substituted as a curtain over the kitchen sink window.

“Tell him to stop eating my tuna!”

“My name is Feathers.”

“Just because the bird in the clock used to be a tetradactyl, doesn’t make you a lion! You were a normal tabby cat that ate a finch, before Laurma took you in! You dork!” Nerissa was yelling. Game shows were playing in the background from other old people waking up in the building. It didn’t seem to phase Feathers. He’d



finished the tuna and was licking his... back paw... the way cats do. “Gross! I am so glad I broke up with you!”

“Glad to hear it, Peaches,” Feathers mumbled. Jumping down from the table, Nerissa bounded out of the room, screaming like a teenage girl.

“Ivan—,” Belfana started.

“Feathers.”

“Fine, little cute, neon, green, kitty. Feathers. Might as well add to the fluffy factor,” Belfana sing-songed. She was still banging skillet and stirring pots. She wiped her hands on her apron and tossed a look at the kitten. He stopped licking. “Nerissa does have a point. Humans ignore cats licking everything. I know better.” Feathers got the point. He sat on his haunches and blinked at Belfana.

“So, what’s the update on the mission?”

Wiping her hands on her apron, she stepped down and took Sally’s chin in her hand, moving her head from right to left, squinting. Huffing, she rounded the other side and sat down across from Sally. “Well, the green is slowing down. Looks like Feathers is on the mend.” She laced her gnarly knuckles together in front of her and looked between Feathers and Sally. When Sally had arrived the night before, all she could think of was an older lady built like an upside-down U. Black dress huge square black rimmed glasses that turned her eyes into bug eyes. The tone in her voice made Sally wonder if Belfana was a general in some bizarre old people army.

“The mission is still active. Just a slightly different timeline. First, Sally needs to be able to go out in public without looking

purple and green,” she said, pointing more to Sally’s black eye than to the green skin. “You need to be at full health, Feathers. I’ve got a course of vaccinations, but not sure they will ward off whatever that XA-37 is trying to upload into the computers.”

“Computer virus? I thought Feathers had a cold.”

“Kid, your skin is green and you’re starting to groom in public. Let’s just say it’s complicated. Don’t interrupt,” Feathers ordered, turning back to Belfana. “Okay, so the kid isn’t green. What’s next?”

“I need show up at school as her grandmother.”

“You can do that?” Sally asked.

“Kid. Last night she took a celestial phone call on a ceramic chicken cookie jar. Private emergency line. Seen the red phone in the movies that calls the president?” Sally shook her head no. “Never mind. Being your grandma will be a piece of cake.”

## Thirteen

### Math Homework for the Moon

---

“**M**ath homework? What’s this?” Sally protested. Her feet were up on the coffee table and she was munching on chips. At Belfana’s, Sally was always munching. It was an impulse, as if she was going to starve again the next day. She sat up.

“She had to sell it. Do the work.” Feathers leapt up onto the coffee table and yawned.

“She had to sell what?” Sally wondered.

“She had to try and sell them on the idea that she is your long lost grandmother. All it did was buy a little time while that black eye goes away. I’m not going to sugar coat it, kid. You’re going to have to put up with a foster home for a few weeks.”

Sally yelled, “What?!”

“Calm down. Belfana and Mrs. L have a plan. It will just be for a few weeks.” The finch from the cuckoo clock screamed the hour

like it was from a dinosaur movie. “That stupid dinosaur taunts me every hour, knowing I can’t—”

“Feathers! Concentrate. Where’s Belfana? What’s this plan?” Sally blurted.

“Relax. She’s taking a nap. That trip down the school really took it out of her.”

Sally suddenly realized that the only time it was quiet in the apartment was when Nerissa and Feathers were napping. Before today, Belfana had been humming to her scratchy records while she was cooking. Past that, Belfana had been reading romance novels in her recliner. “For saving the planet and everything, you all take naps quite a bit.”

If a kitten could shrug, Feathers did it as he piped up, “You don’t see lions on a treadmill. It’s hard work keeping the universe in one piece.”

Sally slumped. “But you’re not a lion! If you have these big plans, why not come as a lion or something? Why drag a homeless fifth grader into the mix? Ever read a comic book? Yeah, I’m not in there!”

Feathers looked up at the tiny roses patterned into the beige wall paper. “You read comic books? They have those in elementary school?” Sally clutched her fists together in frustration and sat up straighter on the couch, leaning into Feathers. Feathers yawned, ignoring her power play. “Yeah, we tried to go bigger for quite a long time. Why do you think you have so many mythology books about monsters? You should have seen Mrs. L in her glory days.

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What she has now is a petting zoo, compared to her intergalactic collection from years past.”

Sally leaned back. “What changed?” She asked, eyeing the math homework with dread.

“Humans. They started inventing things. I cringe every time I hear someone say, *Don't reinvent the wheel.*”

“Why?”

“Xaxon 4. B-1 Prime. They beat us here, and started adapting to every known machine a man could think of. Leonardo Da Vinci was our biggest nightmare when he started sketching the helicopter.”

“Leonardo who? The ninja turtle?”

“Never mind. The point is, machines got bigger. They infected more villages and people. But we arrived. Mrs. L and her family brought their zoos to try and help. Why do you have a kitten, now? Same reason you're turning green. Nerissa came as a dragon. She was gorgeous, massive, and protected the villagers from the barbarians coming over the mountains with war machines. Everything was made out of wood. It was easy for Nerissa to light them up. Nobody got hurt. The war machines just burned.”

“What happened?”

“Well, just like your world when one disease travels to another country, chaos exploded. Nerissa got the flu. You don't want to be around a dragon that has the runs and is congested. Not a good mix. Long story short, the rivers were running with acidic poo and she accidently sneezed on the village and barbecued the town. People,

buildings and all. The dragons had to go. So, now you have them in stories, but all that's left of them is that whiny purple cat you have in the next room."

"I heard that." Nerissa jumped up on the table. "So, you thought I was gorgeous?" She rubbed up against Feathers.

"Now?" Sally blurted. "I'm in fifth grade. Ooh, cooties. Stop," Sally said. "Focus, Feathers. Why do I have to be in foster care? You can laser punch people with your eyes. You mean to tell me that in all your years, you can't make a magic adoption paper appear in my school file?"

"No can do, Honey," Belfana yawned, scratching her mid-section and shuffling to her recliner. She absently searched for her latest romance novel, before pulling a lever and flipping her feet up. Her flowery house dress with the faded, frilly collar flipped up over his chin, and she had to pat it down.

"Why not?"

"Acid poop. Barbecued villagers. Now I'm a cat. Do we need to tell you another story? Look at your skin? Sally. Even at this level, when we are cute little pets, there's a threat to your world with puppies, kittens, and gold fish guarding the gate. We've learned that there are certain things we just can't mess with. Principal Greene knows the truth. That's where we draw the line. We can't screw around with kind people who know the truth." Nerissa sat and blinked. She nuzzled Feathers.

"Stop that. You two are nuts. I'm going to do my math."

## Fourteen

### Polanski's Prison

---

“Stop fidgeting. You look fine.” Feathers looked over Sally’s shoulder in the bathroom mirror. It was a bit cramped with Feathers, Nerissa and Belfana all crowding behind her.

“I don’t wear dresses. I look stupid.” She kept pulling down at the waist, feeling a breeze on her shins that she wasn’t used to. The mirror had a small spidery crack in the lower corner and toothpaste dribbled into the sink. She was standing on one of Belfana’s many stools, since the apartment was built for normal size people.

“It’s just for a few weeks, Honey.” Belfana smiled. “Oh, you look so lovely.”

“Did you pick out the foster home?” Sally bit her lip, scared.

“Sorry, Honey. We had to let the humans work out all these details. If they smell any funny business, then the adoption will fall through.”

“Stop tugging. You need to look like a lady.” Nerissa meowed, sitting on her haunches on top of the toilet. “Ladies don’t tug. Feathers. The emergency monkey.”

“I’ve got it right here in my pocket,” Belfana replied, fishing out an old game piece. It looked like an overgrown capital “S” with a monkey’s body attached in the middle. Flat. Red plastic. She waved it in front of Sally’s face. “Take this. Only use it in an emergency.”

“Emergency? Isn’t Feathers going with me?”

“No can do, kid. You’re on your own. This has to look legit, and Mrs. Polanski has the next opening. She doesn’t allow pets. That’s why you have the emergency monkey. Nobody is going to steal a kid’s game piece from you.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Stop tugging,” Nerissa scolded.

“Fine. How do I use it?” Sally asked, snagging the red, plastic monkey from Belfana. It felt like the bathroom walls were closing in. She pulled at her collar.

“To activate it, you touch it to your forehead and then rub the belly here, three times, with your thumb.”

“What happens then? Do I turn into a cat with laser eyes or something?”

“Best you don’t know all the details,” Feathers said. “Just know you’ll be safe if you need to use the monkey. Make absolutely sure you need to use it. No monkey business.”

“Really?” Nerissa whined. “You went with that joke there?”



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“I have a dress on. Where do I put this? I don’t have any pockets.” Sally waved it around her torso, wishing for her jeans and T-shirts.

“Backpack, side pocket. Once we present you to Mrs. Polanski, you can change out of that get-up. We just need to put on a good show for Principal Greene.” Belfana turned to leave the bathroom. “Enough fuss. Let’s go. These trips take it out of me, and I’ll need an aspirin and my stories by the end of the day. Nerissa and Feathers. Watch the alarm system. Don’t allow a breach. Stay off the couch. Gather your backpack, Honey. I’ll walk you to Mrs. Polanski’s apartment. Meet me at the linen closet.”

Sally did as she was told. She tucked the plastic monkey in a side pocket of the backpack. She had left the picture of her mother and other important things, like her lucky rock she found in the shape of a kidney, on the bed earlier. She didn’t want to give Mrs. Polanski any reason to take things away. She fought the scratchy instinct to lick the back of her hand and tug at her skirt. Belfana wore a proper straw hat with a silk flower on a ribbon around the rim, a navy wool coat, and an actual cane with a bird head carved at the top, hooked over her arm. Polished black shoes glinted in the hall light. Belfana nodded to the closet. “Now. This is important. When you get to Mrs. Polanski’s house, no matter what happens, don’t use the monkey in a closet.” Sally nodded her head to let her know she was listening. She had given up trying to make sense of anything. At least her skin wasn’t green and the black eye was healing. Her cat eyes had disappeared. She missed being able to jump six feet in the air. “We’ve worked out most of the bugs since the game was invented in 1965, but closets are still a problem. Now, to Mrs. Polanski’s.” She opened the linen closet door.

“This is a closet,” Sally protested.

“This isn’t an emergency. Closets and toilets are our specialties. Look,” Belfana pointed. Sure enough, there was a sunlit street filled with birds chirping and blue sky inside. A neat two-story house with a quaint fence was nearby. “On we go. Remember. I’m your long-lost grandmother and just found out you were lost. We need Mrs. Polanski to know this is *temporary*.” With a small flash of light, Belfana disappeared into the closet. Sally followed. She shielded her eyes against the sun, following Belfana’s shadow. A stringy tall woman opened the door, only enough to look through the screen door. “Good morning, Mrs. Polanski. Is Principal Greene here? I’m Sally’s grandmother. He said to meet him here at—”

“Where’s your car?” Mrs. Polanski croaked, blowing cigarette smoke over crossed arms.

“Um... We walked,” Belfana answered.

“She always wears dresses? That’s weird. You go to church? You religious?” More smoke from Mrs. Polanski. Belfana cleared her throat. She pulled on her collar. Not a good sign. Sally thought she would have everything under control.

“It was my idea, Mrs. Polanski. I wanted to make a good impression,” Sally piped up, peeking from behind Belfana. “Is Mr. Greene here? He told me to be nice for you, so I was hoping he would be here.”

“Suck-up.” More smoke. Belfana coughed a little. “He called and said he’s late. You want to come inside or wait for him on the sidewalk?” More smoke. You could barely see her polyester pants and striped blouse through the screen door and the haze.

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Putting her arm out to push Sally behind her, Belfana said, “We’ll just wait out—” The door slammed. Belfana turned to Sally. “Remember. This is temporary. We need Principal Greene to make the introduction and watch. You remember how to use the emergency monkey?” Sally nodded. Belfana tugged at her collar again. She pulled a hanky out to dab her forehead. The wool coat was a touch too much for the blue sky.

Sally turned to watch the traffic. Seemed like a nice place. Some cars blazed by. She heard kids playing down the street. It didn’t seem like it wasn’t anywhere near Maya Angelou Elementary. “Will I go to Maya Angelou while I’m here?”

“No, Honey. Principal Greene pulled some strings. You’ll be going to Alexander Hamilton while you live here.”

“Hamilton?”

“Twenty-dollar bill. Long story. A miracle they named a school after him.”

“Do they serve breakfast there?”

Belfana’s eyes drooped sadly and she looked away, down the street. “I don’t think so. Part of the deal with Mrs. Polanski living in this neighborhood is that she provides meals.”

Sally translated in her head. Maybe she would eat. Maybe she wouldn’t. There was a reason she preferred the street. After two or three cars had slowed down to wonder about why they were standing outside, Principal Greene showed up in his shiny Subaru. Hustling his large frame up the sidewalk, he apologized, “Sorry I’m late. Kindergarten underwear emergency. So, this is

Mrs. Polanski?” Belfana smiled and nodded yes. He jogged up the steps.

Somebody had possessed Mrs. Polanski’s body. She was not the same woman. Same clothes, but she suddenly had a radiant, shy smile, and reading glasses on a chain around her neck. With a humble nod, she threw the doors open for Principal Greene. “Oh! Such a pleasure. Is this the precious Sally, you gushed about? I see your point, Mr. Greene. Just a blooming flower in the making. Sally looked at Belfana, who shook her head with a quick look. Sally followed.

All the adults smiled and droned on. Mrs. Polanski had a teapot and cups ready on the coffee table, eternally smiling and nodding her head at Mr. Greene. Occasionally she smiled at Sally, but the grin didn’t reach her eyes. Sally hugged her backpack and daydreamed, while the adults babbled all the introductions and timelines. Mrs. Polanski nodded and stood up to let Mr. Greene inspect the first floor, showing a very girly room, all made up. He nodded in approval. “Looks like you are in good hands, Sally.” He looked at his watch. “I’ll put in a good word at Hamilton. Principal Coggins is a friend of mine. She’ll take care of you during the day, Sally. Don’t worry. This is all going to work out.” With that he said his goodbyes.

If there had been a flash of light for Belfana to walk through the closet, Sally felt a flash of darkness when Belfana exited. “Upstairs. Now.” Mrs. Polanski growled at Sally. “Don’t screw this up for me. Word on the circuit is that you’re a runner. Not on my watch. Second door on the left. If you’re quiet, you get dinner. Screw up at school, or report me? No food. We understand each other?” Sally nodded. She knew the moment she walked in the house when there were

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no other kids around. “All the kids get it. You’re lucky. The school is paying better so you get the second floor. The other kids hate that. They do want to eat. Hear anything?” Sally shook her head no. “Exactly.” Mrs. Polanski smiled. She had yellow teeth. “Listen and learn. Upstairs, march.” Sally glanced up at a padlock as she walked into her bedroom. A mattress on the floor. Mrs. Polanski yanked her backpack off. She dumped it all on the ground and pawed through everything. She picked up the monkey and waved it in Sally’s face. Sally panicked. “This your good luck charm?” she sneered. She tossed it into the pile. She didn’t take anything. “Good luck.” She chuckled. “You better have a pretty powerful monkey.” Mrs. Polanski turned off the light. Click, click, click. Locked in. Sally hoped she didn’t have to pee. Glad she had breakfast. Mrs. Polanski cackled her way down the hallway.



## Fifteen

### Shiny School

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**P**eanut Butter and Jelly. Sally obeyed. She ate. Bathroom. Mrs. Polanski smelled like cheap cigarette smoke and hovered over each event. Click, click, click. In for the night. Maybe Sally could check out a book from the library when she got to school to pass the time. At least she didn't have to chase down a place to sleep. She could last the six weeks Mr. Greene promised. She couldn't believe it, but she missed Feathers' babbling about interstellar pets, and Oodles cutting her hair. She glanced up. She had a closet. That was about it. There was a chest of drawers with a bunch of hand-me-down clothes of various sizes. Those were her options for school. She hugged her backpack and tried to dream of better things, while she drifted off into fitful sleep.

A pounding on the door scared her awake. Mrs. Polanski bellowed, "Dress! Bathroom! Breakfast! Brush teeth! Bus! I won't repeat myself." Click, click, click. The door swung open. Sally squinted at the light from the hall. A shadow with hands on hips snarled, "What are

you waiting for?! Dress! It's your first day. I'll repeat it once. Dress! Bathroom! Breakfast! Brush teeth! Bus! Now!" Sally scrambled to her feet. She heard noises in the bathroom. She hurried to the chest of drawers and held up one T-shirt and then another. Finding the only pair of pants that didn't fall down, she pulled them up, pulled a T-shirt over her head that was way too big, yanked her backpack up, and then looked up and down the hallway. She saw a teenage girl leave a bathroom, and she made her way that direction. Bump, bump, bump... She fell down. Nobody talked to her. All the kids were running through each step of the orders as fast as they could. In a blur, she saw a couple of the girls had clothes that fitted, and wondered how they had managed that. She needed to pee. She didn't want to go in front of the other girls, but there was one toilet. She had to do the potty dance and wait. Bump, bump, push. She landed on her butt. The girl smirked over her shoulder and scrambled down the stairs.

Sally finally got to pee. She took a breath and tried to remember the next step. "Bus!" Mrs. Polanski screeched. Sally ran down the stairs.

"What's for breakfast?" she blurted.

"Snooze, you lose. Bus! Now!" Sally ran out of the house, following the other kids. The bus driver looked bored. Sally was the last to get on and was winded. She stood at the front. Dagger eyes came from half the kids. The other half were sucked into their phones. Nowhere to sit. A boy with a runny nose was in the front. He smiled. She sighed and sat down. Her stomach rumbled. She would obey. Maybe there was something at school she could eat.

Hamilton was shiny. That's all Sally thought. Computer labs. Fresh paint. Girls in clothes you see on magazine covers. The posters



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were sparse, but all straight. No gently curled announcements from three weeks ago. No motivational quotes on posters. “Nice shirt, Loser.” Sally looked up. Oh, great. Amanda in a skinny version with designer jeans. Girls around her giggled and pointed. A couple of them took pics on their phone.

“Can you tell me where the office is?” Sally ignored them, lost.

“For you? Next to the dumpster.” The group of girls erupted in laughter and they all walked away.

“Down the hall to the left,” A quiet voice said. Sally turned. “I’m Molly. You look nice. You’re new?” Sally nodded. “I’ll walk you there.” Sally followed. Mr. Greene had said it would only be a few weeks. Molly dropped her off and somebody at the office escorted her to her new classroom. She tried to stay invisible and sit in the back. Her stomach rumbled, so she kept scouting to see if someone dropped a chocolate bar or juice box they didn’t care about. Hamilton was shiny. She desperately wished the shiny people had extra food. She obeyed. First recess.

“Loser! You’re still here!” Skinny Amanda in designer jeans was perched on top of the jungle gym, her bodyguard swinging back and forth. Dropping to the ground, the bodyguard, a bit heftier than the leader, crouched and smiled at Sally. Oh crap. “Get her!” The crew rushed after Sally, she sprinted back toward the building, but the body guard caught her backpack. Sally looked up. She ran into a blind spot. Hamilton was supposed to be shiny. This wasn’t supposed to happen.

At least it was the other eye. She could feel the swelling. It would be blue by nightfall.

Sally's shirt was torn. She still had her backpack. Her pants were ripped. The bodyguard stomped out the principal's office, shaking her fist at Sally. Sally got her gear and walked in. "So, you are Sally Chavez," Ms. Coggins said, giving Sally an up and down look. "I talked to Principal Greene. He suggested we call it a day. I called Mrs. Polanski, and she's on her way. She seems sweet. She said she felt bad, and that you would get exactly what you deserve after such a bad day. Just wait outside and your foster mom will be here in just a minute."

Sally's stomach lurched. She understood Mrs. Polanski's code words. Locked up. No food. "Can I go to the bathroom? I really need to go," Sally begged.

"Certainly, Dear. Just make sure you make it back to the office for your foster mom. We'll try again tomorrow."

Sally ran to the girl's room. Closing the stall, she panicked. "Definitely time to use the monkey. I agree," the toilet said. Belfana used the toilet cellphone system too. Sally pulled the plastic monkey out of the backpack.

Tapped once to the forehead. "Here goes nothing. What could get worse? I've got to quit asking that." She rubbed the belly of the monkey. His eyes glowed and he smiled bigger. Poof. Sally smelled something. Poo?

"So, you're the new kid." Sally pulled hay out her hair. A sky-blue cow chewed, complete with cloud formations for spots. "Feathers mentioned you might be coming. A bit ahead of schedule, aren't you? I'm Louise. I hear you're Sally. Nice to meet you." Sally shook her head. She fell on her back in the hay. Unbelievable.

## Sixteen

### Portal Work

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“I’m starving.” Sally sat up, pulling hay out of her hair. “Do you have a cold? There’s no way I want to turn blue. Do you have any food? Where am I?” Louise kept chewing. “Can you hear me?” Flash. Louise looked like a normal black and white cow.

“Shut up. Farmer is coming to milk. Hide.” Sally almost screamed, but she obeyed. Looking around, there was an empty stall. She did a turbo crawl on all fours to get to the next stall. It was hard enough just to keep finding food each day without having to talk to sky blue cows. She couldn’t even talk to herself anymore without thinking she was insane. A huge barn door moaned open. A scrawny man in overalls and a straw hat limped in with a stool and bucket.

“So... Magical Bessie. Make me some money. Drop that chocolate milk.” Sally watched through a crack in the stall as the farmer plopped the stool and bucket down. Squirting noises hit the

bucket and then softened until the farmer grunted and stood up. Leaving the stool for the moment, he limped out the barn.

“Stay put. He’ll be right back,” Louise ordered. “This is the hardest part.” Sally pretended she was a mouse and sat there in silence. The farmer reappeared, and to Sally’s shock, he spent almost half an hour gossiping about other farmers, complaining about the crop and the bunions on his feet. Full blown adult babbling. Amazing.

“Thanks for listening, Bessie. Don’t know what I would do without you listening and making chocolate milk.” With that the farmer patted the cow on the head, picked up the stool and walked out of the barn. The door rumbled shut. Click, click, click. Sally knew that sound. She went from being locked in a room to being locked in a barn with a sky blue cow that offered chocolate milk. No wonder Feathers liked Louise.

A shudder shimmered on the cow and a groan, “You can come out now.”

“You’re blue with clouds again. Why did you change for the farmer, if you already give him chocolate milk?” Sally asked, as she came around the corner.

Sounds of the back door to the house slamming shut, reminded them they were alone again. “I’m sure that even in your time, blue cows would stick in a person’s memory. I wanted to be purple, but Nerissa is purple. I think purple cows are less noticeable. I had a human friend Seth that told me that when I wasn’t locked up.” Sally doubted that, but didn’t interrupt. “I was stupid and got captured. Look at my back leg.” Sally looked down to see a ball and chain

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locked around the ankle. “At the last second, I was able to put on the normal cow clothes before he locked me in here. If I’d been blue, he would have sold me to the highest bidding freak show coming through town. One of the first rules of the sisters is to not do circuses or freak shows.”

“Seems like it would have been easier to blend in as a blue cow there than to be locked up here.”

“It’s not about being easier. We’re here to complete missions. I failed my first one and I’m trying not to fail my second.” Louise stopped to chew. The tail swished at a fly.

“What’s your mission?” Sally asked.

“Train you kids in portal work.”

“Train me? Why did Feathers send me to you?”

The sun was peeking through the old barn. Other than that, there was dusty, stinky hay everywhere. Pitchforks and farming equipment stacked here and there. Sally sneezed. Louise stopped chewing. “Feathers said I have a knack with kids. You said you’re starving. You need to learn how to milk a cow. Go to that third stall down and get the three-legged stool and bucket. Bring them back.”

“What cow? You are the only one here?” Sally looked over her shoulder.

“Feathers really knows how to pick ‘em. Moo. I’m a cow. You’re going to learn how to milk me.”

“I can’t milk you... You’re talking... I don’t like chocolate milk.”

“Good grief. You like strawberry milk shakes with a hint of cinnamon?” Louise groaned.

“No cinnamon.”

“Fine. Think of me as a waitress serving you breakfast. Strawberry milk shake. It will fill you up.” Sally was starving. There was another shimmer. Louise coached Sally on where to sit, how to pull on the udders and milk a cow. Sally smiled to herself as she got the hang of it. Louise looked back. “Good. Now drink that and go to sleep in that back stall. There’s an old horse blanket. Cover yourself up and much as you can. Farmer never goes back there.”

“What about you? You said you were going to train me. How do I get back to Yakima?”

Louise was snoring. Oh, great. Feathers slept after using his laser eyes. Louise fell asleep after changing the flavor of the milk. Sally really was starving. Her stomach took over her brain, and she drank the strawberry milk shake straight out of the bucket. Her eyes drooped and she decided the horse blanket idea was great. Soon she was out like a light.

# Seventeen

## Rescuing Louise

---

“Wake up!” A tiny paw was slapping Sally’s earlobe. “Louise is still sky-blue! It’s almost milking time! Wake up!” Sally, groggy, opened one eye. The blanket was warm. Her stomach was full. She tried to roll over and ignore the dream about a ranting grey mouse.

“Ouch!” She sat up in pain, holding her ear. “What bit me?”

“Not what. Who. I bit you.” No dream. A grey mouse was on her lap, standing on its back two legs and crossing its paw. “Now go wake up Louise.”

Sally moaned. “I’m tired. Besides, Feathers doesn’t wake up for three days when he uses his super alien powers.”

“If he’s blue when Farmer comes, we’ll never see Louise again! Get up or I’ll bite you again!” the mouse demanded. Sally yawned, stretched, and decided she liked the strawberry milk shake. Might

as well take another order from a talking animal. Scratching her belly, Sally wiped the sleep out of her eye. Louise was snoring.

“Louise, wake up,” she mumbled. “The mouse said you need to wake up.”

“Too late! Sit down and look like you’re milking Louise!” the mouse screeched. Sally only kind of understood, but the screeching in her ear woke her up enough to go grab the stool and the bucket. She sat down and barely reached under the snoring Louise when she heard, click, click, click and the roar of the barn door open. Louise was still in a bit of a shadow, so Sally hoped Farmer would notice her.

“Hey!” Farmer dropped his stool and bucket, yanking her backwards off the stool, and picking her up by the floppy T-shirt. “What are you doin’ stealin’ my milk!” His nose was about an inch away. Crooked teeth. Bad breath. Left eye slightly crossed and stubble on his chin.

“I was just hungry. I didn’t think—”

“Everybody’s hungry! I don’t cotton to no stealin’!” He shook her like a rag doll. “Now tell me how you even got in here. Did McGuirk send you? Want a new deal on his shipment?”

“Who? I was just running from trouble and landed here in the dark. I don’t know a McGuirk,” Sally blurted. Her little racing brain knew to leave out the detail of the talking toilet and grey mouse that woke her up.

“Where yo’ ma and pa?” He didn’t let go, but he quit shaking her. He was steaming mad, but only the strung-out homeless people and Amanda really wanted to beat her up.



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“Don’t have any,” Sally replied, looking at the ground.

“We didn’t order nobody off that infernal orphan train. You run away from your situation?” Sally was confused but shook her head no. He let go and stood up. Taking a step back, he took his hat off and scratched his head, thinking. “You got no situation? No parents? Did you come from that orphan train?” Sally kept shaking her head no. He looked out the barn door. “Darn shame. It’s 1919 and they’re still shipping those youngins out here like cattle. Thousands of kids like you are roaming Nebraska. He gave her a serious look. When you lose your parents?”

“My mom died when I was five,” Sally said.

“You been wandering the countryside all that time with nobody around to take care of you?”

“Kind of. They fed me at school.”

Farmer laughed.

“Well, you had one nice teacher then, to pack you food. Look, I can’t afford another mouth to feed. You know how to milk Bessie?” Sally nodded. “You drink her special milk?”

“Moo.” They turned to look at Louise who was all black and white.

“Never mind. I do the milkin’. You’ll have to work some other chores. Let’s go up the house and get you some different clothes and food. You said you’d work?” Sally nodded. He rubbed his chin and bent down to pinch her upper arm a little. “Pretty skinny, but we could always use help. Tell you what. You work, and you’ll eat. That’s how it works around here. You might not eat much if we can’t

get the crop to grow, or if Bessie runs out of milk, but you won't starve. Do they dress all the orphans in New York in clown clothes, like you got on? The Missus will definitely need to figure out a proper dress for you to wear." Sally groaned. Yesterday had been the first day in her life she'd had to wear a dress. She was doomed. "And that hair has to go. She'll clean you up proper. You'll have to stay on the farm until that shiner goes away. You've had it rough, kid, but I don't want McGuirk to think I'm beatin' on no orphan." They were at the back door and he ushered in to a tiny kitchen. A short woman with a tight bun of jet-black hair turned from her work peeling a potato. "Missus, this here is..."

"Sally. My name is Sally."

Missus glanced up at her husband without changing the look on her stone face. It looked like her few wrinkles had been carved by the sun. She didn't look at Sally. "She know how to peel a potato?" He shrugged. The door banged as his shadow left the room to look after more farm chores.

Looking at Sally, Missus slapped the little knife on the table where she was working. She got up. "Peel these potatoes." She picked up a peeling. "See this? No meat. Just skin. Just peel them. Don't butcher them. First go wash your hands. You'll need a dress and I'll cut that rat's nest you have on your head tomorrow." Sally looked like she was about to cry. "Hair will grow. Wash up over there in that basin. Peel the potatoes." Missus turned her back and walked over to the little stove. "I don't say things twice, child." Sally had heard that before. She hurried to wash up.

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Her hands ached and even though she didn't do a very good job with the potatoes, Missus didn't complain. Missus didn't talk much at all. She pointed to each task. She might demonstrate it once. One time she came around behind Sally to reposition her hand on the knife. "Don't want to cut your finger. I can't use food that has your blood on it."

Farmer came in and sat down to their meal. A bit of chicken soup, and boiled potatoes. Sally ate. It didn't taste great, but she ate. No one spoke. Farmer mumbled about the weather and what part of the field he needed to tend. When the evening was over and the dishes done, Farmer went to the little room off the kitchen, and sat next to the pot belly stove in a chair, smoking a pipe. Missus sat in another chair, using a needle and thread to fix a sock. Sally sat on the floor. Her plastic monkey was in the backpack, and she didn't know when she would be able to return to the stall. Finally, Farmer blew out his pipe. He went somewhere and pulled down some scratchy blankets. "This will have to do until we get you a proper set up with a pallet. The stove will keep you warm enough to sleep at night. When it gets cold, in the morning, your first job is to go gather wood for the stoves. I'll show you where that is tomorrow. Missus will give you chores. Night."

Sally asked about a bathroom and they pointed to the outhouse in the yard. Sally was grossed out, but did her best. Back inside, nobody was in the room, so she snuggled into the blankets. "Hey, I've got a mission update." A brown mouse was at her ear. She sat up.

"How many of you are there?"

“We’re mice. My name is Fester. Thousands of cousins. Not all of us can talk. Some of us just sing and dance. Anyway, your mission is to steal Farmer’s key to Louise’s ball and chain. How you do that is up to you.”

“I can’t do that!” Sally protested in a low voice. “Where in the world is this place? I’ve never heard of Nebraska.”

“Portal work.”

“Time travel? He said this is 1919.”

“Kind of. Look, kid, the Spanish flu is on its way, and you need to be out of here by then, and get back to saving your own world.”

“I can’t steal the key! Besides, they feed me. I just have to do a few chores.”

“Spoiler alert. The Spanish flu wipes out millions. Another spoiler alert. Your chore list will last twelve hours a day. He’s going to work you like his mule.”

“I didn’t see any mule.”

“The third stall was empty. The mule died. Like I said. Steal the key, or not only does your world end, but you’ll end too, sooner or later. Either the Spanish flu or the hard work will get you. Not easy being a homeless orphan in 1919.”

“Get me the plastic monkey. I’ll work on getting the key.”

“Not how it works. Monkey is a one-way portal door. Louise has the return trip ready in the barn. No key, no return.”

“That’s not fair. Besides, I just have to go back to Mrs. Polanski. Why don’t I just tough it out here?! At least I eat.”

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“I don’t make the rules, kid. Key. Portal. Hope for the best. Belfana sends her love. Feathers said the mission is still on and he needs you back as soon as possible. Good luck.” Squeak. Poof. A lamp glowed in the hallway.

“You talkin’ to someone?” Farmer asked, with rumpled salt and pepper hair going every way on his head.

“Sorry. Just a bad dream.”

“Go to sleep. Day starts early around here.”

Sally laid down. “A very bad dream...,” she muttered to herself.



## Eighteen

### Key to a Good Life

“**Y**ou gonna eat that? Thought you said you was hungry?” Farmer asked, digging through his potatoes and boiled chicken. Sally was about to fall face first into her potatoes. She’d never been so tired. The brown mouse was right about the hard work. The days were all a blur. Cold dark blue mornings before the sun came up, she was gathering wood. She helped with breakfast, worked with Farmer in the field fixing fence or gathering eggs. Back to prepping for lunch or washing dishes. She bounced between the two as a personal chore machine from morning until night. Sally didn’t know how long she could keep it up. She did her best to put food in her stomach, because she knew she needed the energy to work in the morning. Mercifully, Missus didn’t order her to dry dishes that night. Sally didn’t remember how she had gotten to her pallet next to the stove with a few scratchy blankets.

“Kid, wake up.” Sally dreamt of a brown mouse riding a motorcycle and chasing the Tooth fairy down to steal quarters. “Kid!” Sally felt a sting on her cheek. “Wake up.”

Not a dream. Fester was back with another message from Louise. It wasn’t bad enough that she worked to the bone, barely got enough food, but they came by with random facts and problems that had nothing to do with her in the middle of the night. “Chores, work, sleep...” Sally mumbled to the mouse, pulling the blankets and trying to roll over and ignore him. Sting, sting, sting, bite. Sitting straight up, Sally hissed, “Ouch!” Holding her ear, she whispered, because she couldn’t yell, “What?!”

“Tomorrow’s your chance. Get the key.”

“I can barely walk. I work 14 hours a day. I eat and sleep on the floor.”

“Welcome to 1919. Just be ready. Louise has cooked up something big. It’ll give you a fighting chance.” Squeak. Poof! Sally sighed and fell back on her pallet. The next thing she remembered was Missus nudging her with her foot to wake up.

“Wood needs gathering.” Sally moaned and pushed herself up. Missus had sewn two dresses for Sally out of scrap cloth and flour sacks, to work in. She pulled on one of the dresses and pulled on her tennis shoes. It was warm enough she didn’t quite need a coat and gathering the wood woke her up. She started the fire in the pot belly stove and then the cook stove, like she had been taught. She went to gather the eggs for breakfast. Like most of the last few weeks, her head was foggy. She just went the motions of her chores. The morning and meal preparing was always the same. The only thing



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that changed were the chores she helped Farmer with in between what Missus wanted done. The kitchen light glowed, and she slogged up the back steps with the egg basket.

Farmer ran past Sally, bumping her. Eggs everywhere, smashed. Sally's eyes went wide. Missus would be so angry, Sally wasn't sure she would get breakfast. Farmer was dancing a little farmer dance, as Sally followed him in. "We're rich, Missus! Get on your new dress! I'm firing up the motor buggy for this one!"

Missus crossed her arms, and Sally walked in behind, trying to wipe egg yolk off her hands onto her skirt. "Rich, huh. Gold from a chicken today, Sally?"

"No! Bessie gave me buckets and buckets of chocolate milk. It'll spoil. McGuirk won't be able to sell it all. We're going to have to go door to door. Get your dress on! I've got the buggy loaded. Soon as you're changed, we're headed to Lincoln." Spinning around, he saw Sally. Her eye was mostly healed, but still a little green from the shiner. "You're still gonna work my chores. Start by weeding the corn patch. You have enough to keep busy all day. Remember. Work to eat." Sally nodded.

After a spastic few minutes Farmer and Missus were rumbling down the road, with an ancient car belching smoke. "Now's your chance. Go get the keys," Fester ordered from the kitchen sink. He was munching on a carrot Missus had been chopping. "Go!"

Sally woke up and ran to Farmer's room.

"It's locked!" She heard Fester curse under his breath. "I'm going to start my chores. I'll think of something," Sally offered. She didn't know what else to do.

“Your funeral. Louise tried really hard. You’d better make it count.” He hopped down and disappeared. Sighing, she pushed her way outside toward the corn patch. She spent a couple hours weeding the rows to perfection. As the sun came up, she’d stand up and stare at the barn. Door. Side. One window. Her head spun with possibilities. Without a key, none of them seemed to matter. With her back aching, she stood up and arched it backward with her hands on her hips. She walked out of the patch, looking back at the barn.

“Hey, little girl, is your pa home?” A man in a clean suit drove a truck. On the back was a brand-new tractor.

“Who are you?”

“Oh, my name is Mr. Ruddermaker. I represent the finest tractor company in the world! Is your daddy home?”

A light bulb went on in Sally’s brain. “Oh yes! Just this morning, he was telling us about how much money he had from a recent crop. I’m sure he’ll want your tractor. Can you get it down, so he can come see it and how it runs? I’ll go get him!” Mr. Ruddermaker’s eyes lit up.

“Why yes! I’m sure we could put him in the baby today! Why don’t you go get him!” He jogged to the trailer. Sally ran into the house, just inside the back door. She closed it just enough so Mr. Ruddermaker couldn’t see, but he could still hear.

“Pa! This is your lucky day! There’s a man here with a brand-new tractor. Just like you said you wanted.” Sally watched Mr. Ruddermaker start to hurry with the chains that tied it down. She paused just a bit and then yelled, “What? How much?” She opened

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the back door and yelled out to Mr. Ruddermaker, “How much for the tractor?”

“Oh! For just today, I’ve been authorized by my boss to offer this premium machine for \$835. Will that work?”

“I’ll ask.” She closed the door and waited a beat, pretending to talk to someone. Back at the door she yelled back. “He says that will probably work. He just needs to see it run a little and know it will fit through the barn doors. Could you start it and park over there, and leave it running? He’s almost ready.” Mr. Ruddermaker nodded yes, and after jumping in front of it to hand crank the engine over, he hopped on top of the tractor to pull it in front of the barn. Getting off the tractor seat, Sally made a special note in her mind about the large lever he pulled to keep it from moving. He walked up the door with his hat in his hand.

“Your pa want to come out and see the tractor, now?” the salesman smiled.

“Oh, yes Sir! He’s right in there!” She pointed. As soon as he crossed into the room, Sally sprinted to the tractor. She didn’t know much. She jumped on, slammed the gear lever, grinding this and that around, until it lurched forward. She was short so she jumped to the gas pedal and pushed it hard with her right hand like a huge button. The front doors or the barn splintered open, with the tractor creating a gaping hole. She jumped up into the seat and steered it through the wall. The barn sagged from the support beams being crushed. The entire front creaked and moaned. She jumped down again to hit the gas, so it would crash through the wall.

“Kid! Run!” Louise waddled forward with the ball and chain, out of the barn. Mr. Rudder maker blasted out of the back door, standing there in shock at the barn, the destroyed tractor and the sky-blue cow. The clouds spots floated on her hide when Louise was nervous. Now they were almost flying by like a bad video.

Sally jumped down and barely escaped the collapsing roof. She ran after Louise. The salesman was too stunned. He was just scrambling trying to figure out how to recover his tractor. Louise made slow work of moving with the ball and chain slowing her down, but they wandered down the dirt road away from the farm.

“That wasn’t a key, kid,” Louise sighed. They rambled further down the road. Fester muttered curses as he sat in the pocket of Sally’s dress. Luckily it was a lonely dirt road, so nobody was around to see the little girl and her sky-blue cow. “We need a field full of cows. I need to blend in.” Sally didn’t argue. They just walked a while.

“I got you out. Fester said you had another portal.”

“You drove a tractor through the barn door and collapsed the portal. We have to come up with a new plan.”

“What?” Sally protested.

“No worries. You get points for style. We’ll figure it out. Let me know if you see a field with cows.”

# Nineteen

## Chew Choo

---

“**Y**ou did good, kid.” Louise chewed her cud. She was black to blend in with the local herd. It had been a long day. They hadn’t been able to get rid of the ball and chain. What saved them was that all farmers had lonely spreads on back country roads, just trying to make a living. They found a piece of weak barbed wire fence and Louise pushed through it. Specks of blood were on her torso, but she didn’t seem to notice. They found a place distant from the herd, but off the road.

“We’re going to get caught. You need to lose that ball and chain,” Sally said, looking down, when they settled. She was hungry, but the crisis with Louise kept her from complaining. She was always looking over her shoulder, positive that Farmer was going to come barreling down the road, screaming at her to come back and work on the farm to make up for destroying his barn.

The moon was rising and the night was comforting. It was a small sign that Farmer wasn’t running after them. Louise was

chewing cud. Fester was off running around the field trying to see if he had any cousins that could get a message to Belfana or Mrs. L. Louise broke into her thoughts. “I’m counting on getting caught, kid. That’s the plan. That’s the mission. You’ve got to get back to 2022 and help Feathers.”

“That’s nuts. This is all nuts. All I wanted to do was survive another day on the street. Eat breakfast and lunch. Maybe learn some math. Why is this the plan? You are a sky-blue cow that gives people chocolate milk. Why don’t you just call Belfana on the toilet and use the space magic to bounce us out of this mess?”

“The rules are there for a reason. We used to flex our intergalactic muscle quite a bit. We screwed up. Sometimes bigger isn’t better.”

“Name one time. Having laser eyes, like Feathers, and sleeping three days is starting to sound like a dream come true. Beats starving and working twelve hours a day, like I’m doing right now.”

“Patience. You’ll learn. Ever heard of the pyramids in Egypt?” Louise asked.

“I’ve seen pictures.”

“Yeah. A major screw up. Don’t tell Feathers, but trying to put his face on a building was a very bad idea. Humans have been suspicious that aliens put those pyramids there for all of modern history. The robots have been laughing at us ever since.”

“Aren’t the humans worried about the robots?”

“You’re a human. You worried? Sure, there are scary robot stories, but there are also scary dragon stories. Put it this way. Are humans going to freak out about a blue cow or a train?”

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“Trains look normal. Cows look normal. Just stop being blue with a video of clouds drifting on your side. Stop producing chocolate milk.”

“Tell that to Mrs. L. I didn’t ask to land here. I thought her zoo was going to be a good idea. When it comes to my planet, a sky-blue video cow and chocolate milk is the same as a three-year-old kid drawing a stick figure and calling it a person. Kid. We don’t have much time. This next plan has to work, so I need to give you a small lesson and instructions.”

“First of all, humans think cows came here when Christopher Columbus brought a few to Florida. He messed up and named people Indians. He hadn’t discovered India. One of my grandparents landed with him. The current robot is the train. The robot generation of XB-14 came with the train. They block the portals, so we can’t get here to stop their virus work. The trains carry out their mission.”

“Humans just finished World War I and wiped out more men with more inventions than we’ve ever seen. Now the Spanish Flu is coming. Tons of humans are convinced the world is ending. So a cattle army is battling the trains. This battle is raging because we let the train slip through, and ranchers are shipping beef all over the country with trains.”

“But—”

“Be quiet. I’m a soldier, kid. You weren’t chosen at random. Here’s the plan. The guy that owns this herd will come to inspect them soon. Just what farmers do. When he does, something big is going to happen. At first you have to hide, and then you need to hop on with Fester. It will be obvious. We’re going to end up in a new

place. Again, at first you hide, and then you need to hop on. Now. Reach under my collar. You'll find a cylinder about the size of your pinky." Sally reached up and found something looking like silver lipstick. She tucked it in her pocket. "Good. So. Again. Third time. You'll hide, then you're going to hop on. Fester will coach you."

"What do I do with the cylinder?" Sally asked.

"After the third hop, you'll have to fight a robot. That's to cut his hydraulic line."

There was small breeze that waved through the grass. "Fight a robot? Wait. You've had a laser cutter the entire time, and you walked all day with that ball and chain?"

"It's a one-use only device. Kid. This is the plan. The last thing to remember is that you'll have to sweep the leg. Now repeat after me..."

"Fight a robot? I'm ten!"

"You didn't seem to have a problem with driving a tractor through a barn door, collapsing the roof and the portal, just to free me from the situation. Fighting a robot will be a walk in the park. It's 1919. They're not that fast. Now be quiet. I'm going to recite the plan in short phrases. You will repeat after me and memorize it."

"Hide and hop".

"Hide and hop."

"Hide and hop."

"Cut and sweep."

"Run."



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Sally repeated it. Louise drilled her, and drilled her, and drilled her.

Fester appeared. “That’s enough, Louise. She’s as ready as she’s going to be. Kid. Here’s some cheese. Munch on this and try to get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”



## Twenty

### Cattle yard Chaos

“It’s go time. Get up,” Fester said.

“Don’t bite me. I’m up. Where’s Louise?” Sally stood up in the field. It had been a cold, jittery night. She kept chanting the plan and clutching the lipstick.

“Moo!” Louise yelled. “Now!” Fester jumped into her pocket. She got the point. Louise was loaded into the back of a truck. She sprinted to the truck as the farmer walked to the front to start the engine. She heard gears grind and was afraid she wouldn’t make it, but at the last second, she jumped on the back bumper and held on to the cattle rails. For dear life.

“You’re sky-blue!” she yelled over the dirt and wind that was pumping out everywhere.

“That’s the plan!” Louise bellowed. “Moo!”

Gritting her teeth and holding on, she yelled, “That’s a dumb plan!”

“Says the girl that destroyed our first portal with a tractor!” Louise bellowed.

The road was bumpy and the dust coming up from the ground choked Sally. She didn’t have time to be hungry. She would eat later, if she didn’t fall off and die. “Settle in, Princess. It’s going to be a bit of a ride to the cattle yard. Check the first hide and hop off your list,” Fester yelled from the pocket. Her arms ached, but she started to get used to the bumps and adjusted her weight to make it easier to hold on. Eventually, she even started to watch the flat Nebraska landscape go by with pop ups of farm houses and trees. The road droned on and on. She glanced at Louise, who chewed, unconcerned that she was sky-blue. Clouds drifted by on her hide. Clouds drifted by in the real sky.

Lincoln neared and the smell of cow poop slammed into Sally’s face. People started to stare at Louise and kids pointed at the little girl clutching the back of the pick-up for dear life. “Get ready to jump, kid,” Fester warned. The truck lurched to a stop. “Now!” Sally jumped and immediately fell into a puddle. A couple of kids pointed and laughed. “Get up, kid, no time. We need to make sure to keep up with Louise. Run.” Sally picked herself up, her front covered in mud, and started running, wiping mud out of her eyes as she went. “Next time try to land on your feet. I’m picking mud out of my ears,” Fester complained. Sally didn’t have time to answer. Her side started to hurt. “Okay. Pull off here in the alley. We just need to make it to the auction and the loading ramp for the cattle.”

Happy to stop running, Sally ducked into an alley. She saw a large garbage can. It wasn’t a dumpster, but she felt comforted

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hiding behind it. It had been part of her life before Feathers and she understood what to do next. “Cattle auction? What is that?”

“The hamburgers come from somewhere. Don’t think about it. We need the portal. We need to stick to Louise for the next hide and hop. Walk down the sidewalk.” Sally kept walking. Suddenly she saw a sky-blue cow on a platform in the distance. She wanted to break into a run, but Fester said, “Don’t. Remember the drill. Hide and hop. You don’t want some police officer yanking a muddy orphan off the street. It happens. We need the cattle auction and then watch for where they load Louise.” Sally tried to wipe more mud off her dress. It was useless. She used her homeless instincts to watch out for dangerous adults and act invisible. She wished she had her backpack and her normal clothes. “Doing good, kid. Follow the blue cow.”

Men in front of the platform were screaming numbers and waving cash. Louise stood there and chewed cud. Sally suddenly understood and was horrified. “Louise said she needed to be free! What is she doing!”

“Shut up, kid,” Fester scolded. “Louise is a soldier. This is the plan.”

“Oh, no,” Sally whispered. She heard a rumbling car. Farmer slammed the car into the car park, slammed the door, and stomped to the front of the platform, fuming to the auctioneer. Sally ducked behind a post near a holding pen. “I *really* need to hide. Farmer showed up.”

“Don’t panic. He has a pocket full of cash and he’s really mad. He’s concentrating on Louise. If it works out, Farmer gets Louise

back. If it doesn't, somebody else gets Louise. Either way, we keep fighting the trains. Edge off to the side. Keep her head down."

She did what Fester said, but it didn't work. "There she is! Get her!" Missus spotted Sally. Half the men glanced back at the muddy little kid. Everybody else was about to get into a fist fight with Farmer for Louise.

"New plan. Run, kid. That rail car right over there!" Sally didn't need another idea. She sprinted to the rail car. At the last second, she rolled under the car that Fester pointed to, and hid behind one of the wheels. She saw Missus' shoes and a few men's boots. Missus was frantic and screaming, but Sally knew the right time to be quiet. The adults started screaming more and running down the railway. "Nice move. No wonder Feathers likes you. Up you go. This car. There's some hay and a blanket the last hobo left behind."

"Hobo?" Sally whispered. "Are they a special kind of alien?"

"Homeless. Like you. Hop up inside. We need to settle in and wait it out. Louise has one more trick up her sleeve to get us on our way."

## Twenty-One

### Portal Potty

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“Good, kid,” Fester started. Snoring. Something snapped in Sally and she fell dead asleep under the blanket in the car. “You’re getting the hang of this save the world thing, kid. Always start with a nap.”

*Boom!* Sally woke up. “What was that?”

“Louise’s insurance policy. She blew up the feed store by planting things in the fertilizer bags. Don’t ask. Big tech. Bunch of my cousins involved. Like we said. New plan. Get ready. You’re at the Cut and Sweep stage.”

“I’ve got the cylinder, but he said sweep the leg. I don’t have anything to swing.”

“On its way. Hide. You need to watch what happens next.” On cue a blue rectangular halo appeared on the opposite side of the car. It was in the shape of a door and you could see stars, as if a moonlit night was just beyond. Sally didn’t have much time to study

the portal. A bunch of clanging of gears and wheezing, stomping footsteps shook the car. Sally remembered a random picture a kid from school pulled up on the computer that said, “Steampunk Halloween Costume.” Sally was staring at it. Glowing red eyes. Round, English hat. Gears, leaking oil, and stomping. “Just watch,” Fester whispered. Salley nodded. “See that tube looping from its neck to its chest and branching off to its elbow?” Sally nodded. “Good. See the little chain at your feet. Be careful not to rattle it. They’re slow and stupid, but they have great hearing.”

Sally noticed a spinning sawblade at the end of one of its arms. “What do I do about that?”

“Avoid it. Nasty business. Remember the tractor. That was good work. You got this, kid. That blue halo is the portal. This is a low-level guard to keep us out. Once you cut it and sweep it, run as fast as you can through the portal. If everything goes right, Mrs. L. will pick you up on the other side.” The smell of poop was still overwhelming. Sirens screamed through the city trying to cope with the feed store explosion and fire. Sally glanced out and all the farmers except Farmer had scattered. He took Louise by the halter, but the auctioneer must have forced him to take off the ball and chain. Louise was sky-blue. Sally hoped Farmer didn’t sell her to the circus.

No time to daydream. Wheeze. Pop. Blade spinning. Wheeze. Pop. Blade spinning. The robot was marching back and forth in front of the portal. The blue halo flickered. “You’re going to have to time it. Remember. Cut. Sweep. Run. Remember—” Sally attacked with fury and precision when the robot turned his back. Cut. Hydraulic oil squirted everywhere. So much oil that the robot slipped, dug the



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spinning blade into the railway car floor, and got stuck. Sally was so trained she looked for a way to Sweep. “No! Run!” Fester screamed. The robot pulled and pulled against the blade. Sally jumped over him through the portal. Lights. Pop. Poof.

“Lester.”

“Fester.” Apparently, the mice knew each other. They both looked down their noses at each other from different pockets, as Sally picked herself up off of her face plant.

The soft glow of Malarkey’s Exotic Pets and Toy Store appeared. The red vinyl dentist chair with the duct taped cell phone had some more duct taped parts. Sally sighed in relief. Mrs. L smiled. “You’re back, Deary. Good job. Oodles! Hair emergency. Katherine! Wardrobe!”

“Can I have something to eat?” Sally mumbled, sitting up, more than a little dizzy.

“Carlos! Ovens! Do you want something special, Deary?” Mrs. L smiled. Her caring eyes taking some of the edge off of Sally’s nerves. “Louise gave me a strawberry shake. That was nice. Can you please help her?” Sally was overwhelmed, and a tear fell down her cheek.

Mrs. L. tried to smile, but it dimmed a little at the request. “Strawberry shake to start. Then you need a sandwich, a bath and a nap... I’ll do my best for Louise. You did well, child. Get some rest. Tomorrow will come soon enough. Make hope a part of all your dreams.” Mrs. L. patted Sally on the cheek. Stepping away from Sally, she limped toward a blue Persian rug. “Pronto! Strawberry shake! Turkey sandwich! Bath! Pajamas! We have a full day in hair

*Doug Johnson*

and wardrobe. This new agent needs the best!” She tapped her cane on the floor three times. A poodle, a potbellied pig, and a raven all gathered in the room starting to fuss over Sally. Dizzy or not, she was glad to be back in the Malarky Exotic Pet and Toy shop... Even if it was through a side door.

## Twenty-Two

### Back Home

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“**Y**ou steal those clothes?” Amanda demanded. Sally thought about the tractor destroying the barn, and jumping over a killer robot. Amanda looked more and more like a pudgy bully in dingy red hoodie that beat up kindergarten kids for lunch money.

Sally stood up, spun, and shoved her in the shoulder. There were no teachers around. Amanda never brought her crew in front of the teachers. “Go for it, Fatso. Take a swing.” Imelda in the back actually gasped. Amanda scrunched her nose in a fury and pulled back to swing. Sally heard Louise’s voice echo in her head, “*Cut, Sweep, Jump*”. She dropped and swept Amanda’s leg, landing her on her butt. No blood. No fists. Sally stood over her, hands on her hips, a furious look on her face. “What? You’re too clumsy to stand on your own feet? Is that what you are saying?” Amanda scooted backwards. She was trying to act cool, but Sally kept stepping up on her, not making it easy for her to stand up.

“Get her!” Amanda commanded. Sally spun around to face her attackers. Nobody wanted to take it on. If she had put Amanda on her butt, nobody else wanted to see what Sally could do.

“Anything else, Amanda? Should I ask you where you got that ratty red hoodie?” Amanda kept scooting. Sally kept approaching. Amanda’s crew kept backing away. A couple of them actually pretended they needed to get to class.

“Leave me alone...,” Amanda whined. “Let me stand up.” Sally spun and stomped away. She shot one look over her shoulder as Amanda turned on her belly trying to push up on her knees and stand up. It was the end of the day, so Sally just swung her backpack over her shoulder, and walked the distance to Belfana’s apartment.

Nerissa buzzed her into the building and Sally bounded up. She was an entirely new girl. It had been about a month. Yes, the mission was still on, but it took some recon. That, and contrary to popular opinion, the next XZ-37 the robots had sent was dumber than the last one they had put into play to infect the student computers. Also everybody in the exotic pet store failed to tell her that there were multiple humans trying to help them fight the robots, just like there were multiple humans trying to help the robots.

While Sally was slaving away in 1919, Mr. Pinkles had made a call to the tech department, and they had loaded antivirus software onto the student computers. Sally was starting to wonder if the mission she had with Feathers had been that big of a deal. The software had slowed down the new XZ-37 that the school bought for Mr. Pinkles.

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“Get ready. Tomorrow’s your chance,” Feathers said, while Sally was eating chicken soup for dinner. Belfana smiled.

“I’ve heard that before. Do I have to hang onto the back of a truck for twenty miles and jump over a killer robot?”

“No.”

“Then it’s a piece of cake. What are the orders? I need to memorize them before I go in.” Sally slurped her soup.

“I knew Louise was the right choice.”

“She really does have a knack with kids,” Nerissa noticed, licking her paw.

“Whatever. What’s the plan?”

“Same plan. I just can’t come to school with you to coach you. You need to put this sticker on the robot vacuum.” Feathers nodded to the sticker on the kitchen table.

“You’ve got to be kidding. All the stickers in the world, and you give me a robot kitten to put on Mr. Pinkles’ vacuum?” Sally protested. “Are you trying to get me kicked out? I just made it back to Maya Angelou, and Principal Greene is watching my every move.”

She had felt great since she got back. Mrs. L. had Oodles clean up her hair. It was growing back into that warrior look with the one pigtail on one side and the shaved head on the other. She now wore multiple-color T-shirts. They all fit. They all had the *Malarky Exotic Pets and Toys* logo with two goldfish circling in the middle. Sally had a drawer filled with them. Her pants fit. Her shoes fit. She actually had to get used to sleeping in a real bed, instead of laying on

the floor. She had been allowed to stay with Belfana. Mrs. Polanski had an *anonymous* call made for a surprise inspection. All her kids were being placed in kinder, better places, and Mrs. Polanski was a greeter at Walmart.

“What can I say?” Feathers said about the cat sticker. “I’m handsome.”

“Louise told me about the pyramids and cats,” Sally protested.

Belfana laughed so hard her belly jiggled. Nerissa yowled. Feathers shook his head. “That was a slight misunderstanding. Just put the sticker on the vacuum.”

“Good as done.” Sally grinned at the sticker. She wondered what her next exotic pet was going to have her do to save the world. After all, she was ten years old. She wasn’t a kid anymore.



