

MIRACULOUS

“A WHALE OF A TALE”



SAMPLE CHAPTERS

WALTER ROUZER

MIRACULOUS

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Sometimes when you believe in miracles, the most amazing things can happen...

Dreaming of a normal life, Hailee Tupper finds herself in a world more amazing and unbelievable than she ever imagined. After rescuing a young tiger cub, Hailee suspects her new furry friend may have killed the person who discovered their makeshift cave home.

Afraid for her life, Hailee flees the cave and finds herself as a stowaway on the ship of Captain Baker and his crew. But it is here, in the angry snarl of the ocean's grip, that Hailee's life changes forever. For a beast lives somewhere in the deep, and if she is not careful, Hailee may suffer the same fate as the doomed crew...

With the help of the beast, Hailee embarks on an incredible adventure of faith, miracles and destiny. Join Hailee as she discovers a peculiar and enchanting land where anything might happen, and often does, as she journeys to uncover her ultimate destiny. With a single flash of light, Hailee's entire world will change, and her story will be a whale of a tale...

Prologue

Stories let us explore the lives of others from the comfort of our own shoes, beside our own windows, in our own worlds. But stories are magical too, for they have the power to change us right where we are.

Your name may not be Hailee Tupper, but that's alright. Not many people are. You may not live in a cave, but that's alright. Not many people do.

But you may know what it's like to be bullied, or sad, or afraid, or alone, but that's alright, because Hailee knows too.

Sometimes the world sends great challenges, and it is up to us to choose how we face them. One need not be superman or supergirl to overcome fear or pain or hardship. One only needs to be mindful of their thoughts and actions towards others and, most importantly, towards ourselves.

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In *Miraculous*, we are offered a doorway into Hailee Tupper's world. A world where one day a cave dwelling becomes just too small for a young girl growing into a super person. We are offered a window through which we can watch her brave pirates and storms and beasts from below.

We are even offered a new pair of shoes, worn by a girl set against the world who is challenged to face struggles with kindness, patience, and perseverance. And from inside these shoes we may choose to step into the bright big world and see it for ourselves: that anyone can be miraculous.

“Look Through My Eyes. You'll Be Amazed At What You'll Learn...”

Chapter 1

I always tried to believe in miracles. I always hoped and prayed for one. I always wondered what would happen if my life could change for good.

I'm Hailee Tupper and this is my story.

For something did happen that changed my life for good--something that changed my life forever. I received a message from my guardian angel. You may think I'm nuts but messages from angels are not something to laugh at. For I know now that they have the power to change the world.

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“When your pain becomes so great you think you cannot bear it, you will have unspeakable joy.” My angel proclaimed. “If you endure the trials, have faith, and live a life in love with kindness for others.”

When one heeds the words of the angels, incredible things can happen. No one knows this better than I.

November 17, 1871

Brunsville Zoo keeper Joseph Higgins told me the story of my birth. He said he remembered the details all too well...

It was a dark and stormy night when he lit the oil lamps and shouted out across the zoo grounds for Miss Finch, the head veterinarian, to hurry up and get inside the carriage. He squinted through heavy sheets of rain, trying to keep his horses centered on a narrow road, bordered by towering, craggy cliffs. The wind blew in great gusts, rocking the carriage side to side, nearly tipping it over.

He recalled that on this night Miss Finch looked like death warmed over. Her black hooded coat cloaked her white, half-mooned cheeks deep in shadow as she

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stared straight ahead with large, doll-like eyes.

He felt the sting of cold blow against his face as he pressed the horses onward for about an hour longer before reaching my parents' house, a mud-brick building with a straw thatched roof, located by the edge of the forest. Higgins took a deep breath and smelled the scent of pine blended with the pungent fragrance of sage.

The carriage came to a sudden stop in front of my parents' house at exactly midnight. The numbing cold nearly froze his hands around the reins. A howling wind swept the trees from side to side, and one could hear the tips of their branches screech against the windowpanes, as if pleading to come inside to escape the storm's thrashing.

They stepped down from the carriage, then hurried past the white picket fence, and across the brown cobblestone pathway leading to the front of the house. Higgins reached out and was about to knock on the front door, when it suddenly opened before him. My dad, Devin Tupper, a tall, thin man, with a squared-off chin, pleaded with them to hurry inside, saying his wife, my mom Clarabelle, was about to give birth.

Higgins said the first thing that caught his attention upon entering the house were baskets of mushrooms.

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They were everywhere. He said my mom was crazy about eating mushrooms, all different kinds, colors, and shades, even exotic ones, and ones that probably should never have been eaten. There were baskets of them by the front entrance, living room, kitchen, and even by the bedside where my mom waited impatiently to have her baby... waited to have me.

The storm raged on as everyone nervously awaited my birth. Deep rumblings and explosive bursts of lightning flickered light through the windows. Rain beat upon the rooftop. One could hear the constant dripping of water through the thatched ceiling into a wooden bucket at the far corner of the room.

Miss Finch stepped into the bedroom wearing her black hooded coat, wrinkled black pants, and thick leather boots.

Mom quickly leaned up in bed, rubbing and blinking her eyes. "Who's that?" she asked.

My dad walked up to her bedside, clasped her small hands, and smiled. "She's the doctor who's going to help deliver our baby."

Mom shook her head. "Doctor? Did you say doctor?" She pointed at Miss Finch. "But she doesn't look like a doctor."

"Doc Reeder got an emergency call," said dad. "He's

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on the other side of town treating rancher Billings, who got gored by one of his bulls.”

Dad watched Miss Finch place a steaming hot bowl of water on the dresser beside the bed, then remove several white clothes from her brown leather bag.

“She’s the only other doctor available this time of night,” he said, smiling at mom. “I was told that she has plenty of experience delivering babies, even though she’s only a zoo veterinarian.”

When Mom heard that, her mouth dropped open. “Veterinarian! Veterinarian!” She took two deep breaths. “You fetched a veterinarian to help deliver our baby?”

“Now, now,” said Miss Finch, stepping forward. “Nothing to get upset about.” She reached down and placed her reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I successfully delivered many babies in the past, but I have to confess that this will be the first time I’ll be assisting to deliver a baby without a tail.”

“Did you say without a tail!”

“Tails or no tails,” said Miss Finch with a grin. “You can trust me to deliver your baby.”

Mom raised her hand up against her forehead, looking as if she was about to faint, then reached out for a half-full bowl of mushrooms on the dresser counter.

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Dad rushed over and snatched the bowl away before she could lay her hand on a single one. "You couldn't possibly be thinking about eating another mushroom now," said dad. "Remember what Doc Reeder said?"

Mom gave a heavy sigh. "Oh... you worry about too many things. They're just healthy food." She reached out for the bowl. "Give me just one more. What harm could just one more mushroom do? I need one to help calm me down."

Chapter 2

At half past midnight, out from the womb I came. Miss Finch whisked me up into her arms and carried me to the far side of the room, all the while keeping her back to my mother.

“Well, what’s wrong?” said Mom, leaning up in bed. “Let me see my baby!”

Miss Finch looked back over her shoulder, forced a smile, and announced, “It’s a girl!”

“Let me see my baby!” Mom stretched her arms toward me. “Bring her to me!”

Miss Finch slowly stepped toward her bed, but then suddenly stopped halfway across the room.

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Mom's eyes widened, and her breathing deepened. "Bring my daughter to me now! Are you deaf? Didn't you hear me? I want to see my baby!"

With a solemn look on her face, Miss Finch walked up to her bedside.

Mom's eyes narrowed. "Well, come on. Hand her to me!"

The instant mom saw me, she screamed. Higgins said she could be heard nearly a mile away. It was a scream of disbelief, and of horror. Higgins said her voice must have scared me mute. I looked like I wanted to cry, but nothing came out. My mouth repeatedly opened and closed, over and over again, but nothing came out. Not even a peep.

Was it the shock of my mom's scream right after birth that made me mute, or was it a physical ailment? No one could figure it out for sure, not even the doctor. Higgins said I came out looking like some kind of mushroom monster with a grey moldy looking face and body.

Mom turned her head away from me and said, "She doesn't even look human. I can't even bear to look at her."

The floorboards bowed and creaked beneath Miss Finch's black leather boots as she stepped up to my dad

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with me cradled in her arms. She offered to take care of me, and raise me as her own. She even promised my parents that they could come visit me anytime.

Dad shook his head. "How could we give up our only daughter, even if she doesn't look human?"

Miss Finch showed my face to my dad again. He reached out to touch my grey moldy face, but quickly pulled his hand back. He stepped away from me, then raised his hand up against his forehead, looking as if he suddenly turned ill. Higgins said he saw beads of sweat roll down my dad's forehead and drip onto the floor.

After my parents shed many a tear, they finally agreed to let Miss Finch give me a good home.

"I think you made the right decision," said Miss Finch. "You won't have any regrets. You have my word on taking good care of the child."

Higgins walked up to me and stared deep into my eyes, the window of my soul. "I can see something special, dear, and beautiful coming from within, beneath the outer layer of her moldy looking skin."

"Higgins," said Miss Finch, "I think you imagine too many things."

Right as Miss Finch was about to leave, she looked back over her shoulder at my parents and said, "What

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name did you choose for the child?"

My dad spoke up. "We already decided, that if it were a girl, her name would be Hailee."

Miss Finch grinned and smiled down at me. "Very well then, Hailee it is. Hailee Tupper."

Higgins said he couldn't understand why Miss Finch's sad look all of a sudden turned into a big smile the instant she stepped into the carriage. As a matter of fact, he said her smile stayed with her all the way back to the zoo.

When they arrived at the zoo, Miss Finch stepped down from the carriage, rocked me in her arms, and gave me a big grin. "This child is going to bring the zoo more visitors."

Higgins shook his head. "But you promised her parents that you would give her a good, proper home. Don't be greedy."

Miss Finch chuckled. "Greed? Who's greedy?" She reached into her side pocket and pulled out a piece of chocolate. "Have one?"

"No, and stop tryin' to always get your way with a little bit of chocolate."

"Well... she's not going to fit in anywhere else," she

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argued. "If not here, then where? Come now, should we arrange to put her in some kind of traveling circus like I had to suffer as an orphan child with no family and stable home? Get your senses, Higgins." She aimed her finger at him. "You'll see that the logical place for her is right here at the zoo." She put on a sweet smile. "Don't you know that kids everywhere love animals?" She swiped her hand at Higgins and chuckled. "It could be a real-life animal paradise for her staying here." She smiled down at me and tickled my chin. "You're a lucky child, aren't you?" She turned toward Higgins and said, "She'll be in a nice large enclosure, next to an exhibit that has a cute tiger on one side, and on the other side, a big lovable gorilla." She gave him a lopsided smile. "Everyone knows kids love tigers and monkeys."

Higgins stepped up to Miss Finch and tried to pry me out of her arms. "Give her to me! Give her to me now! You can't do this!"

Miss Finch stepped back and shook her head.

Higgins glared into her eyes. "I won't let you do this horrible thing!" He stepped closer. "It's not right to exhibit her in a zoo, like an animal!" He reached out a second time and tried to take me out of her arms. "Give her to me! Give her to me now! The zoo is no place to raise a child!"

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Miss Finch suddenly jumped two feet back, seeing a large cockroach scurry across the ground in front of her. “Dirty, filthy bugs! Disgusting creatures!” she shouted, taking several more steps back.

Higgins chuckled. “Why are you so afraid of a little bug?”

“Only cockroaches. I sprayed a bunch of them in my house last week. Before the dreadful little creatures had the chance to die, they tried to attack me by flying on my face and neck while I laid in bed. The filthy, dirty bugs had a leader too. He was the giant of the lot. Biggest, ugliest bug I ever laid my eyes on. I called him Daddy Goose Bump because he was so horrible looking, the hairs on my arm stood straight up.”

“Cockroaches don’t have names, get revenge, or have a leader.” Higgins chuckled. “Perhaps you just had a creepy nightmare. What would happen if word got out that you’re terrified of little bugs, or that you give names to creatures like that?”

Miss Finch reached out and pushed Higgins back. “You better keep quiet about this, or I’ll... I’ll have you fired!”

“Maybe Daddy Goose Bump will get you first.”

“No, I’m sure the bug spray got him. Just haven’t found him yet. I’m sure he’s curled up somewhere in

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my house.”

Higgins squinted and pointed at her. “You are a heartless woman.”

She raised her chin at Higgins. “If I were heartless, I wouldn’t have offered to give her a stable home.”

“You mean cave home.”

“Oh... what’s the difference? It’s still stable, isn’t it? More than I had growing up.” She smiled down at me, and then rocked me in her arms. “I just want to protect her.” She stepped up to Higgins and poked his chest with her finger. “What better way of protecting her than by putting her in a secure place where people can’t hurt her?”

Higgins reached out to me. “A cave is no home for anyone. Besides, she needs a “real” mother and dad, and to be treated with kindness and love!”

Miss Finch gave him a sharp slap on the side of the shoulder. “Come on, who would be willing to do that for this child?”

Higgins pointed at himself. “I would.”

Miss Finch tilted her head to one side and locked eyes with him. “Yes... I suppose you would care enough to give her the attention she needs.”

Higgins nodded. “I’m insisting on helping her, every way I can.”

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She pointed her finger at him. “Not during your work hours!”

“OK, then I’m doing it during the evening time. I’m not a professional teacher, but I’ll do the best job I can to help her to learn.”

Chapter 3

Miss Finch had thick, low set eyebrows, which reminded me of a bird of prey, like a hawk or an eagle. She smiled down at me and said, “It won’t be so bad here at the zoo. I had to work hard as an orphan child just to survive in this world, and you can too.”

Sometimes I thought deep inside that I was like regular people and dreamed that my face, arms and legs, looked just like the zoo visitors, so I would be free to leave. I thought about running away, and even sailing across the ocean to a land where people actually love and care for one another.

At the end of each day, right after the zoo closed, I would drag my feet back into my cave and stand before

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my only possession, a cracked mirror Miss Finch hung on the cave wall to remind me that I was not like them. I looked at my hands and could see signs that I was like them... the humans. I knew one thing for sure in my heart: I'm not some kind of beast to be laughed and mocked at. I would often stare at my reflection in the mirror and ask myself, *what am I?*

As I stood before the zoo guests, I would often take note of their beautiful clothes and shiny hair. I often dreamed of having clean, shiny hair, and spotless warm clothes, like those staring back at me from the other side of the fence.

The food that I was served at the zoo tasted bad. Thank goodness for Higgins. He was kind enough to sneak special foods and snacks to me. I knew he didn't make much money working at the zoo and felt so thankful for his giving nature.

Higgins was nearly bald and had a "melon-shaped" head. Deep creases ran across his forehead. Even though he had only a little bit of hair on top of his head, I would often see him comb it to keep what was left looking neat. What I liked most about the way

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he looked were his large, kindly eyes, bushy eyebrows, and the way he always seemed to carry the warmth of a smile wherever he went.

One day, at a very early age, when I first began to understand words, Higgins placed his hand upon my shoulder, and told me my given name... “Hailee Tupper.”

With tears in his eyes, he also told me the meaning of the words on the sign that hung above the cave Miss Finch destined to be my home. It said, “The Mushroom Monster.” He said that’s what people thought I looked like.

One morning, Miss Finch gave me some ugly clothes to wear. “Here’s a short-sleeved black shirt and pants to put on.”

The only true friend I ever had was Higgins. He always tried to teach me new things. One night he came to me and said, “Hailee, always remember, every human, animal, and even the insects are precious, having a special purpose in life.”

Higgins kindhearted way of thinking about life must have deeply affected me because even when I saw such a lowly creature as a worm after a heavy rain struggling upon the ground, I would pick it up in the palm of my hand, dig a little hole, and gently

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cover it with dirt. I thought Higgins was right when he said that all life is precious. I felt warm inside knowing that even such a lowly creature as a worm now had a second chance at life. Everything deserves a good life. Everything deserves to live.

One evening, Higgins sat on a chair in front of me and told me about his childhood. "Hailee," he said, "I experienced many hardships in life, just like you. Raised in a small, three-bedroom house I was. It leaned to one side, and I was always worried that it might collapse at any moment. During the evenings, my mom, dad, three brothers, and five sisters would offer prayers of thanks to God for the large pot placed at the center of our dinner table. Most evenings it was filled with just hot water, cabbage and a couple potatoes." Higgins suddenly gripped his arm, looking as if he was in a little bit of pain. "Darn shoulder, it always gives me trouble. Too much heavy lifting as a child. Where did I leave off? Oh yes... when I was still quite a young lad, I needed to help put food on the family table by working at Montgomery Textiles, located on the other side of town." He raised his hand in front of me. "See this scar on my thumb?"

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I nodded.

“I got that from working at the mill.” He shook his head. “Mr. Peabody, the owner, should never have let children work there. One day, I told him straight on, not to let children work at his factory. Got fired, I did, for standing up to that greedy Mr. Peabody. I am very thankful to later get hired here at the zoo because I love to take care of animals. My bother Elroy helps me with the zoo grounds a couple days a week. He loves all different kinds of animals, just like me. If anything should happen to me, Elroy would likely take my place. He is a good man.”

He held a book up in front of me. “My parents couldn’t afford to send me, nor my brothers and sisters to get a formal education. Mom, every evening, bless her soul, tried to teach us how to read the best she could.”

Higgins’s serious look suddenly blossomed into a big smile. “Hailee, despite the hard life growing up, the most important thing about family life is that I was raised in a “God-fearing” home filled with love. I am so blessed and thankful that my parents taught me the importance of love, forgiveness, and compassion for all living creatures.

Music is also an important part of my life. My

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parents taught me, and my brothers and sisters, how to sing many beautiful, spiritual songs.”

I loved to hear Higgins sing. He sang precious songs of joy, beauty, and of redemption. He was blessed with such a wonderful singing voice. “Amazing Grace” was my favorite song he taught me. I listened carefully to all the words and notes to his songs, memorizing them all by heart. As he sang to me, I often wished and wondered how lovely it would be if I wasn’t mute, and had a voice to sing along with him.

Higgins had another gift from God, and that was being an artist, although he didn’t start out that way. He was able to teach me all about the outside world and what it looked like through his drawings and paintings. He began by just doing simple line sketches with a pencil. As the days, months, and years passed by, his drawings began to look more lifelike. I was delighted when he started working with colored paints. I would never have known what beautiful colors existed in nature outside my cage if it weren’t for his paintings.

Higgins eventually made hundreds of drawings and paintings for me to look at. There were scenes of people, pets, wildlife, towns, and just about everything else. His early works of art weren’t very good, but as he kept on practicing, over time, he became a master

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at creating beautiful paintings.

Higgins smiled. “Hailee, I would never have acquired such a skill for drawing and painting if not for my love in showing you what the outside world looks like.”

By pointing at objects, people and places in his art, and then showing me written words to go along with them, he was able to teach me the meaning of a great many words. I wished that I looked normal so I would be free to travel and see in real life all the beautiful images in his paintings.

Although I was mute, and couldn’t tell him directly, I hoped that he would someday have the chance to show his paintings before important people and make a good living selling them.

I would often see him with droopy eyes, sitting slouched forward, elbows resting on his knees, looking so exhausted after a long day at work. In spite of feeling so tired, he still managed to spend a couple of hours each night to teach me all about the outside world, in all its splendor, and all its dangers.

Higgins also taught me what he knew about history and geography, and even brought me a map, from which I learned all about my city and country.

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I would often sit in my cold, damp cave, beside my lantern, and think; *everyone deserves to have a better life than this.*

I cared for and loved everything that God created. I wished and prayed for just one word of kindness, from one zoo visitor, but I never heard a single one.

I felt so sad that I never had the chance to get to know my parents. I sat on my bed, with my hands folded together, and prayed each night that they would deliver me from this nightmare of a life. I dreamed about what my mother and father might look like, and what they might be doing.

I would stare toward the back end of my cave, trying to convince myself that this would be the day they would come to my rescue, and set me free. But sadly, they never came.

I wished and prayed that I had a mother and father who would wrap their arms around me in love, just like the families I would see every day walking up and down the zoo pathway. I wished I had a pretty dress, instead of rags. I wished I had a soft bed, instead of my hard-wooden bench with its bumpy splinters. It was hard as a rock, and oft times felt as cold as the ground beneath my shoes, each having two holes worn clear through.

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Though I couldn't speak, I was able through making gestures with my hands and face let Higgins know that I wanted to be with my mother and father. He came to me one night and said, "Hailee, I am goin' up to the mountain today, to the place you were born, and try to find your parents."

But when he came back later in the day, he said that they were nowhere to be found. My heart sank low when I heard that. I felt so alone.

"Hailee," said Higgins, "I even traveled to neighboring villages, knocked door to door, I did, but still was unable to find your parents."

Miss Finch would always get tight-lipped whenever Higgins brought up the subject of where my parents might have moved to. I suppose, with all the money she was making off me at the zoo, any thought of trying to locate my parents would be the furthest thing from her mind. I took a deep breath, with my head and shoulders slumped low, and thought that they must be dead, or didn't know about my life here. No parent, I believe, would be willing to suffer their child to such a life as mine.

Chapter 4

Before I was brought to the zoo as a baby, many changes were made to the exhibits to make them look more like that found in nature, including open grass areas and plant life. A wide moat, about eight feet deep, was kept filled with water at the front of each exhibit to keep the animals from trying to escape. I didn't know how to swim, so trying to escape that way would be difficult and dangerous.

The zoo had three cave exhibits. There was one each for the tiger, gorilla, and myself. Mine was in between the other two animal exhibits. The caves were made of cement, colored and textured to look like grayish stone. Each cave was about thirty feet long, twelve feet wide, and nine feet high. At the back end of the caves were iron bars, with a padlocked door that

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faced the service road. The opposite end of the cave opened up to a large grass area that faced the moat and fence, through which the zoo visitors could watch the animals and me.

Toward the back end of my cave, on one side, I could look through the sidebars and see a silver-back gorilla they called Igor. Actually, he had very little silver fur on his back. He looked kind of funny because most of his silver fur was from the waist down, making him look like he was wearing silver pants. He liked to play a game with me to see who could do the best job at beating your chest, or scratch under the armpits. I think he always won the chest-beating contest, while I did a better job at scratching under my arms. If Igor thought he won, he would beat his chest, make three grunts, then raise his arms high above his head as his way of telling me that he was the champion.

Once I bravely, or perhaps foolishly, placed my hand through the bars of his cage. Igor reached out with his massive hand and we touched fingertips. I thought that was really neat. It was like we became sort of monster friends.

On the opposite side of my cave, toward the back, gazing through the sidebars, I could see a beautiful tiger. Higgins said that she was going to have cubs

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soon. She was almost as popular as my exhibit, and actually liked to lounge around on the outside grass area where the visitors could watch her. She had a better life than I did, because no one made fun of the way she looked.

One evening, as Higgins sat in front of me, he said, "Hailee... I truly believe with all my heart that someday you will have a victory over all the trials in your life." He raised his hand, closed his palm into a fist, then pointed his index and middle finger straight up, forming the letter "V".

"Hailee," he said, "do you know what this "V" letter stands for?"

I shook my head.

"The "V" stands for victory. Keep the faith and some day you will have victory in life, no matter what stands in your way."

I raised my hand and copied the sign of victory.

"Yes, that's it, Hailee," he said, watching me make a perfect "V" with my fingers.

"From now on, whenever we see each other, let's give the victory sign. We "will" be victorious!"

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Higgins smiled and pointed toward the gorilla exhibit. When I turned to see what it was, I smiled and chuckled, seeing Igor staring back at us in his cage with his hand raised high, giving us the victory sign with his two giant fingers. I thought it was pretty amazing that he was able to figure out how to copy us that quickly.

“See that,” said Higgins. “Even Igor believes that you will have victory in life.”

Chapter 5

Higgins shouted excitedly, “Hailee, come see! The mom tiger had two boy cubs.”

I was so happy when I heard that, I ran as fast as I could to the back of my cave and peered through the sidebars. My eyes stretched wide seeing the mom with her two cubs cuddled next to her. They were so lucky to have a caring, loving mother to look after them. I even felt a little jealous.

One day, after the tiger cubs grew old enough to eat solid food, I heard Miss Finch talking to someone

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by the back-service road. I was curious as to what she was up to, so I walked along the side of the cave, so as not to be seen. I peeked around the edge of the wall and saw Miss Finch chatting with a man she called Sir Gumtree. He had a pointed black mustache and was dressed in tan shorts, a white striped shirt, knee-high socks, and had on a broad-rimmed, brown leather hat.

“When do you want the mom and one of the cubs?” asked Miss Finch.

Sir Gumtree gave her a serious look. “I need to take delivery tomorrow. I have an important client requesting a tiger hunt at the reserve. He’s paying a nice sum to add such a beast to his mantle collection. As for the cub, he’ll be ready for a hunt in a few month’s time.”

When I heard that, my hands curled into a tight fist, and my face flushed red. I thought *I couldn’t let this happen!* I looked around me, but what could I do? How could I stop it? I remembered seeing Miss Finch hide a second set of keys under a wooden crate on the other side of the road by the storage shed. I thought, *if I could just figure out some way to get my hands on those keys, then maybe I could escape at night and take the tigers with me.*

I just couldn’t let Miss Finch sell the mother and

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one of her cubs to be hunted for sport. I stepped in plain view of Miss Finch, stuck my hands out through the bars, and shook my fists at the both of them.

“Excuse me one moment, Sir Gumtree,” said Miss Finch. “I have a brief matter to attend to.” She stomped up to me, then pointed at my face. “See here, you little snoop! Well... so you heard our private business affair, did you?”

I nodded, then reached through the bars and tried to grab her jacket, but she took a step back before I could get hold of it. She turned toward the man and smiled. “I’ll be right with you, Sir Gumtree.”

She placed her hands firmly on her hips and gave me a mean look. “How dare you try and lay a hand on me, you little monster!” She raised her chin, chuckled, then sneered at me. “Well, if you could only talk, then maybe you might be able to warn someone, wouldn’t you?” She leaned forward, stuck her face close to mine, and whispered into my ear, “Would you like a nice “warm” tiger rug for your cave?”

I was so mad when I heard her say that.

When Higgins came by later that evening, he said,

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“Hailee, what’s wrong? I’ve never saw your face look so flushed before.”

I used a stick to scratch a picture in the dirt of Miss Finch and Sir Gumtree holding a gun pointed at a tiger. Then I drew a line out from the gun toward the tiger. Next, I drew a picture of a tiger laying on its side, like it was shot.

Higgins scratched his head and gave me a confused look. “Hailee, I’m not sure what you are tryin’ to tell me.”

Early the next morning I heard some loud voices by the service road. I rushed to the back of the cave and saw Higgins arguing with Miss Finch and Sir Gumtree. That same moment, two workers I’ve never seen before were trying to get the mom tiger and one of the cubs into the back of a large truck.

Higgins pointed at the tigers. “Where are those men taking the mom and cub?”

Miss Finch stepped up to Higgins and stared him straight in the eye. “If you must know, my business friend here, Sir Gumtree, is taking the Tigers to a game reserve where they will have lots of food to eat, and a big area to roam around in, just like they were in the wild.”

Sir Gumtree grinned. “True indeed, this zoo can’t be

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compared to the size of land I offer them to freely roam about.”

Higgins’s face flushed red. “You wouldn’t be takin’ them to a game reserve to be hunted down for sport, would you?”

Sir Gumtree and Miss Finch exchanged glances in silence.

“Do you think I would do that?” said Miss Finch.

Higgins nodded.

“Well, they’re going, and that’s that!”

Higgins stomped up to the back of the truck and tried to force the back door open to let the tigers out, but the two men grabbed his arms from behind and held him back. Higgins shook himself free and chased after the truck until he ran out of breath. He looked back down the road at Miss Finch with narrowed eyes, and shouted, “You can’t get away with this! I’m tellin’ Mr. Brunsky about this!”

Miss Finch chuckled. “Go ahead. He was the one who sealed the deal, and for quite a nice sum, I might say.”

Higgins dragged his feet over to my cage with his head hung low. “Sorry Hailee, there is nothing more I could do about it. You heard Miss Finch tell me the tiger and cub would be goin’ to a reserve with lots of food,

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and a big place for them to roam around. We don't have any proof about them being used for a hunting sport."

I clenched the iron bars with my fists in frustration, feeling so helpless for not being able to prevent the tigers from being taken away.

I named the cub that was left behind Zebu, from one of the stories Higgins told me about a family of tigers.

Zebu turned out to be nothing like his mom and acted very shy, even though he was a boy tiger. He refused to go out of the cave so all the people could stare at him.

Early in the morning, I heard Miss Finch shout at the tiger cub, "You little coward! Get out there this minute so the visitors can see you." She walked up to him and kicked straw into his face.

Zebu became very skinny, weak, and sickly, because he wouldn't listen to Miss Finch and get enough food. No matter how much Miss Finch tried, he still refused

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to go out of the cave and entertain the guests like the other animals.

I could tell that Zebu was developing a deeper, growing hatred toward Miss Finch. I could see it from the expression on his face and in his eyes.

Igor jumped up and down and beat his chest whenever he heard Miss Finch yell at Zebu. I bet when Igor heard that, and Zebu growling back, he thought that the tiger cub was in some kind of trouble and wanted to help him fight back.

It became painful for me to stare through the bars and see Zebu getting so thin. I made a vow to myself that someday I would find a way to escape from this prison, and when I did, I would find a way back here and free Zebu.

I shared as much of my food as I could with Zebu to help him get stronger. He had a big appetite, so I could only give him so much food, or I would end up starving myself. Higgins tried to sneak extra meat to the cub whenever he could as well.

Chapter 6

Early in the morning Miss Finch would often stand by the back-service road and say, “Do I have to come here every single morning to get you up? And don’t get too close to the water. I wouldn’t want you to drown trying to cross the moat.”

After the zoo closed one evening, I tried to make a bridge to cross the mote by breaking off several branches from the trees, then tie them together with vines. I was able to get to the other side of the moat and climb over the fence, but only got a short distance away from the zoo before they spotted me and brought

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me back. They trimmed off all the lower tree branches so I couldn't try to escape that way again.

I think the zoo visitors just thought of me as entertainment, someone to mock at, or to make them feel bigger than they really are. People can be so cruel at times.

I walked to the back of my cave, then gazed through the bars and out across the countryside. I thought, *there must be more good people like Higgins out there*. Couldn't the parents teach their kids more about the importance of being kind to others? Didn't they learn anything at school about showing love and compassion to those who were less fortunate than themselves?

Chapter 7

Higgins sat outside my cave one evening and started to paint pictures of angels. “Hailee,” he said, “it’s important to have faith and believe in things that can’t be seen. In the depths of the deepest darkness a shining light of hope exists for all to take hold of through faith.” He gazed up into the night sky. “I often make special prayers that you will be delivered from all this. I believe that a miracle can and will happen to you someday.” He turned and looked me straight in the eye. “Miracles do happen, and I believe that one will change your life forever.”

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I was able to keep the light of faith in my heart beating through the dark, dreary days and years as they slowly crept by, that is, until now. I felt so depressed I didn't think I could survive one more day of having to live in the zoo.

Ten o'clock that evening, I walked outside my cave and gazed up toward the stars. It was very peaceful that night and I so much enjoyed the quiet peacefulness. It made me feel closer to God. I loved the sounds of nature, like the crickets chirping, frogs croaking, and even hearing my friend Igor snoring in the cave next door.

Like many nights before, I made a special prayer to be delivered from this body and place. I finally reached the breaking point, and came to believe that all was lost. Facing the moat, I took three steps toward the pool of water. As if in a trance, I took five more steps toward the moat. Moments later, I found myself standing by the moat's edge, staring down at my reflection on the water's surface. It looked so peaceful and calm down there... so inviting. Why couldn't life be as such? There was a full moon out that night, and I was able to see all the way down to the cement bottom of the pool. I inched closer and felt my body leaning over the edge.

It was during this final day and moment of

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despair, when I was about to give up, that something miraculous happened. Amongst the multitude of heavenly lights, I caught sight of a shooting star. I had witnessed many a shooting star in the past, but this one appeared to be very special and odd. It looked as if it was heading straight toward earth, as a matter of fact, heading straight where I was standing. The sky quickly grew brighter and brighter until it was almost blinding. I raced across the grass to the safety of the cave. A moment later, I was startled to see a glowing sphere of light flash down in front of the cave opening. It hovered about three feet off the ground several seconds, then started to float inside. I backed away from the light until I felt the heels of my shoes brush up against the cave wall. The ball of light quickly grew in size. My lips parted, and eyes stretched wide, seeing an angel step out from the light. She looked just like one of the angels in Higgins's paintings. *But how could he know what a real angel looked like?*

She had shining hair and the most beautiful smile. Her skin glowed bright. She spoke to me in soft, whispery words that seemed to float upon the air. "I heard your prayer," she said, "and I know your sorrow. Listen carefully, my child. When your pain becomes so great you think you cannot bear it, you will have

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unspeakable joy," she proclaimed, "If you endure the trials, have faith, and live a life in love with kindness for others."

I wished at that moment that I could speak. I had so many things I wished to ask her, but being mute, I couldn't get even say a single word. I wondered how I could have joy when I was trapped in this monstrous body, held captive in a zoo. Gazing into her eyes, I somehow felt that she could understand my every thought.

She spoke to me again. "Bear the pain and trials, and you will have unspeakable joy." She repeated that message to me over and over again, each time her voice growing softer, until moments later, she vanished into the sphere of light from whence she came.

The ball of light floated out of the cave, then flashed back up into the heavens.

I thought, *what did she mean when she said, "When your pain becomes so great you think you cannot bear it, you will have unspeakable joy if you endure the trials, have faith, and live a life in love with kindness for others?"*

I gazed toward the back of the cave and saw Igor and Zebu staring back at me wide-eyed through the sidebars. I wondered if they saw the angel too. I

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think Igor must have seen her because his mouth was hanging wide open like he was in shock.

I laid wide awake in bed, pondering everything that just happened to me for a couple of hours before I finally drifted asleep.

I woke up the next morning expecting to see or feel some kind of miracle in my life, but when I gazed at my reflection in the mirror, my heart sank low. There wasn't any visible change in my appearance at all. Not even a little bit. I thought that I must have been dreaming about seeing an angel the night before.

I heard the visitors' shouting for me to come outside and show my face.

My feet dragged across the dirt to the cave opening. I saw parents, kids, and even grandparents with walking canes, rushing down the pathway to join the other three visitors. They hurried past the giraffe, rhinoceros and elephant exhibit. When they reached my exhibit, they leaned over the railing and stared across the moat at me.

I saw a lady holding a basket with a loaf of bread sticking part way out of it. I wished that someone would care enough to share a nice piece of bread like that with me.

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The moment I stepped outside of my cave, I saw the zoo attendant shuffle people around and say, “Come on, come on, let everyone have a chance to see her. Don’t be pushy.”

The crowd grew even bigger. Igor somehow knew that I felt bad and lured people away from my exhibit by walking across a tightrope to get their attention. Igor always seemed to do that special trick whenever he saw a large crowd of people making me feel sad.

Chapter 8

At the end of another long day of having to stand before a crowd of visitors, I was finally able to retire to my cave for the night. When I stepped in front of the mirror I started to cry loud and hard. A couple of minutes later, the most unusual thing happened. I saw Igor reach through the bars and drop a clump of red flowers into my cave. I walked over, picked them up, and inhaled their sweet fragrance. I just realized, at that very moment, that I was wrong thinking Higgins was the only one who loved or showed any

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compassion toward me. Igor must have heard me crying and gathered some wildflowers growing along the edge of his enclosure. Although I couldn't speak to thank him, I was still able to gesture with my hands how much I loved and appreciated his gift.

I looked at myself in the mirror again and found it hard to believe how extra ugly I looked that evening. I just couldn't help it, and started crying again, so much, for such a long time, my face and body became wet from my tears. I cried harder than I ever did in my entire life, until no more tears were coming out.

I saw Igor jumping up and down, beating his chest, and grunt like he could somehow feel my pain and wanted to help.

I felt totally exhausted, and after a few minutes fell fast asleep.

It was very hot and dry in the cave that evening, more so than I ever remembered in the past. I awakened in the middle of the night feeling something strange happening to my body. I got up, lit the lantern, and gazed at myself in the mirror. I was horrified at what I saw. My moldy skin had shrunk and cracked all over my body. My face appeared so wrinkled I could hardly believe it. I just couldn't stand to look at my ugly self any longer, so I grabbed at my monstrous face, and to my horror, a hand

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full of gray muck came off and stuck to my hands. My eyes stretched wide and pulse quickened. *Oh my gosh, I thought. Is my face coming off?*

I feared that at any moment my face would be completely gone. I could not bear to see my reflection anymore, so I picked up a stone and threw it at the mirror, breaking it to pieces.

The noise from the shattered mirror must have startled Igor and Zebu awake because I saw them staring back at me with wide-stretched eyes. I didn't think gorillas could show extreme emotion, but the instant Igor saw my face he screamed, jumped up and down and beat his chest. That same instant, Zebu darted out of sight like he was frightened by a strange new monster. I thought, *oh great; now I looked so horrible, even my two best friends are afraid to look at me.* Poor Igor and Zebu, they must have been shocked to see my face like this.

I leaned forward, feeling as if I was going to throw up, when a piece of broken mirror reflected something strange in the middle of my right cheek about the size of a quarter. It looked like pure, unblemished skin. I quickly dipped my hand into the bucket of water and washed my cheek to expose more of the hidden skin. I just couldn't believe how soft it felt. It appeared to be

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normal, silky, even-colored, and beautiful.

I really got excited and started to wash my face faster and faster, all around my eyes, forehead, and neck, until the rest of the gray muck was gone. I raised the lantern close to my face, and once again looked at my reflection in the piece of mirror. I was shocked to see a beautiful girl staring back at me. She was like a stranger I never knew existed before. *Could it be she was hidden beneath my outer shell of ugliness for all these years, and I just never knew it?*

I saw beautiful, soft hair where just moments ago I could only see a moldy looking mop. I quickly washed the rest of my hair in the bucket of water until all the muck came off. I looked at myself again and saw shiny, flowing hair all the way down to my shoulder.

The water in my bucket turned dark and murky. I needed more clean water to wash off the rest of my body, so I ran outside to the edge of the moat and repeatedly splashed myself with water until all the remaining goo was gone. My entire body now appeared to be soft and beautiful, like the skin of a newborn baby. I rushed back into the cave just to make sure the beautiful girl was still there. I blinked over and over again, trying to shake off the reflection of the strange girl looking back at me, believing that she was just a

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dream, and that at any moment I would see my former hideous self in the mirror again. But to my delight, the image of the girl stayed with me.

The only blemish that remained was a very unusual black mole in the shape of a star on the inside of my right wrist.

When I looked back, I was shocked to see Igor raise his hand and give me the “V” for victory sign.

Feeling completely exhausted, I laid down on my bed and fell fast asleep.

Chapter 9

The following morning, I was jolted out of bed by visitors calling out to see me. I dragged my feet over to the cave opening and saw a crowd of twenty people already waiting for me to come out.

“Where is she?” they asked.

I stepped out into the morning light in a complete daze, expecting at any moment to hear the kids and adults talk at me, but this time it was different. I saw their mouths hanging open in complete silence. I wondered what they were thinking. I sensed fear in their faces, but of a different kind than I was used to seeing.

One of the mothers pointed at me and cried out,

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“There’s a beautiful girl! A beautiful maid is trapped in the monster’s cage! Help her, quick!”

A young boy shouted, “The mushroom child is going to get her! Hurry!”

I looked back toward the cave, wondering what they were talking about, then gazed down at my arms and legs and saw beautiful skin. *Was what happened to me the night before for real, and not a dream?* I pinched myself. Yes! Yes! It really must be true.

Of course they didn’t know. They must be thinking my other self is still in the cave, about to come out and get me.

One of the dads quickly climbed over the fence, then dove into the moat, making a big splash. He swam across, climbed out, and ran up to me. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I won’t let her get you.”

Was he trying to rescue me from my former self? I thought. *How weird was that?*

His daughter cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, “Daddy! Daddy! Hurry! The mushroom monster is in the cave! The Mushroom Monster is going to get you!” Her mom whisked her up into her arms and she quickly hid her face in her thick coat. The crowd shouted, “I think she’s coming! Hurry! Get her out! Fast!”

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Before I knew it, the man swept me up into his arms and carried me toward the moat. He stopped at the edge of the water and looked back, probably expecting to see the Mushroom Monster rush out of the cave at any moment to try and get us.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and hung on for dear life as he swam across the moat. Next, he carried me to the top of the fence where three other men were waiting to help me get safely down the other side.

The next thing I knew, I was laying in the middle of the zoo pathway with a crowd of people gathering around me. They leaned forward and stared down at me with worried expressions.

An elderly woman dropped her wooden cane, cupped her hands over her mouth and looked as if she was in shock after witnessing what happened.

I felt extremely weak and cold, not even having the strength to get back up. I turned my head and looked toward my cave exhibit. There she was, Miss Finch, running around the front grass area, looking for the Mushroom Monster. She shouted, "Come out wherever you're hiding!" She stood in the middle of the grass area, placed her hands firmly on her hips, then slowly turned a circle. "You can't hide for long! You better

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come out, right now!” She smiled at the crowd in silence a moment, then resumed her frantic search for the Mushroom Monster. She rushed around like crazy, searching all my past hiding places, including behind the boulders, trees, and bushes. She even looked in the moat to see if perhaps her precious monster might have drowned.

I knew all that she was going to find would be a pile of grey, moldy goop next to the shattered mirror in the cave.

Two young women knelt on each side of me and clasped my hands. “Don’t worry,” one woman said. “You’ll be OK. You’re safe now.” The other said, “No monster can get you here.”

A kindhearted woman rolled her wool sweater into a ball and placed it under my neck for a pillow. “How did you get in that dreadful cage, dear child?” she asked.

“What is your name?” asked another.

I gave them a blank stare, unable to respond.

A mother ran her hand softly back across my forehead. “The poor dear must be in shock. I bet that’s why she can’t speak.”

I felt something I never felt before at that moment. People acted as if they really cared and were worried

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about me. It felt so good to be on the other side of the fence, away from the reflection of my former monster self.

A woman took off her boots and put them on my feet. It was wonderful to have my feet feel so warm. They even put a beautiful jacket on me. I could hardly believe all of their kindness. These were my first real clothes, and they felt so good to have on. They were wonderful gifts from people who thought they rescued me from the Mushroom Monster. If they only knew the truth, I bet they wouldn't believe it in a million years.

It was hard to believe how such a wonderful miracle could happen in my life. I felt like smiling for the first time ever.

They kept asking me who I was, where my parents were, and how I got trapped inside the monster exhibit. As hard as I tried to speak, I couldn't utter a single word.

I was so tired, and my eyes felt very heavy. Moments later I drifted sound asleep.

Chapter 10

When I finally woke up, I discovered that I was in a nice bed covered with white sheets up to my neck. Miss Finch, a nurse, and a doctor stood at my bedside and talked about what happened to me back at the zoo.

Miss Finch waited until everyone had left the hospital room, then leaned over my bed and stared down at me with squinted eyes. “How? How did you get inside the Mushroom Monster exhibit?”

Before I had the chance to gesture with my hands that I couldn’t speak, she walked over to the front door, looked up and down the hallway a moment, then quickly hurried back to me. “Come on! Speak up!” she continued to rant. “Tell me! How? How did you get inside the Mushroom Monster exhibit?” Her voice

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grew louder. "How did you get inside?"

I pointed my finger at my mouth to let her know that I couldn't speak.

She shook her head, looked the other way a moment, and then thrust her face back at me again. "Oh, don't play dumb with me. What happened to the mushroom girl? What did you do with her?"

I gestured with my hands and shook my head, trying to let her know that I couldn't answer back.

She put on a fake looking smile. "All I saw was a pile of moldy grey muck in front of a broken mirror; the same muck that was found on your clothes." She leaned up, placed her hands on her hips and stared down at me. "How did you get her clothes? Why did you put them on?"

I pointed at my mouth for the third time to try and convince her that I couldn't speak.

She stepped back, took a deep breath, then stared down at me in silence. "Another mute, I can't believe it! First the Mushroom Monster... and now you. I'll be getting the truth out of you, mute or no mute. Just you see."

She stared down at me in silence a moment. "No. You couldn't be," she said. "Couldn't be the same as... Impossible." Next, she grasped my arm and stared at

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the star-shaped mole on the side of my wrist. “What an odd mark.”

A couple of days later, Miss Finch brought me in her carriage to the Brunsville County Courthouse. Right before entering the front door, she gripped my shoulder. “If you ever, ever, want to see your parents again, you better go along with everything I say from here on out, especially when we go before the judge. Got it?”

I nodded.

Miss Finch walked up to Judge Randall and offered him a big piece of chocolate. “Have one Judge.”

The judge’s eyes narrowed. “That wouldn’t be a sweet bribe you’re offering me? Now would it?”

“Why... of course not. Just thought you’d like some chocolate.” She smiled. “Everyone thinks you to are such a sweet judge.”

Miss Finch spent the next hour in the courtroom office discussing my case before the judge. I don’t know how, but she somehow managed to convince him to give her temporary custody of me until I was claimed by my rightful parents, or next of kin.

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The judge said that posters of my picture were sent out to the nearby towns. I knew that it would be impossible for my parents to recognize me in my new body.

Miss Finch never stopped smiling and acted so sweet in front of me. I think she was just trying to impress the judge. I felt like pushing her back right then but was afraid of what she said to me earlier about not getting to see my parents again. I felt she knew the truth about me and my former Mushroom Monster self, but couldn't get herself to fully believe it. Heck, I could hardly believe it either.

Miss Finch extended her hand to me and smiled, but I stepped back, keeping my arms close to my side. Judge Randall took note of my cold response and looked a little concerned.

"She's still in shock, and timid of everyone," said Miss Finch.

Judge Randall nodded. "That's to be expected."

She stepped toward the door with me at her side, then looked back over her shoulder. "Nothing to worry about, Judge Randall. I'll be taking good care of her until she is claimed by her rightful parents or next of kin."

Chapter II

Miss Finch told me to hurry up and get inside the carriage the moment we stepped out of the courtroom. I think she was worried that Judge Randall might change his mind at any moment about giving her temporary custody of me.

I felt her hand push against my back to rush me inside the carriage. “Come on. We don’t have all day. We must hurry!”

The driver got the horses off to a fast gallop. I looked out of the carriage window and noticed that the door handle on my side was tied with a cord so it couldn’t be opened.

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Miss Finch looked down at me and grinned. "Don't even think about trying to get out," she smirked. "I'll be taking good care of you. You have nothing to be worried about."

After a long, bumpy ride, the carriage pulled up alongside a grey stone, two-story house, surrounded by green pastures. Bushy trees, ranging in color from deep green to bluish shades, dotted the landscape. I gazed out the carriage window and down to the valley below. Cows and sheep could be seen grazing upon vast fields of grass.

An elderly lady in a house directly across the street from us peeped out her window. Before I knew it, she stepped out the front door, then walked up to us wearing a bright yellow dress and feathered hat. "Gracious me," she said, giving us a big smile. "Who's your guest?"

I figured her neighbor didn't have much else to do, living out in the middle of nowhere, then inquire of every new person who crossed her path.

Miss Finch put on one of her fake smiles. "She was found in the zoo's Mushroom Monster exhibit."

The lady put her hand over her mouth. "Gracious me! The Mushroom Monster exhibit? Dreadful. Simply dreadful!"

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Miss Finch grinned and put her arm around my shoulder. “Judge Randall gave me temporary custody of her until we find her lawful parents, or next of kin. I have a lovely room waiting inside, just for her.” She turned and gave me another fake smile. “I think she’ll love it.”

As we headed toward the front door, a cockroach suddenly raced across the path in front of us. That same instant, Miss Finch jumped back. “Dreadful, filthy, vile creatures!” she screeched. “If there’s anything I can’t stand, it’s a creepy cockroach.”

Chapter 12

The moment I stepped into Miss Finch's house I saw fancy furnishings everywhere. I couldn't wait to see my bedroom, and wondered what kind of food I would be getting to eat.

She led me upstairs, down the hallway, and into a beautifully decorated bedroom. On both sides of the window were several dolls, each having a unique face and wearing a different colored dress. I loved the interesting stitch designs on their clothes.

Miss Finch put her arm around my shoulder and gave me a big smile. "Ah yes, I can see the sparkle in your eye." She turned and spread her arms far apart.

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“Isn’t this room simply a dream come true?”

I nodded and grinned. *Oh my gosh*, I thought, *was this beautiful bedroom set aside just for me?* Everything looked so clean and well kept. *This room would be just perfect for me.*

She showed me some paintings hanging on the wall, including one of her daughter riding a blue bicycle. A bouquet of red and white roses filled the bike’s front basket. I wondered if her daughter might be a musician, because she had a guitar strapped to her back.

I smiled, admiring a watercolor painting of two cats dressed in human clothes, one in a blue dress, the other in a black suit. They faced each other in a flower garden with a picnic basket filled with milk bottles at their side.

Everything about the room seemed to be perfect. I thought, *perhaps I was wrong about Miss Finch after all.*

At that moment, when I was feeling so very happy, something happened that took all my joy away. She squinted and wagged her finger at me. “I don’t want you, ever, ever to step foot in this, or my other daughter’s bedroom. Understand?”

I nodded as if I understood, but actually I didn’t. If

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her daughters were gone, what would it matter if I got to stay in one of their rooms?

Her eyes narrowed. "Just so you know, my daughters insist that everything is left perfect, just the way they left it."

My heart sank low with disappointment. *This can't be true.*

She had me follow her down the hallway, then step into a room that was completely bare, with the exception of a small round wall mirror having a rusted frame, and a bed without a cushion. There were just grey bed sheets covering a plank of wood, just like back at the cave.

Miss Finch grinned. "What you're looking at is all I got as an orphan child; a hard bed, and that same mirror. No one ever gave me anything good growing up. Do you think you are better than me, or deserve more?"

I sighed, then shook my head.

Miss Finch swiped her hand down across the wall's surface, then showed me her fingertips. "See, I personally dusted this nice storage room before you arrived. Aren't you lucky? Isn't it roomy?"

How could this be? I looked around the room. There wasn't even a window to get some fresh air. It

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was almost as dreary as the zoo cave. I turned and looked at her, and thought, *you greedy person. You must be kidding me.* Her selfish way made me all the more want to find a way to escape from her home.

Miss Finch smiled. "Every square foot of this house is precious to me. I need all the comforts for my daughters and me for when they come back to visit."

My hands curled into a fist.

"Child, don't ever make a fist at me, that is, if you know what's good for you. I might decide not to give you any more chocolate pieces if you do that again. Wouldn't that be simply dreadful? Chocolate makes everyone so sweet. Don't you think so?"

I thought, *you don't even know the meaning of sweet, chocolate or no chocolate.* I tried to remember what Higgins taught me about being thankful for what we have, even in times of grief. This was definitely one of those times.

I thought, *at least it isn't too cold in the storage room, and I didn't have anyone staring at me, like back at the zoo.*

Chapter 13

Miss Finch led me downstairs and into her living room. I saw a brown leather couch and red velvet sofa having two large purple pillows at each end. Behind the sofa were four shelves packed with all kinds of books of different sizes and colors.

I saw three clay pots sitting on a desk by the windowsill. The soil had a thick layer of green moss growing on top. In the center of each pot was a miniature trellis having a leafy green vine with tiny orange flowers.

Miss Finch's face suddenly turned mean looking. "My, what a brave girl you were, going into the cave with the monster like that."

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I thought, *oh no! Is she going to talk about that again?*

She stepped closer. "Come now, spit it out. Where is the monster? Did you bury her?"

I gestured with my hands that I couldn't answer her.

"Well, if you're going to stay here with me, you must have a name. Since you can't speak for yourself, and the Mushroom Monster has seemed to have vanished into thin air, I'll call you by her first name." She pointed at me. "From now on, your name is Hailee. Any complaints?"

I shook my head and was actually very happy to have her call me by my real name.

She reached out and gripped my shoulder. Her large white hands felt cold, just like everything else about her. "Well, until your parents arrive, if they *"ever"* do, you will work here for *"me,"* and *"earn"* every penny of your keep. Understand?"

I nodded.

She clenched her hands into a fist. "You're going to work. That means cooking meals, and cleaning house." She tilted her head to one side and stared at me in silence a moment. "You are a strange one. Well, you'll certainly have your work cut out for you here." She

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reached out and grabbed my wrists. "Let me see your hands." Her eyes narrowed. "Smooth as a baby. Just as I thought. I suppose you haven't worked a day in your life, have you?"

I gave her a blank stare.

"Well... the first thing you do when you get up in the morning is to make my breakfast. I gather you don't know how to properly cook eggs either, do you?"

I shook my head.

She gave me a sneer. "Well... you're not going to get out of work by being ignorant in this house. I'll show you how. Never forget, I like a dozen eggs, sunny side up, each and *every* morning. And if you should happen to break one of the yolks," she squinted and lightly tapped her finger upon the table, "you're going to have to spend extra time cleaning the house. Understand?"

I nodded.

Miss Finch repeatedly opened and closed her hands. "So you better have strong hands, and at the same time, nimble fingers, for cooking eggs and scrubbing floors." She gazed at my clothes while shaking her head. "No, no, no, those will never do." She fetched some ordinary looking clothes and handed them to me. "I want you to wear these while living here."

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I was so disgusted with the ugly looking clothes she gave me. I felt like tossing them onto the floor in front of her black boots. I could hardly stand to look at the plain brown, long-sleeve shirt, and full-length pants, the same boring color.

She reached into her side pocket and handed me a piece of chocolate. "Here, have one. Bet you never met anyone as sweet as me." She smiled. "Now, this is something to dream about. Besides getting free chocolate pieces; if you work really hard, I might even consider making you like a stepdaughter."

More like slave-daughter, I thought. Instead of having to wax her precious floor, I felt like waxing the top of her head with melted chocolate.

Miss Finch grinned. "Are you thinking about something... sweet?"

I gave her a big nod and smiled. Being mute had the advantage of making me hold my tongue, so that I couldn't give her a piece of my mind. Higgins taught me that we're not perfect beings. I guessed I needed to work on thinking kinder thoughts, even in the presence of unkind souls.

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I followed Miss Finch's lead out of the living room and into the kitchen. The grey ceiling had thick wood beams, spread about three feet apart. The walls were painted white, and over a foot thick.

To the back of the kitchen, sitting on a shelf above the brick fireplace were five ceramic plates, each one having pictures of climbing roses glazed onto the surface. I saw several cooking utensils hanging on hooks on either side of the fireplace, including six copper pots of different sizes.

In the middle of the room was a large brass ceiling lamp hanging above the kitchen table.

I was startled to see a huge cockroach lying on its back at the far corner of the kitchen. It was the biggest bug I've ever seen in my entire life. Instead of scaring Miss Finch with it, which at the moment I didn't think was a bad idea, I used the edge of my shoe to slide the dead bug out of sight under the cabinet ledge.

I looked behind me and saw a shiny red door by the side of the kitchen with stacks of boxes in front of it.

Miss Finch quickly stepped between me and the red door, blocking my view. "Oh, so you're curious about that door, and what might be inside that room, are you?"

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I nodded.

She gave me a grin. “Wonder why those boxes are in front of the door?”

I nodded.

“Well, don’t. That room is strictly *off limits!* Never go in there! Understand?”

I nodded.

She pointed at the top box. “That’s where I keep my precious cocoa powder. The other boxes are filled with cleaning supplies. You’ll need lots of them while living here.”

I leaned to one side and tried to get another look at the red door, but she quickly stepped in front of me and blocked my view again.

I walked to the far side of the kitchen and looked out a large window having a beautiful view of a flower garden. The scene reminded me of one of Higgins’s paintings.

I felt a sudden tap on my back shoulder.

“Are you a daydreamer?” she asked, squinting at me with one eye. “Let’s make one thing perfectly clear; I don’t tolerate daydreamers in this house. Understand?”

I nodded.

“Good.” She pointed out the window toward her

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barn. "First thing in the morning, after feeding the chickens, cleaning the barn, and preparing my dozen eggs for breakfast, I want you to scrub the floor in the living room. I want it waxed and polished. Understand?" She squinted at me. "If I can't see my reflection on the wood floor, it will cost you your dinner. Understood?"

I nodded. *Now I knew why there were so many cracks in the floor. The wood probably couldn't stand her reflection.*

I kind of enjoyed waking up early in the morning to feed the chickens and collect the eggs for breakfast, but hated to think about what might happen to me, or any one of the chickens if they should happen to come up short of her daily dozen eggs. I might get stuck without lunch and dinner, but the poor chicken would probably end up becoming Miss Finch's lunch or dinner.

I always had to be on guard while tossing feed to the chickens, because a huge white goose named Jenny Ann, loved to sneak up when I wasn't looking and give me a nip in the behind. Next, she would stretch her long white neck at me and flap her orange beak, making the most annoying honking sounds. It was so nerve-racking. I very much disliked Jenny Ann.

I was given strict orders whenever I prepared or served

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her any food or drink to put on my cook's outfit; a full-length white apron, and tall white hat.

"This is how I want my vegetables prepared," she said, putting several potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, and stalks of celery on the cutting board. She started dicing them into small cubes. "See, like this. Not big pieces. Not small pieces. Just right. Got it?"

I nodded.

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you sure?"

I nodded again.

Sometimes, when I looked over her shoulder while watching her give instructions on how to cook, I would place my hands firmly on my hips, give her a sneer, and think to myself, *you got to be kidding*.

When she looked back at me, I quickly dropped my arms to my side and smiled sweetly. When she looked away, I put my hands back on my hips again. I liked to play that game with her. Good thing I never got caught. I sometimes wondered if she suspected I was acting silly behind her back because quite often she would turn around really fast as if trying to catch me doing something.

I experienced many smells in my life, most very unpleasant, but the ones in Miss Finch's kitchen, to the contrary, were quite delightful to the senses. She taught

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me many interesting and sweet recipes. I associated the smells with food names like gingerbread, angel cake, and blueberry muffins. I couldn't ever imagine anyone having a bigger sweet tooth than Miss Finch. Unfortunately, all that food did nothing to make her the least bit sweeter. I thought devil's food cake and sourdough bread might be foods that would better match her personality.

The amount of food I served her in a single meal was more than I got to eat for an entire week when I lived at the zoo. She loved to eat lots and lots of large juicy steaks. I often wondered where she went to get so much meat. I didn't think a stomach could hold that much food all at once. I couldn't get the image out of my mind, seeing her stuff her face like that.

I thought that it would be so nice to sit at a table and to have as much food as I wanted to eat like she did, but I never complained, nor could I, even if I wanted to.

I stepped into Miss Finch's bedroom, just like I did every night, and served her a cup of hot cocoa with an added half-teaspoon of her sleeping medicine. She

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normally requested that I add a whole teaspoon, but she said she felt very tired that night and only needed a half dose.

I waited outside the bedroom for her to fall asleep. After she started to snore, I tiptoed down the hallway and entered one of her daughters' bedrooms. I knew she didn't want me to go in the room, but I just couldn't resist cradling one of the dolls. I thought, *it wouldn't hurt anything, and besides, it would be so nice to know how it feels to hold one of those beautiful dolls in my arms.*

I was drawn to the large doll with the red velvet dress. I picked her up and held her eye level, admiring all the details that made her appear so lifelike. I looked around at all the furnishings and felt so much at peace being in such a beautiful room.

I was startled by the sound of the door slamming shut behind me.

Miss Finch shouted, "How dare you step foot in my daughter's bedroom!"

She caught me red handed, she did, holding one of her daughters' prized dolls.

Her large feet stomped up to me. "Didn't I tell you to stay out of this bedroom, and especially not to touch anything?" She leaned forward, then put her

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mouth close to my ear. "Are you daft? Didn't you hear me before?"

She snatched the doll out from my hands and tossed it onto the bed. "Now, go to your room this instant!" she said, pointing out the door. "You're lucky to have such a nice place to sleep, not to mention getting "free" food and wonderful bits of sweet chocolate for doing just a "little" bit of chores."

I thought, yeah, right, *a little bit of chores from morning to night, scrubbing the floors, washing dishes, cleaning carpets, cooking food, dusting the house, feeding the chickens, and not to mention, getting nipped in the behind by her honkin' goose, Jenny Ann.*

I was still very upset at Miss Finch the following evening for the cruel way she frightened me for going into her daughter's bedroom, so decided to teach her a lesson. I went into the kitchen and found the monster cockroach I discovered the first day I arrived, then picked it up and slid it into my side pocket. Next, I sneaked upstairs while Miss Finch was busy reading one of her books in the living room.

I looked around her bedroom, trying to think of

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a nice place to put the dead bug. *Ah yes, I thought,* focusing on her bed. I gently placed Mr. Cockroach on the pillow to make it look like it was sleeping on its back. Next, I pulled the cover half way up over its body so its head and first few legs were plainly visible.

About a half hour later, I heard a very loud scream while I was busy cleaning the kitchen. *Yep, I thought, I bet she found Mr. Cockroach.*

“Hailee! Hailee!” she shouted in a panicked tone of voice. “Come here! Quick!”

I ran upstairs and into the bedroom. Miss Finch was leaning back against the dresser with all the color drained from her face, and it looked like she was shaking.

“Get it out! Get it out!” she shouted, pointing at the bed.

I pretended I didn’t see anything, and gestured that I didn’t know what was wrong.

She stepped closer to the bed, pointing at the giant cockroach. “Can’t you see it?” Her neck stretched forward, squinting in the direction of the cockroach. ***“IT’S DADDY GOOSE BUMP! HE’S COME BACK FROM THE DEAD AND SLEEPING IN MY BED!*** I can’t believe it!” She snapped her head at me, then looked back toward the cockroach. “Can’t you see him?” She took

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three steps toward the bed and pointed again. "There! There he is! Are you blind?"

Poor Daddy Goose Bump, I thought. He appeared to be resting so peacefully. I thought it to be such a shame to disturb him.

After repeated pleas to get him out of her bed, I finally took Daddy Goose Bump outside and gave him a proper burial for helping me teach Miss Finch a lesson.

I looked over my long list of cleaning chores the next morning and sighed. How she expected me to do so much cleaning in one day was beyond my wildest imagination.

The next thing I knew, I found myself kneeling down and polishing her precious floor for over an hour. I felt very tired and decided to sit down on the living room couch to get a well-deserved moment's rest. My timing was bad, because a minute later, Miss Finch entered the room and caught me slouching on her couch. Her nostrils flared, and face reddened. "Well, well, well!" she said, swaying her head from side to side. "Isn't this a pretty sight! Napping on my

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favorite couch, are you?"

She looked back at the clock, then toward me again. "By the way, I don't want to seem to be too unkind, but you've been just a tad bit "too lazy" today and behind on your list of other cleaning chores." She walked up to me, then squinted down at the floor in front of my feet. "I'm sure you can do a much better job at waxing the floor than that. Why, I can hardly see my reflection at all."

I thought, *why don't you look into a real mirror, Miss Finch?*

"Don't doddle," she said. "Now get up and get busy. You'll find out, soon enough, that slackers get little to eat in my house."

Chapter 14

Miss Finch acted very strange the moment she got back home from the zoo on Mondays and Fridays. She would park the carriage, look in every direction to make sure she wasn't being watched, then step into the carriage and shut the door behind her. When she stepped out seconds later, it appeared as if she was hiding something beneath her coat. Next, she would slip in through the back-kitchen door, lock it, and then immediately lock the other door too, the one leading to the hallway. There was no way for me to peep

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inside to see what she was doing in there. When she came out of the kitchen a short time later, it appeared as if whatever she had beneath her coat wasn't there anymore. I knew she was hiding something in the kitchen, and was determined to find out exactly what it was.

On Friday afternoon, I knew Miss Finch wouldn't be back from the zoo for quite some time. Three large sacks of potatoes were delivered to the house the day before. I emptied one of the bags, hid inside, then cut a small hole in the burlap so I could peek out.

I heard the back-kitchen door open and close, then saw Miss Finch enter the room. I could tell that she was hiding something beneath her coat again. She walked up to the red door, slid the boxes aside, then entered the room.

It seemed like an eternity for her to come back out again. I felt very nervous and knew that if she caught me in the potato sack, I would be in big trouble. I heard the door squeak open and watched her step out. There she was... in her normal size again. Now I knew her secret hiding place. I put my finger to my chin and

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thought, *I wonder what she's hiding in there?* It must be something important, or she wouldn't be trying so hard to keep it a secret.

Miss Finch left the kitchen and headed down the hallway toward the living room. I gasped when I heard her shout, "Hailee! Hailee! Where are you?"

I jumped out of the potato sack, then ran out the back-kitchen door to the chicken coop.

A minute later, I saw Miss Finch step outside the back door and stare at me.

"Oh, so you forgot to feed the chickens this morning, did you? Well, hurry up and get back inside."

I took a deep breath, feeling relieved that I didn't get caught. Now I knew "*where*" she was hiding something. Next, I was determined to find out "*what*" it was.

The next morning, after serving breakfast, I handed Miss Finch her black coat by the front door. Just As she was about to step outside, she stopped and looked back at me. "Oh... by the way, you did remember how to make my Shepherd's Pie, didn't you?"

I nodded.

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“Good, and don’t forget to add the extra pound of meat I left on the kitchen table. When I get back, I expect my supper ready and waiting. Got it?”

I nodded.

“And don’t make a mistake on the recipe, or else.”

I stepped into the kitchen and began preparing her special dinner. As I started to slice and dice the potatoes and carrots into small cubes, I glanced over my shoulder at the red door. I thought, *now would be a good time to see what Miss Finch might be hiding in there.*

I stepped outside the house and gazed down the road just to make sure she was gone, then rushed back into the kitchen and slid the boxes away from the red door. I felt my heart pound in my chest as I entered the room. It appeared to be empty inside, except for a large freezer box. That’s it, I thought, *whatever she’s hiding must be inside that box.* I saw red stains on the cement floor in front of it. They didn’t look like paint. I got down on my hands and knees to get a closer look. Oh no! I thought. *The stains looked like dried blood!* I took a deep swallow. Dare I look inside? Will I have nightmares for the rest of my life after seeing what’s in there?

I headed for the door, but then stopped and

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looked back over my shoulder. Perhaps there was a zoo animal in there. I felt like I had to protect the other animals at the zoo, so I stepped up to the freezer box, then reached down and gripped the edge of the metal lid. It felt cold to the touch and sent shivers up my spine. I took a deep breath and thought, *OK, on the count of three. One...Two...Three.* The instant I raised the lid and looked inside my eyes bulged wide in shock. I saw, perhaps, two hundred raw steaks packed in ice. I crossed my arms in front of me and thought, *now I know why Miss Finch was starving the animals. She was stealing the zoo's meat to fill her own belly!* It's no wonder she asked me to cook steaks for her nearly every night, and stuff her Shepherd's Pie with so much extra meat. Only someone like her could do such a horrible thing as starve an animal to fill her own belly. I felt an urgent need to take action and figure out a plan to rescue my dear friend Zebu before it was too late.

I slipped into the kitchen and put the boxes back in front of the red door, just the way I found them. My hands felt shaky, but I was still able to finish making her dinner.

Later that day I heard the front door open and close, then Miss Finch's unmistakable footsteps

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heading toward the kitchen. Thump, thump, thump. They grew louder with every second. I stood by the kitchen table, next to her two-pound Shepherd's Pie.

She stopped at the entranceway and stared into the kitchen. "Well, it's a good thing you got my Shepherd's Pie done in time. You better have prepared it according to my *"exact"* instructions."

She was about to take a bite when she suddenly stopped and stared at the boxes stacked in front of the red door. Next, she leaned across the table and squinted at me in silence. "You haven't been doing any snooping around lately... have you?"

I felt very nervous that moment, worried that I didn't put the boxes back exactly the way she left them.

She quickly got up and walked over to the boxes, then looked back at me with a mean look.

I thought, *Oh no. She knows. Should I run?*

"Just as I thought," she shouted.

She slowly turned and looked back at me. "Come here!"

I felt so nervous; I didn't think I could move.

She pointed at me and demanded, "Come here!"

I forced myself to walk up to her.

"Didn't I tell you...?" she started to say.

I was expecting her to accuse me of going inside

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her secret room. I looked toward the back door and thought about making a run for it, but instead took a deep sigh of relief when I heard her finish the rest of her sentence.

“Didn’t I tell you to let me know when we got low on cocoa so I could order more? It takes two weeks to get a new shipment in. Can’t you remember anything?”

I took a deep breath, feeling so relieved that she didn’t notice any of the boxes were moved.

Chapter 15

I waited until Miss Finch was sound asleep, then slipped out the back-kitchen door and into the night. I needed to find a place to hide my friend Zebu for when the time came for me to try to rescue him from the zoo.

After searching for about thirty minutes, I discovered what appeared to be an abandoned horse stable. The two side windows were broken, covered with spider webs, and the hinges to the front gate were rusted, making it hard to open. Looking up, I saw a black horse weathervane. Gazing to my right, I saw two carriage wheels leaning against the side wall with their rusted metal bands laying on the dirt in front of them. There were two horseshoes nailed to the front door.

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When I entered the barn, I saw four horse stalls and a large leather saddle covered with dust. I thought, *this would be the perfect place to hide Zebu.* All it needed was a little cleaning up.

I figured that the only way to rescue Zebu would be for me to drive the carriage to the zoo late one night, free him, then bring him back to this barn. I was already trained on how to hitch the horse to the carriage and felt I stood a decent chance at being able to drive it to the zoo. My main concern was that Misty, the carriage horse, was very particular as to who was doing the driving. I decided to do some extra nice things for Misty to get on her good side so she would allow me to drive the carriage.

For the whole next week, I sneaked out late at night and pampered Misty by giving her extra apples and carrots. She liked it when I brushed her mane around the neck and hind legs. I treated her like royalty and even filed her hoofs, which was quite a chore.

After a week of pampering, I was fairly certain that Misty would allow me to drive the carriage to the zoo. All I had to do now was set the second half of my plan in motion, and that was to decide on a day and time to get my friend Zebu out of the zoo.

Chapter 16

The night I planned to rescue Zebu had finally arrived. I felt excited, but at the same time nervous, not knowing for sure if everything would go according to plan. My biggest concern was that Miss Finch might not stay asleep the whole night and find me, Misty, and the carriage missing.

Just like every evening before, I filled Miss Finch's mug with boiling water, then stirred in a scoop of her cocoa powder, together with her sleeping medicine.

I headed upstairs and stopped for a moment just outside her bedroom door to practice my not-so-happy look, just like I always did right before entering her room. I knew that if I acted too happy or sad, she might get suspicious and start asking questions. I couldn't

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afford to have anything go wrong on this night.

OK, here I go, I thought, heading into her bedroom. Miss Finch turned her head in bed and stared at me squinty-eyed. “You did add my sleeping medicine tonight, didn’t you?”

I nodded, and thought, *Yes, I did Miss Finch, may you rest in peace, witch*. There I go again, having bad thoughts. I needed to remember what Higgins taught me about having patience and forgiveness for others, even if they may be your worst enemy. And I had to admit that Miss Finch was at the top of my list.

As hard as it was to be completely forgiving, I knew Higgins was right because I always felt a great inner peace after getting rid of any hatred toward anyone.

Miss Finch wagged her finger at me. “You better have measured everything just right, or you’re not going to get any food tomorrow... Did you hear me?”

I nodded and curtseyed, just like she taught me. My thoughts were so focused on the night’s rescue plan, even Miss Finch’s nasty voice didn’t seem to bother me that much. After she finished sipping the last of her cocoa, I took the cup from her hand and gave her a last goodnight smile before heading out of the bedroom.

I stood outside her room and placed my ear up against the door. Just like clockwork, about five

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minutes later, she started to snore like a giant pig. I hoped and prayed that I could get to the zoo and back again before she woke up.

I headed downstairs, through the hallway and into the kitchen. Next, I entered Miss Finch's secret steak room. I decided to take one piece of meat to coax Zebu out of his cage, and another one to get him to follow me back up to the barn. Before I closed the lid to the freezer, I placed a piece of wood beneath a couple of steaks to prop them up even with the other pieces of meat to make it look like nothing was missing.

I slipped out the back door, hitched Misty to the carriage, and stepped up onto the driver seat. The moment I gave the reins a light jingle, Misty started to trot down the road.

It was a perfect evening for the rescue, with a full moon to light the way before me. I figured Misty probably traveled this same road hundreds of times before, so I let her follow her instincts, and only gave little direction by pulling the reins to the left or right when we had to go around a curve in the road.

When the carriage neared the bottom of the hill, I jingled the reins again, and was able to get Misty to go from a trot to a fast gallop. We passed by beautiful green pastures, thickets of holly bushes, and tall pines.

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After traveling for several miles, I took a deep sigh of relief seeing the zoo finally appear in the distance. I was able to get Misty to turn down the back service road and stop across from the tiger exhibit. I stepped down from the carriage and gave her a big hug and kiss for helping me get to the zoo safe and sound.

I found Miss Finch's extra set of keys she kept hidden under the wooden crate by the storage shed.

The moment I opened the cage and stepped inside, Zebu scampered deep within the cave. His yellow eyes glowed back at me from the shadows, and he started to growl. I took out one of the steaks from my paper bag and held it out in front of him. To my delight, he followed me out of the cage and up to the carriage, never letting the steak get out of his sight. I tossed the piece of meat into the carriage and he leaped right in after it.

I was so worried about him because he appeared to be too thin, and looked like he was almost starving. I locked the cage, and put the keys back under the wooden crate. I found a shovel and dug a hole under the iron bars to Zebu's cage to make it look like someone had tried to steal the tiger, or that the tiger clawed a big enough hole to get out. It was a good thing Zebu wasn't too big yet, or I would have had to spend a lot

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more time digging a bigger hole.

I looked at the gorilla exhibit and saw Igor staring back at me, waving his hands above his head, trying to get my attention. He looked as if he wanted me to take him too. I walked up to my dear friend and stuck my hand through the bars, then touched fingertips, just like we did when we first became friends. I smiled and gestured with my hands to try to let him know that I loved him very much. I saw tears bead down his face. I wished I could take him too, but I knew it would be impossible to hide and feed the both of them. The instant I stepped up onto the carriage seat I heard Igor make a loud grunt. I looked back and was surprised to see him raise his hand and give me the “V” for victory sign. I thought that was so nice of him, even if he might not know what the “V” sign really stood for.

Chapter 17

As soon as I made it back to Miss Finch's house, I opened the carriage door and coaxed my tiger friend up the hill and into the barn with another steak.

His coat was like a furry blanket and helped keep me warm that chilly night. I rubbed his neck and stroked my hand back across the top of his head while watching him fill his stomach with the juicy steak. He made a deep and mighty purr; the purr of a future beastly king whom I somehow wished ruled over man, because man could oft times be so cruel, so unkind, worst of all the beasts of the Earth. I kept him company for as long as it dare into the night, worried

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that Miss Finch might wake up at any moment and not find me in bed. I kissed Zebu's forehead and gave him one last goodnight hug before heading back down the road to Miss Finch's house.

I knew the exact moment when Miss Finch came home from work the following day when I heard the front door slam shut.

I leaned to one side and peered down the hallway toward the living room. I was shocked to see objects flying through the air, then crash and break against the walls and floor. Her rage could only mean one thing; she must have discovered Zebu was missing from the zoo.

She flashed into view at the opposite end of the hallway and stared back at me with bulging eyes. "I can't believe it!" she shouted, raising her hands high above her head. Her normally white cheeks were now beet red. "Someone stole the tiger cub!" She placed her hands firmly on her hips, took a couple of deep breaths, then leaned toward me and grimaced. "What kind of monster would break into the zoo and steal the tiger?" She stomped over to the opposite end of the

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hallway where I was standing, then placed her face up to mine. “Do you have any idea who would do such a horrible thing?”

I looked at her with a blank expression on my face. It was a good thing I couldn’t speak because Higgins taught me the importance of always telling the truth, even if it might hurt, and this would have hurt a lot. After two hours of screaming, she plopped onto her brown leather couch and stared out the window in silence.

After Miss Finch fell asleep each night, I would head up to the barn to feed Zebu and clean his straw bedding. It was a lot of extra work, but I didn’t seem to mind it too much, because it was a sacrifice for one of God’s splendid creatures I loved so dearly.

I didn’t know whether tigers could smile or not, but he appeared to be so happy each evening, after I brought him a nice juicy steak from Miss Finch’s freezer. He could hardly wait for the steaks to thaw out enough so he could devour them.

I kept Zebu company for about one to two hours every visit. With each steak removed from the freezer, I

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added another piece of wood beneath the other meats to make it look like nothing was missing. I knew that I could only fool Miss Finch for so long before she would discover the missing steaks, but that was a chance I was willing to take, and hoped before she found out I would have another plan put into action.

I managed to keep Zebu hidden for four weeks now. He grew fast and gained a lot of muscle thanks to all the extra steaks I fed him. I also noticed that his purr was getting deeper, louder, and mightier.

I had to be more careful about how my face looked in front of Miss Finch because she was beginning to ask me why I looked happier than usual, even while scrubbing the floors or washing the dishes. I think it bothered her to be around anyone who didn't look or act as miserable as herself.

Three evenings later, my worst fears happened. I heard Zebu's growl echo down from the barn toward the house. I jumped up from the living room sofa and rushed over to shut the window.

I thought, *what am I going to do?* Miss Finch never goes to bed this early. If I didn't get to Zebu in a hurry to calm him down, he'll sure to be heard. I couldn't risk getting his steak yet. The last thing in the world I wanted would be for Miss Finch to hear his growl. I

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wouldn't even want to think about what might happen to Zebu or me if she discovered us hiding out in the barn.

I knew that she was upstairs in her bedroom. Thank goodness the night was cold, and her window was probably shut. I decided to take a chance and head up to the barn early.

I slipped out the back-kitchen door and walked up the hill as fast as I could. When I reached the barn door, I looked back over my shoulder and was shocked at what I saw. Miss Finch was staring back at me from the bottom of the hill with a very nasty look on her face.

Her mouth suddenly opened wide. "What are you doing up there, Hailee?" she shouted. She stomped up the hill, then stopped six feet in front of me. "Again I'm asking you! What are you doing here by the barn?" Her eyebrows lowered. "I could hardly imagine you to be sleepwalking this early in the evening. What is it? Come on... confess?"

I gestured to her with my hands, like, *I don't know*.

She pointed at me and said, "Come here!"

The moment I walked up to her, she reached out and gripped the side of my shoulder, then brought me to the barn door. "I'm asking you again. What are you

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doing up here?" She looked back and forth between me and the barn. "Are you hiding something in there? Is that it?"

I feared for Zebu that moment, and prayed Miss Finch wouldn't go inside. When she reached out for the door, I felt my heart drop in despair. I didn't know what to do.

She yanked the door open, expecting to find something. I looked inside and couldn't believe it. Zebu was smart enough to hide by himself. I bet he recognized her nasty voice. I knew he was hiding in one of the horse stalls, but which one? I saw his eyes flash at me from the stall at the far end. I hoped and prayed she didn't see him.

Miss Finch lit the lantern and said, "Well now, let's see what's so important for you to go sneaking up here at this time of night." She ordered me to hold the lantern out in front of her as she searched the first stall. She poked around the hay with a pointed stick for a moment, but found nothing. She had me to hold the lantern for her while she searched the second stall, then the third.

Finally, she approached the last stall where I knew Zebu was hiding. I had to think of something fast. I pretended to trip, and let the lantern slip from

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my fingers. When it hit the ground, the glass casing shattered, and the flame sparked a fire in the hay.

“Clumsy fool!” she said, grabbing a horse blanket to smother the fire. She shook her head at me. “Do you want to burn down the whole barn?”

She dragged me by the shoulder down the road toward the house. “You’re getting to be more trouble than you’re worth; first the missing Mushroom Monster, and now the tiger. Do you think for one moment it’s easy for me to entertain strangers?”

I thought, *do you think it’s easy for me to entertain your house by slaving over it hand and foot to keep it clean?* I felt like I could endure her cruel words and twisted thoughts because what was most important to me at that moment was Zebu’s safety. I just wondered how much longer I could keep the secret going.

Chapter 18

When I entered the bedroom the next evening to give Miss Finch her cup of hot cocoa mixed with sleeping medicine I noticed that her eyes were closed. I thought, *did she pass away?* I placed her cocoa on the side dresser, then reached out and lightly tapped her shoulder.

I must have startled her, because her arm flew straight out and knocked her drink off the dresser table. I lunged forward to try to catch it as it fell, but

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her cocoa ended up spilling across the carpet.

Her eyes bulged. “Look what you made me do! You should know better than to startle me like that! What’s the matter with you? Have you lost your senses?” She pointed at the carpet. “Now clean up that mess, and get out!”

I hurried downstairs to get some cleaning rags in the kitchen, then rushed back to her bedroom and got down on my hands and knees to blot up the stains. I tried to ask her by making hand movements if she wanted me to get her another cup of cocoa with her sleeping medicine, but she shook her head and swiped her hand at me. “Don’t bother! I’m very tired and don’t need it tonight!”

I had to get out and feed Zebu shortly, but felt afraid to do so with Miss Finch still awake, and not having her sleeping medicine. I headed downstairs and tried to decide what to do next.

About ten minutes later, my worst fears happened when I heard Zebu’s growls echo down from the barn. I was fearful that Miss Finch wasn’t asleep yet and would hear him. I exchanged glances between the kitchen and the upstairs bedroom, and thought, *what shall I do now?* If I didn’t get Zebu his steak quickly, Miss Finch would surely hear him. I didn’t have any

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choice. I had to get him a steak, and do it fast. I hurried into the kitchen, slid the boxes away from the red door, then rushed over and opened the freezer. My hands felt shaky. The steak I was holding slipped through my fingers onto the floor, making a loud thud. I flashed my head back toward the kitchen door. *Thank goodness*, she was nowhere in sight.

I rushed out of the room, then quickly slid the boxes back in front of the door. Before heading out of the kitchen, I stopped and stared through the hallway toward the living room. It was all clear. I didn't know why, but I had this strange feeling come over me as if I was being watched. I ran up the hill to the barn as fast as my legs could carry me. Zebu quieted down the instant I gave him his steak. I stepped back to the barn door and stared down the road toward the house. Miss Finch was nowhere in sight.

I sat in front of Zebu and watched him eat. I wished I could explain to him that he must stay quiet if I'm a little late in bringing him his meat. I stroked my hand back across his head and listened to him purr. Three minutes into his meal he suddenly stopped eating in the middle of a bite. *That's weird*, I thought. He never stopped to take a break from eating like that before. He didn't look at me, but instead stared over my shoulder

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toward the barn door. I wondered what was making him act like that.

Next, his teeth clamped down so hard on the steak it sliced in half and dropped at his feet.

The shadows surrounding me faded, and the room grew lighter as if the moon suddenly came out from behind the clouds and cast its rays into the barn. But that was impossible because there was a thick fog that night. I had that strange feeling come over me again, like I was being watched.

Zebu kept his eyes fixed on the door behind me. I was afraid to look back. I hoped that the light would dim and the shadows would return to the way they were a moment ago.

Zebu's eyes narrowed. He started to growl exactly the way he did back at the zoo when Miss Finch would step into his cage.

I looked back toward the door in shock, seeing Miss Finch holding a lantern, staring at me with wide-stretched eyes and cheeks that flushed from pink to crimson red. She pointed at me with her mouth hanging wide open, shaking her fist. ***"SO, YOU'RE THE ONE WHO STOLE THE TIGER!"*** How could you do such a monstrous thing after I took such good care of you... and even shared my private house!"

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I heard her breathing deepen, sounding as if she was out of breath. “You little thief! Do you have any idea how much trouble you got me into?”

She took three steps toward me, then stopped and stretched her mouth open again. “I was responsible for that tiger! You’re no better than a common thief!”

She stomped toward me squinting. “You’re going to pay for this!”

I backed away with my hands raised up in front of me. That same moment, Zebu lunged between Miss Finch and me, blocking her way.

“Get out of my way, cat!” she snarled. “That is, if you know what’s good for you!”

Zebu stood his ground, growling back, not showing any signs of fear. All his rage was focused on one person; the cruel zoo veterinarian who was standing right in front of him.

Miss Finch sneered at Zebu. “You don’t even come close to scaring me.” She kicked straw up into Zebu’s face, just like she did so many times in the past. “Take that, cat!” she shouted, kicking more straw at him.

That must have been the last straw for Zebu, because he leaped forward and sunk his teeth into her leg. She somehow managed to stay on her feet and looked as if she was about to hit Zebu with the

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metal lantern, so I rushed forward and pushed her off balance onto the hay. Before she could get back up, Zebu leaped at her, knocking her flat on her back.

“Get off of me! Get off!” she shouted. Zebu kept her pinned down and repeatedly swiped his paw at her, starting from the base of her neck, going up to her forehead. She was no match for Zebu now. He had grown too powerful from eating all the extra steaks I gave him.

As much as Miss Finch disgusted me, I tried my best to pull Zebu off of her, but he was too strong and determined to have his revenge upon her.

She fought back like a wrestler, tossing, turning, trying her best to push him off, but quickly grew weaker and weaker with no hope of escape.

I raised my hands to the side of my head, feeling hopeless to stop the fight. I couldn't stand to watch it a second longer, so I fled out of the barn.

Chapter 19

I ran down the road for about a mile, then stopped a moment and gazed back in the direction of the barn. I could still hear Miss Finch's faint cries in the distance. I hoped and prayed that Zebu didn't kill her, for if he did, I believed he would surely be hunted down and killed.

I thought that if the authorities caught me, I would be put behind bars for taking Zebu out of the zoo. Who would believe that I was trying to prevent a tiger from being starved to death, or from being sold to a private game reserve to be hunted down and killed? How could I convince them when I couldn't even speak?

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I gazed down the hill, and from out in the distance could see the ocean. I had a keen interest about the sea from what Higgins told me about it and thought that it might offer me a place of refuge.

After traveling for about an hour, I finally reached the coastline. A gentle breeze blew in from the ocean and filled my lungs with the salty air. It felt so good to be free, and I was determined to do my best to keep it that way.

I peered over the edge of a high cliff and saw white-capped waves roll ashore, then crash and foam over slimy green rocks. I suddenly felt dizzy and backed away from the cliff.

Gazing southward, I spotted a lighthouse perched on the rocks, beaming its light out across the ocean.

To the north of me, from out in the distance, I was excited to see two sailing ships docked at a harbor.

After hiking along the coastline for about an hour, I finally reached the place where the ships anchored. A surge of excitement stirred within me as I gazed upon the sailing vessels. I pondered if perhaps one of them might become my ticket to a new life, in a new land, a wonderful place, where people might be of a kinder sort. I just had to figure out a way to get on one of those ships. I didn't have any money, and was

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unable to speak, so how could I do it? Without being able to talk, they might think I'm dumb, or maybe even crazy. I looked down at my clothes and a new body, and thought, *at least I have a chance now, since I no longer look like the Mushroom Monster, and had on some decent clothes.* I knew that it would be difficult to find a way to get passage on one of those ships, and besides, I had no way of knowing where they would be going, but that was a risk I was willing to take.

Chapter 20

Isaw crew hands on each ship mending nets, sharpening harpoons, and scrubbing the decks.

A fancy dressed man, but not too clean looking, walked about the ship's deck, inspecting the sailors' work. I heard someone call out his name. "Captain Graze," they said. He was a tall, young-looking fellow, except for his sunken cheeks and a peppered beard that draped across his thin chest. He had on a navy-blue jacket with gold buttons running down the front. When he smiled, I noticed that he was missing a few teeth on one side of his mouth, creating the

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impression of a dark hole leading inside. Strangely, the sight brought back nightmarish thoughts of the dark, gloomy cave where I was kept a prisoner for so many years.

Captain Graze leaned against the side rail and shouted toward the ship docked across from his. "Captain Baker," he said. "Did you see any signs of Rage?"

Captain Baker crossed his arms in front of him. "No, Captain Graze, but I'm sure we'll be gettin' that devil whale soon." He turned and gave me a quick, unsavory stare, with squinty bloodshot eyes. Captain Baker had deep wrinkles spread across sunbaked copper skin, and was a stubby sort of man. A red bandana wrapped around his well-greased, coal-black hair, tied flat against the scalp, and a short ponytail hung on the nap of his neck.

I gasped when he turned sideways and saw the image of a blue whale with a harpoon pierced clear through its side tattooed on his left shoulder. The sight made my stomach churn.

Captain Baker faced the other ship. "Any news of the other two ships that went ah whaling to snare Rage, Captain Graze?"

Captain Graze shook his head. "They were due

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back a month ago, they were. Perhaps that whale you're huntin' got 'em first. Biggest, meanest, of the Seven Seas, they say."

Captain Baker chuckled, "Stuff of fables, it be. I am remindin' you, dear brother, the name of this here ship, "The Lucky Whaler?" We always get our whale."

Captain Graze sighed. "We lost one brother to that monster. Watch your stern. Can't afford to lose another."

"Aye, that be true. That be true." He reached into a wooden keg and pulled out a bone with a little bit of meat still left on it. A medium-sized, short hair brown dog, well-muscled, with a broad head, stubby tail, and powerful looking jaws, licked his chops when he saw Captain Baker dangle the bone above his head.

"Hey, Brutus," said Captain Baker, with a smug grin. "How'd you like to add a nice juicy bone to your ribs?"

Brutus sat in front of him with his eyes sparkling at the bone. His jaw hung wide open, with the corners of his mouth raised, as if smiling, waiting to be given a tasty meal.

Brutus jumped up and down for about a minute before he finally let him have the bone.

"Brother," said Captain Graze, grinning. "Brutus is

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goin' to get his revenge on you someday." He squinted at the dog's massive jaws. "Take you for a meal, perhaps, for teasing him. You best not always tease him too much. You have to stop that."

Captain Baker chuckled. "Aye, I'm just having a little fun with him, I was." He looked down into Brutus's snarling face. "Time to time he needs to be reminded who the captain of this here ship is."

I raised my hand to my chin and thought, *If I could be a stowaway on one of the two ships, I hoped it would be on Captain Graze's vessel.* It appeared to be newly painted, and even had a wooden mermaid attached to the bow, painted in blue and gold.

Captain Baker's ship, on the other hand, although it looked to be well built and seaworthy, had the appearance of being very old and weathered. I raised my nose and grimaced. The boat smelled like stinky fish. The odor made my stomach feel suddenly upset.

Attached to the bow of Captain Baker's ship was a wood carving of a whale that looked as if it might be smiling. Head to tail, it must have been over six feet long and was painted blue.

I turned and saw three girls in their twenties, dressed in fancy blue, yellow, and pink dresses chatting on the dock next to Captain Graze's ship. Each lady

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had a special look about them. One had long, golden braided hair piled on top of her head. The second had very long, thick eyelashes, that didn't look real. The third lady had ruby red lips and a powdered white face. It appeared as if they were pointing and giggling at a poster. Even though I couldn't read that well, I was still curious about what it said, so I walked over to get a closer look. I ran my finger across each sentence, peering at each word close up. I wished that I could understand everything it said, but there were words written I was never taught the meaning of.

The lady with the golden hair stepped next to me. "Can't you read? The king of Nod, of the Kingdom of Bore, is having a singing contest." She smiled and raised her chin. "The maiden with the most beautiful voice in all the land will win the hand of the king's son, Prince Arnold." She ran her eyes from my shoes up to the top of my head. "Too bad you're dressed like a pauper and all. Maybe if you could sing and afford a decent dress you could enter the contest too."

My head sank low in disappointment. As I started to walk away, the other two ladies stepped in front of me, blocking my way.

Now, what do they want? I thought. Didn't I get enough insults for one day?

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The lady with the red lips and powdered white face tapped me on the shoulder. “We have the best singing voices in all the land.”

The lady with the long eyelashes moved closer and stared into my face. “No one has a chance to beat us. No one.”

Such braggarts, I thought. When they giggled, it sounded so silly. What prideful women. I watched them huddle in a circle, giggle, glance my way, then suddenly walk up to me again.

The lady with the golden hair stood directly in front of me. “So strange you are. We never heard a peep out of you. Are you deaf?”

The lady with the ruby lips tilted her head at me and gave me a frown. “If only she could speak and sing, sister.”

The lady with the golden hair swiped her hand at me. “Oh, don’t even mention it to her. How could a mute girl win a princely hand?”

I was so happy to see the three bragging women finally walk away and head up the boarding ramp onto Captain Graze’s ship.

I didn’t know what was worse now, spending days at sea with those three windbags on Captain Graze’s ship, or having to stay on Captain Baker’s smelly

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whaling boat.

Crew hands from each ship headed down the boarding ramp and made their way across the dock. They entered a red building; then moments later, came back out carrying crates and barrels to restock their ships.

I sneaked to the back of the storage building and was able to squeeze in between two loose boards to get inside. Next, I rolled a large empty barrel from the back wall to the front side door where they were loading supplies. I quickly climbed inside, then lowered the lid on top of my head. It was pitch dark inside. The walls smelled sweet and felt sticky to the touch, like molasses.

I could feel the barrel I was in suddenly tilt onto its side, then lift into the air. I couldn't help but wonder which ship I would be loaded onto.

Chapter 21

The barrel I was hiding in suddenly thumped to the floor. I heard men talking among themselves for a couple of minutes. A moment later, it became very quiet, so I decided to take a chance and peep outside. Just as I was about to lift the lid, I heard someone start to snore. Not only snoring but grunts and farts too. The sounds reminded me of Miss Finch. I couldn't forget how she snored, grunted, and let loose bursts of gas, which I hoped wasn't because of an upset stomach caused by my bad cooking. I figured that whoever was making those noises must be close by. I raised the lid a little and peeked out. Oh my, I thought. The mystery

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snorer was none other than the ship's dog, Brutus. I suddenly realized that I must be on "The Lucky Whaler," captained by the man with that dreadful looking tattoo of a harpooned whale on his shoulder.

I thought, *this voyage is going to be one, big, nightmare.*

I quickly lowered the lid, seeing Brutus suddenly open his eyes and sniff the air. I was told that dogs have a keen sense of smell, and was worried that he might have already picked up my scent.

A moment later, I heard sniffing and scratching sounds coming from just outside the barrel. I held my breath and thought, *Oh my goodness! He knows I'm in here. What am I going to do now?*

I waited until it became silent again, then took another look outside. I was surprised to see Brutus sitting three feet in front of me with what looked like a grin on his face, if that were possible, being that he's a dog.

I motioned with my hands for him to stay quiet and get away. Instead of barking, he jumped up against the side of the barrel and started rocking it back and forth.

I heard footsteps approaching, then a deep, raspy voice say, "What's be the matter with you, Brutus?"

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Oh no! I thought. It sounded just like Captain Baker!

Brutus jumped up against the side of the barrel and rocked me back and forth again. I tried to keep my balance and prayed that the barrel wouldn't tip over, sending me sprawling out across the floor.

I heard the captain's voice again. "Brutus! Why are you so interested in that barrel?" Brutus pawed and scratched the side of the container, whimpered, and made deep-throated growls.

The footsteps grew louder and closer, then stopped. I took a deep breath and braced myself for the worst.

I heard the captain's voice again. "Brutus boy, you think food is in that barrel?"

I thought, *I'm done for now, and am sure to be found out.*

Sure enough, the lid lifted above my head. I looked up and saw Captain Baker's scowling face staring back down at me. He slowly moved his head side-to-side in a moment of silence, then raised one eye, squinting with the other. "Aye, what's we have here?" He grabbed my right shoulder and pulled me up. "A stowaway have we. Get out from there."

My legs felt so cramped from squatting in the

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same position for so long that I could hardly stand up.

His face reddened. "Well... too far from shore to bring you back home. You are earning your keep on this ship. You good at swabbing decks?"

I shook my head.

"Good at cookin' grub?"

I gave him a blank stare.

"Speak up, girl! Answer me! What's your name?"

I gestured with my hands to try and let him know I couldn't speak.

He cocked his head to one side, then raised his finger to his chin in a moment of reflection. "A mute, have we?"

I nodded.

Well... you best follow my orders on this ship. A step in the wrong direction and over ye go, swimmin' with the sharks. Let's pray you take the right step forward... always."

He pointed his finger at me. "Share the load, work hard, and a passage to land will be granted you. Understand?"

I quickly nodded.

The next thing I knew, I found myself on the ship's deck being introduced to the crew. I counted fifteen ship hands. There wasn't a clean-shaven man among

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them. Some had silver beads strung onto their braided beards.

The captain called over one of his sailors and ordered him to get me something to clean the deck. He wasted no time in fetching a bucket of water and a flat stone.

Captain Baker pointed at the deck. "Scour well, then expect a portion of food come evenin'."

I felt my stomach grumble from hunger and was all too eager to do any kind of a chore to get some food. I got down on my hands and knees and slid the stone back and forth across the deck.

I looked to my left and saw a sailor scrubbing the deck on the other side of the ship. He started to laugh out loud. I thought, *maybe he got crazy bored*. If I had to scour decks every day, I think I might go crazy and start laughing my head off too.

The air felt hot and humid that day, without even a whisper of breeze to cool the soul or fill the sails. I worked hard, and after only a short time I could feel sweat bead on my forehead and roll down across my face. I had to constantly swipe the back of my hand across my forehead to keep the stinging sweat from getting into my eyes.

The captain was gracious enough to grant me a

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break after an hour's work. I walked over to the side of the ship and gazed out across an ocean that appeared to stretch endlessly. The air was perfectly still, and the ocean reminded me of a giant mirror, reflecting cloud and sky upon its surface.

I leaned against the side rail and took a deep breath of salty air. I was reluctant to gaze upon my reflection on the water's surface or look into a mirror, for that matter, being fearful that I might once again see my previous mushroom face staring back at me. From time to time, I pinched myself just to make sure I wasn't dreaming and was still on this strange ship, voyaging across the open seas to a destination unknown. I kept dreaming of a brighter future, no matter how bleak the present may be.

A light breeze stirred the ocean's surface and the reflection of sky and clouds rippled away. I heard someone call out from behind. "Get back to work!" Whatever break we were allowed on the ship, they weren't long enough.

A sudden gust of wind blew my hair back across my shoulders. A sailor in the crow's nest high above me shouted, "Fair wind, at last, Captain."

I gazed upward and saw white sails flapping in the breeze, then billow out firm.

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Once again “The Lucky Whaler” was on its way, slicing through choppy waters. I was so excited to see a group of six large fish swimming alongside the ship. I wondered how they could possibly keep up with the boat for such a long time. They appeared to be so happy and carefree. I thought that they looked like such beautiful creatures. One of the crew hands said that they were called porpoises.

I closed my eyes and dreamed that we docked in a new land, where people treated others with love, compassion and kindness, if such a place ever existed, which I prayed it did. My dream was quickly interrupted by a firm tap on the back of my shoulder by one of the crew hands. The sailor introduced himself to me as Dizzy Dean. I thought that to be an unusual name, but when I saw his eyes start to roll around in his head, I understood how his name came to be.

Dizzy Dean stared at me with wide, wrinkled eyes. “Aye, Missy. Keep your eyes peeled for Rage.” He stepped over to the side of the ship, glanced out across the ocean, then looked back at me again. “Rage is not any whale.” He stretched his arms far apart. “The largest in the Seven Seas, they say. Over sixty feet they say.” He stepped closer and whispered into my ear. “A revenge for killing its mate, rumor say. A man-killer

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now.”

He stepped back and stared at me with his skeleton-like body and sunken cheeks. “A destroyer of ships! Mighty head has he. Like steel! Crush the hulls, like a battering ram. Wood to splinters, come to pass.” He looked over the side of the ship, then snapped his head back at me. “Men be taken to the deep, by Rage, never comin’ back... never.”

Dizzy jingled some coins in a brown leather pouch hanging from the side of his waist. “Aye, Rage has a hefty bounty on him. Enough for a new ship, perhaps. Keep them eyes peeled sharp, missy.” He pointed toward a brass bell. “See that there, missy? Ring it loud, if ye be lucky, or perhaps, unlucky enough to get first sight of Rage.”

I nodded but really didn’t mean it. I didn’t tell Dizzy, or rather couldn’t, that I would never alert anyone to kill any animal, especially a magnificent creature such as a giant whale. Perhaps Rage wouldn’t have become such a bad whale if his mate wasn’t killed to fill oil lamps in some distant land. I would do everything within my power to prevent any harm from coming to any whale, “Lucky Whaler” or not.

(END OF SAMPLE)