

No Ordinary Lizard

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PDF Edition

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Rock, Blisters, Lizard

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It all started last spring, in the middle of the night, with a horrible cold. I was on my way to grab another box of Kleenex when my big toe landed on something blazing hot. It felt like I'd stepped on the sun and danced around on the flames for awhile. I bit back a scream, lunged for my bed and turned on the light. That poor, tortured toe was the color of a ripe tomato. Wanting to know how it got that way, I crouched on the bed and examined the floor.

Nothing plugged in, nothing turned on. No flames or smoke or ashes. Not a thing that could turn my toe into a swollen vegetable, until I poked through the piles of used, soggy Kleenex. The rock Aunt Myk had given me five days before was buried under the third wad. And it was glowing.

That's right. Glowing. Like the glow sticks police officers give to little kids on Halloween. But it wasn't shimmering yellow. It was glaring turquoise.

Even though my swollen toe blasted a thousand warnings to my brain, I reached out to touch the glow. Within seconds my hand and

most of my arm were throbbing, too.

I limped to the bathroom, ran cold water all over my foot and most of my fingers, grabbed more Kleenex and hobbled back to my room.

Now that the rock was no longer buried, dancing turquoise lights splashed across every inch of my walls. Still, I was so sick that none of it mattered. All I wanted to do – all I could do – was crawl into bed. I fell back asleep before my head hit the pillow.

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Since I slept through all that pain in the middle of a mysteriously lit up room, I knew I was too sick to go to school the next day. But I decided to go anyway. I just had to show that rock to Jared. He was the only person I knew who might understand how a rock could light up rooms and burn people.

I'd just forced down two spoonfuls of Rice Krispies and was pulling myself up the stairs when Mom's voice rang out from the bathroom.

"Ruth Patterson! You better be getting dressed. We're leaving in twelve minutes."

"Almost ready," I called, then headed to my room and squinted watery eyes at Aunt Myk's rock. I really didn't want to touch it again. Not only was it steaming, it was oozing glittery slime all over the place. Plus, it seemed to be swaying. Just a tiny bit, but certainly more than any rock ever should.

Beyond weird. More like frightening. Possibly more than Jared could handle.

While I wondered how to get the rock inside my backpack, my brother, Matt, stood in the hallway and grinned at me.

“Mom! Ruth’s not dressed!” He hopped from one foot to the other, looking more like a hyped-up monkey than a nine-year-old boy. I grabbed some germ-infested Kleenex off the floor and launched the snot ball at his face.

After Matt raced off to rat on me again, I wrapped my blistered hands in a couple shirts I found under my dresser and hurled the steaming, glowing rock into my backpack. I shrugged out of my pajamas, put on my favorite khakis and pulled one of the shirts over my head. It was singed on the left sleeve.

Mom’s head appeared in my doorway. Her eyebrows were scrunched together in one straight, serious line. “We have to go, Ruth. Now.” Mom was a history professor at the University of Iowa. She taught college students the role of women in medieval history and she hated to be late.

For the first time ever, I was as eager to get to school as she was. So I whisked my canary yellow baseball cap onto my head before she could notice my uncombed, frizzed-out hair.

“Let’s go, then,” I said, surprised by the bright and breezy sound of my voice. That’s how my aunt Myk always sounded. I practiced all the time and that morning I sounded just like her, even with my monster-sized cold.

Sounding like Aunt Myk made me feel brighter and breezier too, but not for long. As soon as I headed down the stairs, I launched into a series of sneezes that made the rock’s heat press right through my backpack and into my shoulder blades. It felt like I’d been branded. In a way, I guess I had been. That rock already owned my life. I just didn’t know it yet.

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Jared Jonesburg had always been part of my life whether I wanted him there or not - kind of like a brother, except he's actually Claire Jonesburg's cousin. Claire was my best friend. For some reason, she liked hanging out with him. I don't know why. He was way too serious to be any fun. Usually, I just wished he'd leave us alone. But that morning I couldn't wait to see him. He had unnatural intelligence and I needed someone who could explain what was going on with my rock.

Even though we made it to school before the second bell rang, I didn't see Jared anywhere. I figured he was already inside, straightening his desk or practicing his times tables or whatever it was he did before school actually started.

I couldn't talk to him during school because of all the teachers. Even back then I knew they shouldn't be involved with whatever was going on with my rock. So, after suffering through a whole day of school with the worst cold of my life, I wasn't in the best mood to hear Jared go on and on about the stupid science fair.

"What's wrong with those judges anyway?" he asked, jamming papers and books into his backpack.

I would have told him but he didn't give me a chance. He just asked another question.

"How could they pick a parallel circuit over cryptobiosis?"

I would have answered that too, except I wasn't sure about parallel circuits and had no idea what cryptobiosis was. It didn't matter though. He didn't wait for an answer to that question, either. His head disappeared inside his desk as he shuffled through more books and papers.

I figured he was too busy having his tantrum to think about my rock.

While I waited for him to calm down, I wished there was some way I could turn Jared into his cousin, Claire. Claire had been my best friend for four years, ever since first grade. She never looked down on me, even though my head never caught up to her shoulders. Some kids loved to make fun of my size, but not Claire. Whenever I was with her, I felt taller.

She was smart, too. Not wikipedia-smart like Jared, but world-smart. Jared almost always knew what things were. But Claire knew what to do about things. She would have known what to do about a turquoise-glowing, blister-inducing rock. I should be showing it to her instead.

Except I couldn't. She had moved to San Diego during Christmas vacation, almost six weeks ago. You couldn't get much further from Iowa City without running into an ocean first.

Jared pulled his head out of his desk and let the lid fall with a bang. "What could possibly be cooler than suspended animation? I mean, those brine shrimp are real, live time-travelers, sleeping in biological time-capsules!"

Uh huh. He blinked at me from behind his large, black glasses. I figured he expected me to say something, so I repeated the only word I understood.

"Shrimp? You entered shrimp in the science fair?" I didn't know a lot about shrimp either, but at least I could relate to them. I was called one often enough.

He shook his head. "Not just shrimp. Brine shrimp. You know. The kind they found in the Egyptian tombs? I've got some dormant eggs in here. See?" He handed me a sandwich bag filled with tiny brown balls. I nodded, although I understood why the judges hadn't been impressed. It looked like a bag full of sand.

Jared pushed his glasses further up his nose. "Those eggs can resist anything. Extreme heat, freezing cold, rapidly changing humidity levels. For thousands of years, too. But as soon as they meet the right conditions, bingo! They're born. Stick these little guys in warm salt water and you've got yourself a bunch of shrimp. How cool is that?"

It still didn't seem like any big deal. I smiled at him anyway. Sometimes, with Jared, it was best to just let him talk. He'd quit eventually.

"When they're dormant eggs, nothing can harm them. Time stands still as long as it needs to. Did you know scientists were able to successfully hatch eggs they found in the tombs? They hatched shrimp from Egyptian times!"

Well, okay, that did sound kind of cool. But I still wished he'd get over it. I'd much rather discuss my turquoise-glowing, blister-inducing rock. Now there was some weird science we could talk about if he'd just shut up.

Jared blasted his fist against his desk. "It's Colin's fault I didn't win. You know what he said, right in front of the judges' table? He said, 'Aw, that's nothing but a bunch of sea-monkeys.'"

Sea-monkeys? That's what Jared was talking about? I had gotten some two years ago, for my ninth birthday. They came with a cute little aquarium I had kept on my desk. But then Claire had wanted to build a clay city and I had to move them out of the way. Mom found them in my closet a few weeks later. Most of the water had evaporated by then and some of the sea-monkeys were all dried up, clinging to the sides of the aquarium. She said it wasn't fair to keep them if I wasn't going to take care of them. She made me flush the survivors down the toilet.

“Don’t you think?” Jared asked. I hadn’t been listening but I could tell by his face he’d made a good point.

“Absolutely!” I agreed with a nod. That seemed to satisfy him. I sneezed four times in a row then followed him out of the empty room.

As soon as we were away from the school, I stripped off my backpack and set it on the ground. “I’ve got something to show you,” I said, pulling on the zipper. Nothing happened. I planted my feet and tugged with every bit of strength I had left, but the zipper barely budged. I was all set to yank it again, when a lizard’s head popped out of the gap.

That’s right. A lizard’s head. His tiny round tongue flicked back and forth as he blinked at the afternoon sun.

Jared crouched to get a closer look. “Where’d you get that?”

“I didn’t even know I had it.” I inched my finger toward the lizard’s mouth, just to see what he would do.

He yanked his diamond-shaped head away from my hand and his neck wrinkled up like loose puppy skin. His mouth yawned open to reveal smooth, toothless gums.

Jared bumped his glasses out of the way and rubbed his eyes. “That has got to be the strangest lizard I’ve ever seen.”

I nodded. The lizard’s perfectly round eyes sat like marbles on top of his head. I could picture plucking them right off if I wanted to. And his head seemed to change colors as he turned toward Jared then back toward me - dark green at first, then brick red, then grape gum purple.

“Take him out,” Jared said. “I want to see him better.”

I tried to work the zipper further apart, but the lizard’s nose kept getting in the way. I wiggled my finger down inside the opening. “It

feels like he's stuck on something."

"Be careful! You don't want to hurt him."

"Really? Gee, thanks. That hadn't even occurred to me." Fighting back my irritation with Jared, I worked at the zipper. The lizard nipped at my finger.

Jared just kept talking. "I'll get on the internet tonight. See if I can find out what kind of lizard that is."

Jared hated it when he didn't know what something was. Not that it mattered much to me. A lizard was a lizard as far as I was concerned. I just wanted to take him home. I figured he'd make a great pet.

I'd have to keep him hidden, though. After what happened to the sea-monkeys, I wasn't allowed to have any kind of pet. Except for Snickers, but he didn't count because he belonged to my aunt. Besides, he was always hiding and never any fun.

As soon as I got the zipper unstuck, Jared pushed me away, took a deep breath and eased his hand inside my backpack. He didn't breathe again until he lifted the lizard out.

The lizard's body, tarnished gold with deep green flecks, was almost as long as Jared's hand; skinnier than a hot dog but fatter than a marker. Like his body, his long, scrawny legs were covered with tiny, raised bumps. His feet had four stick-like toes that were all squashed up at the ends and he had a long, snake-like tail. Dangling at the end of it was the turquoise glowing, blister inducing rock.

Jared sat on the sidewalk, settled the lizard in his lap, then nodded at the rock. "What is that?"

I'd forgotten all about it and was a bit surprised to see it again.

It wasn't glowing anymore but I swatted Jared's hand away, just in case. "Don't touch it! That's what I wanted to show you. It's hot

enough to blister skin, so be careful.”

And just like I did last night, Jared touched it anyway.

“It doesn’t feel hot.” He ran his fingers over the smooth surface. “It’s a great rock though. Where’d you get it?”

“It was hot. It burned me last night. Look.” I held out my hand to show him my blistered fingers.

“Seriously? You burned your hand on a rock?” He sounded like the principal did when he’d asked if it was really possible to forget my lunch four days in a row.

“It almost burned my shirt this morning.” I showed him the singe marks.

“Well, it’s not hot now,” Jared said, like it didn’t matter anymore. “Sure is strange though. It looks like the colors are all jumbled up inside it.”

“The colors swirl around in there too, like a lava lamp. Plus it was glowing turquoise before.”

“Glowing?” That unbelieving tone was back in his voice again as he squinted up at me.

“And swirling.” I grabbed for the rock. If he couldn’t take me seriously, he didn’t deserve to see it anymore.

“Wait,” Jared said. “The lizard’s still stuck to it.” He wobbled the lizard’s tail between his fingers, trying to free it from the rock.

“There!” I pointed to a small drop of glowing turquoise, oozing onto the sidewalk and shimmering in the sunlight.

“What is - ” Jared began, but never finished. All that wiggling had freed the lizard. He jumped out of Jared’s hand, landed on the sidewalk, and stood on his hind legs. He stretched his neck clear to the right then clear to the left, like he wanted to see what was behind us. I gathered him up and lowered him back into my backpack.

“What are you doing? We just got him out of there.”

“I’m taking him home.”

“You’re keeping him?”

“You would, if you’d found him.”

“Yes, but I’ve had pets. I’ve kept them all alive, too.”

I gave him my meanest look but I wasn’t as upset as I might have been. Ever since Claire moved, I’d been looking for something to keep me busy. I figured taking care of a lizard was just what I needed.

“I’ll call you later,” I told him then sprinted home, eager to start taking care of my secret pet.

Yeah, eager. That’s how clueless I was.

Cricket, Legends

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Aunt Myk moved in with us right after Uncle Richie kicked her out. Dad said the marriage was bound to fail because she got married too young. Mom said my aunt rushed into things without thinking them through.

I figured Aunt Myk was just too cool to be married. She'd been living with us for two years and she was awesome every single day. Unlike the rest of my family, she knew how to have fun.

Unfortunately, she also knew whenever I was up to something. Sneaking a real, live lizard into the house without her noticing would have been impossible.

But since I'd found the lizard on a Wednesday, it didn't even matter. Wednesday was the one day Myk worked afternoons instead of mornings. It was such perfect timing I really believed it meant I was supposed to keep that lizard.

Of course, there was still Matt to think about. He wasn't as bright as Aunt Myk, but he'd rat on me in a second. So I called his name, poked my head into the living room, then glanced around the

kitchen. No answer, no Matt. Good.

I tossed my backpack at the closest chair and chugged a tall glass of Sunny D. Four icy gulps later, it occurred to me I'd just thrown the lizard across the room. While I rounded the table to check on him, the message light on our answering machine blinked at me. After the lizard pawed at my chin and I was satisfied he was okay, I hit the play button.

"Hey, Rat Brat," said Matt's voice. "How come you're not home yet? Did you forget where we live? Ha-ha. I walked home with Josh. Tell Dad I'll be home for supper. Okay, that's all, Rat Brat. Ha-ha. Oh. Erase this message before Dad gets home or I'll tell Mom you forgot to put the milk back in the fridge this morning, even though she asked you to like a thousand times. Ha-ha."

Oh crud. Sure enough, there it was on the edge of the table. I whisked the milk into the refrigerator, then carried my backpack and the lizard up to my room. I tossed my baseball cap at my bed. It spun on the bedpost until the word "Mouse" came into view and reminded me of Matt's message.

All my baseball caps have the word "Mouse" embroidered on them because that's what everyone calls me. Everyone except Matt. He prefers to call me "Rat Brat," and he always gets yelled at when he does. So I put the lizard on my bed then ran downstairs to erase the message to keep us both out of trouble.

When I got back to my room, the lizard was standing on his back legs, turning in a slow circle in the middle of my bed. His front foot shielded his humongous eyes.

I moved the backpack so he wouldn't trip over it. "You're really checking everything out, aren't you, lizard? You know, you look just like Austin. He did the same thing when he lost his dad at Matt's

baseball game last week." Even though the lizard couldn't possibly understand me, I felt the need to explain. I grabbed some Kleenex and continued. "Austin is Ben's son. Ben works at Krueger's with my aunt Myk." I blew into the tissue, long and hard, then tossed it onto the floor with the others.

The lizard stared at me with his head cocked to one side, like dogs do sometimes. He stretched his mouth then continued circling, his eyes flicking over every piece of furniture in my room.

"You're going to like it here, lizard."

Hmmm. I couldn't keep calling him "lizard." He needed a name. It came to me as I watched him spin.

"What do you think of Benson, lizard? Because of Austin, Ben's son. Only all run together. Do you like that name? Benson?"

He crawled inside one of the socks on my bed. At first it sounded like he was snoring in there. But then I wondered if the smell was getting to him. After all, I'd been sick for six days and had worn those socks the entire time. I peeked in to make sure he was okay. He blinked his marble eyes as he gnawed at a loose thread. Maybe it bothered him.

Or maybe he was hungry.

I didn't know much about lizards, but I figured they ate bugs. So I sprinted to the basement to find him some food. Those skinny spiders that look like daddy-long-legs were always dangling in the corners of the laundry room. Careful not to grab its legs (because they'll just drop those legs right off if you do), I picked the biggest spider off the wall. With my fist clenched around what I hoped was Benson's next meal, I raced back up the stairs.

I placed the spider on my bed then shook the sock until Benson slithered out. He touched the spider with the tip of his nose then

trapped it between his two front legs. But instead of eating it, he batted it around, messing with it like most of the boys in my class messed with Jared. When the spider curled into a ball, Benson raised his head, squinted his eyes and crinkled up his forehead. Later Jared told me lizards don't actually have expressions, but I would have sworn Benson looked confused.

"Okay, I get it." I tried not to sound too disappointed. "I'll find you something juicier. Wait here."

After blowing my nose a few more times, I jogged out to our garden and dug up a cricket. I rushed it straight up to Benson, who was gnawing on my sock again.

"Cut that out." I stuffed the sock under my pillow and dropped the cricket on my bed. Benson licked the cricket's head, backed up, sneezed, shuddered, and spat right on my pillow. His skin, which had been mostly gold, now looked rusty red, like an old barn.

A hollow-sounding growl worked its way up from his stomach.

Okay, so he really was hungry. But I was fed up with his finicky attitude. So I went to the kitchen and got him some bologna. It only seemed fair. That's what I always got whenever I complained about dinner.

Benson crawled right on top of the bologna slice. He circled three times before he stretched out and plopped down. His stomach growled again. I sighed and shook my head.

"Ruth?" Dad's voice shouted up the stairs. "Are you home?"

I gathered up the lizard and stuffed him back in my sock. Not knowing what else to do with the bologna, I stuffed that in there, too. Then I shoved the whole thing into my closet and shut the door.

The sound of Benson's grumbling stomach followed me all the way down the stairs.

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When Dad said Grandma Rose was coming for supper, what he really meant was our house wasn't clean enough and he expected me to do something about it. I was straightening couch pillows when Aunt Myk got home.

As soon as she saw what I was doing, she cranked up the stereo. We danced as we dusted and skated as we swiffered. Then she grabbed my waist and twirled me around.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better! You've felt rotten ever since I came back."

"Was it beautiful?" I'd wanted to ask her about Hawaii for almost a week but hadn't stayed awake long enough until now. "Was it everything we thought it would be?"

"And more." She swayed her hips like a hula dancer. "Even the garbage smelled like flowers."

I grinned at the smile spreading across her face. She'd never been anywhere except Iowa City. My parents had laughed when she entered the detergent contest and said she'd never win. But I knew she would. No one could describe the importance of tropical-smelling laundry better than Aunt Myk. And no one deserved to win more than she did.

She caught my hand and pulled until we both fell onto the couch.

"I think it's clean enough in here," she said. "And there's something I need to tell you. Now that you're feeling better."

I held my breath, waiting for her to begin. It sounded like a secret. Aunt Myk's secrets were the best because she never shared them with anyone but me.

"I met someone very special when I was in Hawaii. His name is Howard." That dreamy look washed over her face again, only this

time it made a shiver creep up my back.

“Who’s Howard?”

“Howard is the sweetest man I’ve ever met.” She grabbed my hands and bounced them in her lap. “He’s gentle and kind and he has a smooth, whispery voice. He lives on the island of Kauai. He paints houses but he quit early every day so he could show me around. He’s so smart, Ruth, and so much fun. I spent every day with him. I’ve never been so happy.”

I pulled my hands away from hers. My tongue felt like a wooden block, hard and too big for my mouth. I asked the question anyway.

“I bet you really miss him, huh?”

“I do. But he’s coming for a visit. He wants to meet everyone. Especially you.” She reached for my hands again but I scooted them under my legs. Aunt Myk sounded like she was in love and it made my stomach hurt. I had no idea how far away Hawaii was, but I knew it was farther than it should be.

She gave my shoulder a little squeeze. “You’ll like him. You really will. He gave me the rock I gave you. He got it from his tutu. That’s what he calls his grandma; isn’t that sweet? That rock meant the world to him. It’s part of the Dancing Stone.”

“The what?” I didn’t want to care where it came from, but that rock had burned parts of my shirt and parts of me and Jared didn’t believe any of it. If I listened closely to what Aunt Myk said, maybe I could tell Jared something he didn’t already know.

“The Dancing Stone,” Aunt Myk repeated. “Howard told me about it. It’s part of a Hawaiian legend. Do you want to hear it?”

I nodded.

She brushed a finger through my hair. “Okay. Well. A long time ago there was a young goddess named Hi’iaka who had a best

friend named Hopoe. Hopoe wasn't a goddess like Hi'iaka, but still, she taught Hi'iaka how to appreciate the fun things in life. Like dancing the hula and turning flowers into necklaces. Hi'iaka loved her like a sister. Which is why Hi'iaka's real sister, the Volcano Goddess, was jealous of their friendship. So jealous that she turned Hopoe into a rock."

Aunt Myk's fingers fluttered through my hair as she gathered it all into her hands. "But that didn't stop Hopoe. Hopoe held on tight to her happiness. Even as a rock, she kept right on dancing."

She let my hair fall then gathered it all up again.

"There really was a rock that danced, Ruth. It moved with every little breeze until an earthquake knocked it over. People said it was Hopoe and called it the Dancing Stone. The rock I gave you is a piece of the Dancing Stone, a piece of Hopoe."

"Is that why it glows?" I whispered. "Is it magic?"

"I never saw it glow, sweetie. But it's got the power of friendship and happiness and fun all wrapped up inside it. It's definitely magic."

I looked deep into her eyes, trying to see what she meant. Was she talking about the fake kind of magic, like the magic of the first snowfall or the magic of imagination? Or did she mean real Magic, like genie-in-the-bottle, grant-me-three-wishes Magic?

It was possible. After all, the rock glowed. It burned me. It singed my shirt. It oozed and shifted colors. And I'd found a strange, large-eyed lizard attached to it. If people believed the Dancing Stone was once a girl, wouldn't it have to be Magic?

"If the rock is magic," I asked, "why would Howard give it away?"

"He didn't want to." Aunt Myk leaned back with a smile. "At first

he said he'd never part with it. But then he said he wanted me to have it because I was his Hopoe."

That sounded too much like a riddle and I didn't have the patience to figure it out. "He thought you were magic? Like the rock?"

Aunt Myk's laugh tinkled all around us. "Yes, I guess so. He said I made Hawaii fun again. That watching me enjoy the sunset made him appreciate it more. Like Hopoe did for Hi'iaka. You see?"

I saw. It wasn't real Magic; it was the fake kind. My heart slid down my leg and quivered inside my sock. Not because I was disappointed about the rock (although I was) but because Howard sounded sweet. Aunt Myk deserved someone who felt that way about her. But not someone who lived so very far away.

"Why did you give it to me?" If I were her, I'd treasure that rock forever. I'd never give it to anyone else. My nose was running again but I tried not to sniffle as I waited for her answer.

"Because." She knocked her head against mine. "You are my Hopoe. You make everything fun. You know how important it is to wear flowers and dance every day. I don't ever want you to forget."

Thousands of germs trickled under my nose and paraded across my face, but Aunt Myk wrapped me in her arms anyway. I stayed right there until Mom got home, a few minutes later.

Mom started issuing instructions before she got her shoes off. "Are you all finished cleaning? You didn't forget to vacuum under the cushions, did you?"

"No, I didn't forget." I jumped off the couch.

Last time Grandma came over, she lost her glasses and tore our couch apart looking for them. She didn't find them under the cushions but she did find an orange peel, a chunk of chocolate fudge

Pop Tart and 17 kernels of Act II popcorn.

After Mom left the room, I slid Aunt Myk a smile. "I guess I better vacuum the couch."

"Good idea. I'll go keep your mom busy."

As I pulled off the cushions, Aunt Myk's bright and breezy voice drifted down the stairs. I waited for Mom's laughter then switched on the vacuum. Good old Aunt Myk. What would I do without her?

And then I pictured her face as she talked about Howard. Angrily, forcefully, I shook the image away. She couldn't be in love. It could ruin everything. And life without Aunt Myk was just too horrible to imagine.

Bubbles, Easter Egg, Worries, Play Dough

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I loved the claw-footed bath tub in our downstairs bathroom. It was so deep I could almost swim in it. I had seven or eight scented soaps to choose from at all times. I'd pick whatever scent best fit my mood, fill the tub with steaming water and plenty of soap, then soak until the water got cold.

That night I chose the fresh and lively mango scent even though I wasn't feeling very fresh or lively. How could I? Grandma Rose had been in an uglier than normal mood; my cold was still messing with me; and I was still worried about Aunt Myk's new-found happiness. But this time I didn't want to match my mood – I wanted to forget it. So I sank deep inside the tangy mango, hoping to wash away the entire day.

While I breathed in the fruity goodness, something rustled in the hallway. Figuring it was Matthew, I was all set to yell at him when Benson wiggled under the door. His whole body was now a murky green.

“You can really flatten yourself out, can’t you?” There wasn’t much space under the door, not much more than an inch probably. “No one saw you, did they?” At least no one was screaming.

Benson’s stomach growled, louder than before, loud enough to fill the room.

“Oh crud. I forgot to feed you, didn’t I?”

He stood on his hind legs and stretched out his neck. Before I could even think about stopping him, he flung himself over the edge of the tub and sank into the bubbles. It was funny until I realized his head hadn’t come back up.

I fished around, trying to clear the mango-scented bubbles out of the way. But bubbles are slippery little guys and don’t like to be separated. Finally, just inches from the drain, my fingers found something that wasn’t part of me. I lifted him up and shook him off. He looked a bit like a band-aid, his limp body a washed-out pink. His eyes were closed and his mouth hung open. He did not look good.

I’d seen a movie about CPR at school, so although I never thought I’d have to blow air into a lizard’s mouth, I was prepared to do it. But first I whacked him squarely between his shoulder blades. A stream of water gushed out of his mouth and into the tub. He fell against my arm and sighed. I sighed, too.

I was about to put him on the floor when he took on a rosy glow, scampered up my arm and lunged for the water again. This time I was ready for him. I pulled him from the tub before the bubbles could cover him. He just blinked at me.

“You’re not real bright, are you?”

To keep him well away from the water, I put him on top of my head. He spun around as he licked the conditioner off my hair.

“Cut that out!” I whisked him off to stare him in the eye. “If I don’t keep that conditioner on for at least three minutes, it won’t work.”

This time, when I set him on the floor, I snatched my arm away before he could crawl back on.

“Now stay out of the bath tub!” I gave him my sternest look so he’d know I was serious. But he wasn’t paying much attention to me anymore. He’d knocked over my shampoo bottle and was busy licking all the spilled Pantene off the floor. His whole body shook as he slurped up the puddle. He must have been starving.

He seemed to be enjoying himself, though. He made a whispery, fluttery noise, like he was purring. Or vacuuming.

I leaned over the tub. “Are you okay down there?”

He tilted his head, pulled back the skin around his mouth and grinned through the shampoo bubbles that covered his tongue.

“Ruth?” Mom called. “You’re not still in the bath tub, are you?”

“No!” I pulled the plug. Oh, crud. How was I going to rinse out my conditioner without Mom hearing the water run? “I mean, I’m almost done!”

“Did you remember to brush your teeth?”

“Really, Meredith?” Dad grumbled from the living room. “She’s not three anymore. I’m sure she remembered to brush her own teeth!” I smiled at Benson, who was still grinning at me. Dad seldom stuck up for anyone. It sure felt good when he did.

I rinsed out what was left of the conditioner and scrambled out of the tub. After I pried Benson from the shampoo bottle, I could tell he’d emptied most of it. Still, I didn’t have time to worry about that. I didn’t even have time to brush my teeth. The lizard was obviously starving and I had to find him something decent to eat.

I wrapped Benson in my dirty clothes then carried the bundle down the hallway and up the stairs. No one noticed except my aunt's cat.

Benson spotted Snickers before Snickers spotted him. I didn't see Snickers at all until I tripped over him. Benson clawed his way out of my shirt and stretched out his neck. He trembled in my arms, straining and scrambling to get free. His skin flashed orange.

Snickers' back arched and his tail shot straight up in the air. I struggled to hang on to the lizard as he scampered around on top of my shirt. A weird "huh huh huh" noise erupted from deep inside his throat. It sounded like laughter until it ended with a horrible hiccup. His front legs clutched his stomach and before I knew it, he was falling backwards, toppling toward the ground. I lunged for his tail and scooped him up with my other hand. His eyes were spinning and a stream of conditioner was leaking from his mouth.

~ ~ ~

I whisked Benson into my room, slammed the door and set him on my bed. He clutched his stomach again and curled into a ball. I think he may have moaned a bit but I couldn't be sure. His stomach was growling so loud it was hard to hear anything else.

I raced back downstairs to find out what lizards were supposed to eat. Normally, I stayed away from the computer, but if Mom saw me, I'd tell her I was doing something for school. That'd make her happy enough to believe it.

It took less than five minutes to learn all I cared to learn about lizards. According to Google, some lizards ate birds and some even ate animals. No wonder Snickers ran. Well. I wasn't about to let him have my aunt's cat, so I settled for a hard-boiled egg left over from

Easter. I also grabbed the salt shaker. Easter had been almost a month ago and I wasn't sure how good that egg would taste.

When I got back to my room, Benson was still curled up on my bed. I tapped on his foot, three times. Hard. He lifted his head and opened one eye.

I poured some salt on a piece of egg then held it out to him. "Go ahead. You'll like it. It's chicken." I waved it under his nose. He squinted his opened eye.

"Okay, it's more like a chicken baby. Or really, a pre-baby. But it would have been a chicken. If we hadn't boiled it before it got the chance."

After a moment, Benson's tongue snaked out and slurped the egg clean.

"There you go." I patted his head.

He hadn't eaten any of the egg, but when he fell back against my bed, there was a smile on his face.

I grinned as I watched him settle into sleep. Google hadn't said a thing about salt. I'd figured it out all on my own. And I felt proud.

Of course, Jared ruined it the very next morning.

~ ~ ~

"You were supposed to call me last night," Jared said as soon as he pushed through all the kids surrounding the school doors.

Oh right. How had I forgotten when I had so much to tell him? "Well, Grandma came and –"

But he didn't let me finish.

"I searched the internet all night," he said in a whinier-than-normal voice. "I couldn't find a lizard like yours. I'll have to try again. How's he doing? Is he still okay?"

Well, of course he was still okay. I flicked up my cap so Jared wouldn't miss the irritation on my face. "He's very happy. He even smiled at me. And Snickers made him laugh."

Unfortunately, that made Jared laugh. "Lizards don't smile." He shook his head like I was some sort of idiot. "And they don't laugh, either. In fact, they don't even have feelings. They can't feel anything because they don't have limbic systems. Limbic systems are where emotions come from."

I shrugged because I didn't particularly care. I knew what I saw and I knew what I heard.

"Where are you keeping him?" Jared asked just as the bell rang. It surprised me when he didn't rush for the door. He didn't like school any more than I did, but just like my mom, he hated to be late.

"When I left he was sleeping inside one of my socks."

"But you've got him in a terrarium, right?"

"A what?"

Jared smacked his hand against the side of his head. I wanted to smack my hand against the side of his head, too, but I didn't. You can get in trouble when you do things like that at school. Instead, I followed everyone else down the hallway.

"Like an aquarium," he said, right behind me. "Only without water. A cage. You've got him inside a cage, right? With sand and drinking water and a heating pad? Or at least some kind of light to keep it warm in there. Lizards are cold-blooded, remember?"

I wracked my brain, trying to remember exactly what that meant. It had something to do with not liking the cold and being a snake or a reptile or oh, crud. Lizards were reptiles, weren't they?

"He's not cold," I said, hoping he wasn't. I'd left him under my pillow anyway. And I'd shut my door. I was the last one out of the

house so I knew it was still shut. He'd be fine.

"How many crickets did he eat? Did you feed him again this morning before you left?"

By this point, I was a little tired of Jared, so I walked faster toward my room.

"He doesn't like crickets."

"Are you sure? Almost all lizards like crickets. Especially small ones like yours." Jared stopped to scratch his head and readjust his honkin' big glasses. I kept going.

He pulled on my arm. "So what'd you feed him?"

I spun around. "He wouldn't eat the crickets, okay? I know he's supposed to but he doesn't like them. All he wanted was my shampoo and conditioner. And salt. He likes that."

"What? You can't feed him that stuff. You could have killed him!"

"I didn't feed it to him. He did it all by himself." Well, except for the salt. But I wasn't about to tell Jared that. I didn't feel quite so proud of it anymore.

Afraid I might yell or cry or do something else stupid, I was relieved to hear the second bell. Jared rushed down the hall toward his room as I dragged myself into class.

I spent the rest of the day worrying about Benson.

~ ~ ~

After school, Jared and I rushed back to my house. I tossed my cap onto the bedpost while Jared chewed on his bottom lip.

"I'll get him, I'll get him," I said, even though Jared hadn't said a thing. I reached under my pillow and dug out the sock. It was flat and lifeless. And empty.

"Where is he?" Jared demanded.

"I don't know!" I wanted to smack him, but he was my best friend's cousin after all, so I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling instead. And smiled. Benson had found a warm place all on his own.

"There." I pointed to my ceiling fan. Benson sprawled across a fan blade, one golden foot dangling over the other. With his back resting against the fan's motor, he munched on a bag of Matt's homemade play dough and sucked on a bottle of suntan lotion. He looked like those women who never swim at the pool but just lounge on the side. The only thing missing was a pair of sunglasses.

"I know I didn't leave that light on," I said. "You think he turned it on so he could be warmer?"

Jared's mouth dropped open. "Don't be ridiculous," he said and I wished, once again, he was the one who'd moved to San Diego instead of Claire. "The real question is how in the world did he get up there?"

I shrugged. "He's a pretty good climber."

"But the fan's in the middle of the room. There's nothing around it to climb up."

I didn't understand why it even mattered. He'd obviously done it because he was there. Why did Jared have to know how? When he kept staring at me, I had the uncomfortable feeling he wouldn't stop until I answered. I shrugged again. "He's also a pretty good leaper."

"I don't think he could have leapt from here – " Jared pounded his hand against one of my walls, " – to there." He pointed at my fan. "Besides, how'd he get that stuff up there with him?"

I hated to admit it, but Jared was right. It was hard to imagine a lizard holding on to a bag of play dough and a bottle of suntan lotion while leaping halfway across the room.

Scowling, Jared said, "He's got to stop eating that stuff. We've got

to get him down from there.”

Jared climbed onto my bed and reached toward the fan. He snatched the suntan lotion with one hand and the play dough with the other, then tossed them both on to the bed. When he stretched toward the lizard, Benson hissed. He sounded exactly like Snickers.

Snickers, Howard

~ ~ ~

“Why did he do that?” Jared scrambled off the bed, keeping one eye on Benson.

I leaned against the wall and tried not to laugh. “Apparently you’ve upset him.” I pretended to examine my fingernails.

Jared grabbed the lotion and play dough and threw them into my closet. “Come on. We’re going to find some crickets.”

I already knew that wouldn’t work. I also knew Jared wouldn’t give up until he saw for himself. So I followed him out to the garden and watched him dig around in the dirt. And then I watched as he pulled the back legs off two of the biggest crickets and placed them under Benson’s nose.

Benson used his left leg to swat one of the crickets off the fan blade and his right leg to fling the other cricket across the room. He screeched at Jared. Jared toppled off my bed. I laughed.

Jared rubbed his eyes whenever he didn’t like something. He also rubbed them when he didn’t understand something. So he was still rubbing away when Benson hopped off the fan and crawled under

my bed. I crouched on the floor and lifted the tangerine bed skirt out of the way. Benson sat on his back legs while his front legs brought something toward his mouth. He turned whatever he held in quick little circles, nibbling on its edges, like a squirrel chomping on a nut.

Right before Jared's head blocked my view, I spotted the pile of Snickers' food. Then I heard Jared groan.

"Now he's eating cat food."

"I didn't put it there."

"Lizards don't like cat food." Jared rubbed his eyes.

I nodded toward Benson. "Better tell him that." He was making that purring/vacuuming sound as he chewed.

"Okay." Jared stood up and readjusted his glasses. "Here's what we're going to do. I've got an old aquarium. I'll get some sand from my sister's sandbox. We'll have to buy a heating pad from a pet store but I think he'll be okay for awhile without it. Find a place to set up the aquarium while I'm gone." He looked around my room with a raised eyebrow. "Good luck with that." Like his room was any cleaner. He shook his head then left.

Hmm. It was going to be harder than Jared realized. My parents would never let me keep Benson if they knew I had him. How could I hide an aquarium? I sat on the floor and scratched the back of Benson's neck. He ate while I thought.

By the time Jared came back, I had done some major work. Normally I kept most of my junk in two cardboard boxes at the bottom of my closet, but I'd moved everything into one box. Because it was heaping full, I had shoved it to the back and thrown some old clothes over the top, hoping Mom wouldn't notice. I'd slid my bed further down the wall and turned the other cardboard box upside down, on the far side of my bed, right next to the wall. Then I'd

covered the box with a pink and purple baby blanket Mom had made before I was born. I knew it'd probably get her attention, but sometimes the best way to hide something is to draw attention to it. Less suspicious that way. Besides, it looked nice. By the time I moved the light off my desk and put it on the cardboard box, along with the library book I was supposed to be reading for a book report, it looked a lot like a bed-side table. We could slip the aquarium under the empty box and no one would ever know it was there.

"How's he going to get any air if you've got him all covered up with that blanket?" Jared said.

I readjusted the blanket so the far corner of the box was poking out. Then I cut the corner of the box and positioned the lamp to hide the hole.

"Satisfied?" I asked. Jared nodded. I scooped the lizard off the floor and placed him in the aquarium. He bent his head and watched the sand gush through his toes. His neck bobbed up and down while the strangest noise rose out of his throat. Actually, he sounded just like me when I laugh.

Jared whipped his head around and squinted at me. "Would you stop doing that?"

"He's doing it." I pointed at Benson as he rolled in the sand, spurting out more giggles. He landed back on all four legs, grabbed some sand and threw it over his head. Stretching his mouth wide open, he unfurled his tongue and caught the sand in his mouth, like a kid caught in a snowstorm. He continued to giggle.

"That's not right," Jared mumbled.

I laughed so hard my eyes watered.

Jared glared at me like it was my fault. "Lizards don't do that," he

said.

“Don’t do what?”

“Play!” Jared’s fingers tore at his eyes again. “It looks like he’s playing, but they don’t do that. I think there’s something wrong with him, Mouse. You’ve got to stop feeding him salt and hair products and play dough and suntan lotion. He’s all messed up.”

Benson didn’t look messed up to me. He just looked like he was enjoying himself.

“Oh lighten up, Jared.” I kicked a used wad of Kleenex so hard it ricocheted around the room. “Just because he isn’t acting like you think he should doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with him.”

Jared didn’t stick around long after that. But he helped me get the aquarium under the box and he offered to get the heating pad if I’d pay for half of it. So I walked him to the door and tried to ignore the way he rolled his eyes when I told him I’d call him later.

As soon as Jared left, bumps and grunts echoed from upstairs. Probably Benson. Probably not a good sign. I took the stairs three at a time.

The noise was loudest in the bathroom. I flipped on the light.

The cabinet doors slit open then banged shut. Open. Shut. I crouched in front of the sink, threw open the doors once and for all and peered inside.

Snickers stood in the middle of the cabinet, looking twice as big as normal. His fur was puffed up and his back was arched. His mouth hung open and his ears were pressed flat against his head. He was not a happy cat.

Even worse, somehow his front legs were all wrapped up in the cord to Mom’s curling iron and his back legs were tangled in the cord to the blow dryer.

“What happened to you?” I whispered, reaching to untangle the mess. There were goose bumps on my arms.

That’s right, goose bumps. Because I think a part of me already knew Benson had something to do with it. But a bigger part of me wasn’t ready to admit it. I hated to think Jared might be right, that there might be something majorly freaky and maybe a bit terrifying about my lizard.

~ ~ ~

“Ruth!” Aunt Myk called, a couple days later. “Can you come down? Someone wants to meet you!”

Uggh.

I scratched Benson’s chin one last time before lifting him into the aquarium. “I’ve got to go take care of something,” I told him. “But don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.”

Ever since Aunt Myk announced that Hawaii Howard was coming for sure, she had been smiling at odd times and humming constantly. I could hardly stand it. She liked him way too much and he lived too far away.

I marched down the stairs, determined to make sure he didn’t stay long.

“Here she is!” Aunt Myk looked at me like I had flowers growing out of my hair and butterflies fluttering around my head. A man, as brown and round as a milk dud, rested his hand on her shoulder. I hated him instantly.

“Ruth,” Aunt Myk said, “this is Howard. Howard, this is Ruth. My aikane.” I had no idea what that meant, but it made Howard smile.

“Hello, Ruth. I’m so happy to meet you.” Howard leaned in

toward my face and whispered, "Aikane means good friend. It's Hawaiian." He held out his hand but I didn't take it. He looked at Myk like he didn't quite know what to do next. I guess he couldn't think of anything good because he pointed at my cap and grinned like an idiot. "Bad hair day?"

I lifted my chin and crossed my arms. "There's nothing wrong with my hair. Is there something wrong with your cheeks?" They'd turned as red as a bottle of ketchup.

Aunt Myk broke in, sounding just as bright and breezy as ever. "We wouldn't even recognize Ruth without her baseball caps. They're very special to her and part of what makes her special to us."

Apparently being around Howard made my aunt sound like an obnoxiously sweet preschool teacher. I felt like I was four years old.

It was time to take control. "So," I said, aiming a smile at Howard, "when will you be leaving?"

"Ruth!" Aunt Myk's right hand swung around to slug my arm while her left hand reached out to grab Howard's wrist.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, even though I wasn't. "I bet that sounded rude, didn't it? I was just, well, I just..." I blinked at Aunt Myk, pretending to hold back a few gallons of tears. "You said we'd go rollerskating, remember? I thought you meant this weekend and I was really looking forward to it, but well, now I guess we can't, can we?"

"Rollerskating!" Howard said, like I'd just offered to fly him to the moon. "I haven't been rollerskating in years." He grinned at Myk. "Used to be pretty good, too."

"Real men don't rollerskate," I told him, because Uncle Richie had made that perfectly clear, years ago.

“Ruth – ” Aunt Myk started but Howard cut her off.

“This real man does,” he said. “How about we all go?”

“Oh, that’d be – ” Aunt Myk began again. This time I cut her off.

“Horrible,” I said then shrugged my shoulders when I saw her scowl. This wasn’t going as well as I’d planned. “I mean, I wanted to go for pizza afterwards. So we could dance to the jukebox again. But Howard would hate that, wouldn’t you, Howard? It’s really embarrassing.”

“Why would I be embarrassed by dancing?” Howard asked, looking genuinely confused.

“Because it’s a restaurant, and people aren’t really supposed to. And last time, Aunt Myk danced right into a waiter and pepperoni pizza went flying all over the– ”

Howard laughed so loud there wasn’t any point in continuing. I kind of felt bad for making him laugh at her, but really, it was for her own good.

“So let’s go there too,” Howard said. “I love dancing in places you’re not supposed to.”

What? No. He was ruining everything. He couldn’t have understood. I shook my head at him. “But. It’s silly, right? Kind of, I don’t know, childish or something? Because Myk gets really carried away.”

Aunt Myk narrowed her eyes but Howard only laughed.

“And real men don’t like that?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “They don’t. And they shouldn’t because – ” Because I knew they didn’t, because no grown-up did except Aunt Myk and why did he keep ruining everything? “Because grown-ups should act like grown-ups, especially out in public where they’re setting an example for everyone else.”

“Ruth.” Aunt Myk again. “What’s gotten into you? You sound just like Richie.”

Which, really, had been the point. Except I’d wanted Howard to remind her of Uncle Richie, not me.

“All right,” Myk said. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to take Howard for a walk around the neighborhood. When we get back, we’ll do this again. And then, my favorite, fun niece will act like my favorite, fun niece. We’ll see you when we get back.”

I slumped against the wall as I watched them go.

Getting rid of Howard was going to be a lot harder than I’d thought.

Grandma, Stick People, Secrets

~ ~ ~

I wasn't about to apologize to Howard but I felt like I'd better say something to Aunt Myk. So when she headed for the kitchen right before dinner, I followed.

Before I got there, I heard Grandma Rose say, "Channel 47, if you don't mind." And just like that, the theme from Alien Avenger came barreling out of the living room.

"Ahh, you can't be serious!" Howard said, sounding disgusted. "This show is a load of garbage."

It was such a perfectly horrible thing for him to say that I couldn't resist seeing Grandma's reaction. I strolled into the room.

Grandma was giving Howard her Look. Grandma's Look brought most people to their knees. I'd seen it happen to everyone in my family. I had nightmares about it myself.

Howard didn't survive it, either. He nearly fell out of his chair.

"And what, may I ask," Grandma said through her puckered up lips, "do you find so appalling about Alien Avenger?"

The alien avenger, Secret Government Agent Colin Swinner,

solved crimes no one else even knew about. All his cases involved alien life forms and the aliens were always angry, ugly, and deadly. Grandma Rose was a huge fan. She never missed an episode.

“I didn’t say it was appalling,” Howard said, repositioning himself into the chair. “I’m sure a lot of people find it very entertaining. It’s just that some people have trouble separating reality from entertainment. And shows like this make some of them distrust our government.”

I fought so hard to keep from cracking up that I swallowed my gum. If anyone had asked me what I hoped Howard would say, I couldn’t have come up with anything better. Or worse, depending on whose side you were on.

Grandma’s eyes settled on Howard as she leaned back against the couch. “So you believe we can trust our government.”

“Of course,” Howard said then squinted at her. “Please don’t tell me you’re one of those crazy types who believe in government cover-ups and secret agencies.”

I had to bite my knuckle to keep quiet after that. Because Grandma was definitely one of those crazy types. In fact, she had spent a lot of time protesting against the government when she was younger. And she was very proud of it, too.

“You think our government tells us everything we need to know.” Grandma’s mouth pulled into something like a smile, but I knew she didn’t really mean it. “No hidden secrets, no classified information that would scare normal people half to death if only they knew all the things our government is involved in.”

Howard laughed right out loud, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “Our government isn’t hiding anything from us. This is America, for heaven’s sake!”

If I'd been alone, I would have been jumping up and down. Howard was well on his way to making Grandma hate him. If he kept going, she'd make his life so miserable, he'd catch the next flight back to Hawaii. I wouldn't have to do a thing except wave goodbye.

Bang!

Grandma turned away from Howard and toward the TV. Agent Swinner had just shot a bullet through the window and was now barging through the broken glass and right into the alien's apartment. He aimed his gun at a long, wildly waving tentacle. "I've got you now," he told the drooling alien.

Howard, who apparently didn't know when to quit, took a deep, rumbling breath. "Besides, aliens don't exist. If they did, they would have contacted us by now."

Grandma was so caught up in the show all she did was grunt.

"Maybe they have contacted us," I said, because that's what Grandma would have said if she'd been paying any attention. "Maybe the government just doesn't want us to know about it."

Howard leaned back and shook his head. "Sorry, Ruth. The only life in outer space is the bacteria we left behind from the moon walk. And I don't think it will be building a space ship any time soon."

Wow. I could not believe Grandma was missing this. I had to get her attention off the TV and back on Howard.

"Grandma thinks aliens exist," I said, a bit louder than necessary. "Don't you, Grandma?"

"Shush, Ruth," Grandma said. "I'm trying to watch." The alien had wrapped one of its tentacles around Agent Swinner's neck and another one around his leg. A third tentacle was inching across his foot.

I turned to Howard. "Grandma says people who don't believe in aliens are too full of their own importance."

Grandma waved her hand in my direction. Agent Swinner was in a lot of trouble now and she seemed a bit frantic about it.

"Too full of their own importance," I repeated, "or too stupid to have any imagination."

"Oh, I've imagined them," Howard said. "I used to dream about them. All the time, after I saw E.T."

"You liked that movie?" Grandma asked. Oh sure. Now she was paying attention. All I could do was hope Howard said no. E.T. was Grandma's favorite movie.

"Oh, I absolutely loved it," Howard said. "When I was a kid, I pretended I was Elliott, hiding an alien in my room. I spent a lot of time talking to an empty closet."

"Well, that's just pathetic," I said.

"Ruth!" Grandma gave me her Look. "Never mind her, Howard. I think it's sweet. Come. Sit by me. Tell me all about it."

And I suppose he did, although I'll never really know. I had to leave the room before I puked. Stupid Howard.

~ ~ ~

Later that night, the strangest noise of all time exploded up the stairs. It sounded like Grandma Rose, laughing. Not that I'd never heard her laugh before but for the first time ever, she sounded happy while she did it. What in the world could cause that?

"Oh Howard," she said, "you are so funny!"

No way.

"See, Mom," Aunt Myk said, brighter and breezier than anyone should ever be, "I told you you'd love him."

Gag me. I sprang from my bed and slammed my door. I had homework to do, after all. Didn't they even care?

I stared at the map of Europe, wondering if I'd ever get it done. So unfair that I was stuck up here while they were down there. Laughing.

Of course, having a spastic lizard clomping around all over my map didn't help, either. Once I got Benson to stop licking my markers, he sat on my hand and stared at every line I drew. It wasn't easy coloring the Baltic Sea with a lizard balanced on my hand, but Benson seemed to enjoy the ride. He cocked his head from side to side as he watched me work. I didn't really mind, until he grabbed the marker right out of my hand. He wound his toes around it and adjusted his grip. And then he forced the point across my bedspread.

"What are you doing!" I didn't mean to yell but I couldn't help it. He'd made a dark blue slash across one of the palest yellow squares in my quilt. I doubted it would ever come out. Mom was going to be furious, especially since she'd just warned me about working on my bed.

Benson ducked his head and turned the color of chocolate ice cream.

"Okay, okay. I shouldn't have yelled like that. Here." I put a sheet of paper next to him and pointed. "Do it here."

Benson cocked his head. He wasn't quite so brown anymore.

"Like this." I drew a line across the paper. Of course I didn't really expect him to, but he picked up a red marker and readjusted his grip.

And then he drew his own line across the sheet.

I gulped, stared, felt my heart skip a beat. This was getting...

interesting.

“Okay. Try this.” I drew a circle. I was tired of working on the map anyway.

Benson pressed his nose against the paper then tilted his head to look at me. His pupils puffed up. His tongue dangled down one side of his mouth like a stretched-out piece of bubble gum. He hummed as he worked the marker around on the paper.

When he leaned back, I saw a shaky red circle right next to my blue one. He looked up at me and grinned his toothless grin.

I nearly fell off the bed.

“What are you?” I whispered. Wasn’t art supposed to be one of those things that made us human and made other animals not human? No, wait a minute. Claire had done a book report on some chimp that learned how to draw cats. Or maybe it was apples. Either way, it was a chimp, not a reptile and besides, I was pretty sure someone had trained that chimp.

I hadn’t trained Benson how to do anything. He’d figured it all out on his own, just by watching me. Which was way more amazing than any old trained monkey, in my opinion. Benson had to be the only drawing lizard ever born. I couldn’t wait to tell Jared. I was practically trembling with excitement. This was almost too cool to even believe.

“Okay, Genius, let’s see what else you can do.”

My fingers shook as I brought the blue marker back to the page. I drew boxes and flowers and stick people. So did Benson. He matched every one of my drawings, stroke for stroke.

Since that’s about all I can draw, I switched to numbers and then letters and then names. Benson drew them all, humming and grinning and pushing the paper forward with his nose until I drew

more.

Forty-five minutes later, I started seeing double and my eyelids were so heavy it hurt to pull them back up. I had to put Benson back in his aquarium but I scratched his chin until my finger grew too tired to follow my brain's directions.

That's when I realized my map still wasn't done. As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered what Mrs. Henson would say if I told her I hadn't finished because I was teaching my lizard how to write his name.

~ ~ ~

After receiving an "F" that my overall grade in Social Studies couldn't really make up for, I spent the rest of the day not telling Jared that Benson could draw. I wasn't very good at keeping secrets and this one was especially hard because it just swelled and swelled inside me. It'd been impossible to pay attention to any of my teachers that day, even the funny ones.

If I'd gotten the phone I wanted for my birthday, I could have shared my news with Claire. Over half my friends had phones, but my parents said I wasn't responsible enough.

So there was nothing I could do. They'd never let me use their phone to call California. I couldn't email Claire because discussing an alphabet-drawing lizard on the internet didn't seem like a good idea.

Still, I had to tell someone, so I chose Jared. I figured that since he already knew about the lizard, telling him didn't even count.

When I finally caught up with him after school, I felt like I might burst with my news. But I wasn't about to spoil the surprise now. Besides, I couldn't just tell Jared what Benson could do. I had to

show him. Jared didn't believe anything until he saw it for himself. So I kept quiet on the way home and let Jared ramble on.

"I think I've researched every kind of lizard there is and I still haven't found one that looks anything at all like yours."

Just wait, I thought, you haven't seen anything yet.

"I've been looking up rocks, too." He sounded almost mad about it. "I haven't found any that look as swirled as yours."

"The swirls move around, too," I reminded him. "And the rock glowed turquoise and leaked stuff. Plus it can get hot enough to blister skin and practically set clothes on fire."

"Uh huh."

When I heard that doubt in his voice, I itched to get to my house. He'd never doubt me again after this.

"Where'd you get that rock, anyway?"

Even a turquoise-glowing, blister-inducing rock seemed pretty lame compared to a lizard who could write his name. Jared kept dragging his feet and all I really wanted to do was yank on him so he'd walk faster. Instead, I decided to answer. Telling him the Hawaiian myth might keep me from hurting him.

"I've read about the Dancing Stone of Puna," Jared said, as soon as I finished. I shook my head and sighed. There wasn't much of anything Jared hadn't read about. "But Hi'iaka's sister didn't turn Hopoe into a swirling colored rock. She covered her in molten lava. The Dancing Stone is a large chunk of lava on the shores of Hawaii. Until an earthquake knocked it over, it was so perfectly balanced the ocean breezes could make it teeter back and forth."

"Well, anyway," I said, wishing we were home, "Aunt Myk got the rock from Howard who got the rock from his grandma who got the rock from Puna. So whatever the myth says doesn't really matter.

All I know is the rock is part of the Dancing Stone.”

Jared shook his head. “It can’t be. The Dancing Stone is made of lava. Hard, rough, black lava. I don’t know what your rock is but I know it’s not lava.”

I had to admit he had a point. The rock was just too smooth and bright and colorful.

“So he lied,” I said. I wished Howard was nearby so I could kick him. My rock wasn’t part of a Hawaiian myth. It probably wasn’t filled with the magic of true friendship, either. It was probably just a regular old rock Howard found on the beach. “Why would he lie about it?”

Jared shrugged. “Maybe he was trying to impress your aunt.”

Yeah, that sounded about right. Howard was a fake, just like his rock. I couldn’t wait to tell Aunt Myk. Maybe she’d see him for what he really was instead of what she wanted him to be.

At least being mad at Howard had made the walk go faster. We were almost home and I couldn’t wait anymore. Running, I called Jared to follow me.

“What’s wrong with you?” Jared yelled, huffing and puffing somewhere behind me. He’d never been much of a runner. “Are you going to be sick or something?”

I jammed my hand on my Mouse cap so it wouldn’t blow off as I ran. “I’ve got to show you something!”

“Again? What else could you possibly have?”

The urge to double up with laughter was so strong I almost had to stop, but I didn’t. I just kept running to my front door. This was going to be better than Christmas morning. This was going to be better than the first day of summer vacation.

After Jared panted his way up my sidewalk, I swung open the

door and stepped aside so he could enter first.

“What did you do?” he asked in a tone filled with wonder. Since he hadn’t even entered the house yet, I figured he was being sarcastic. I shoved him out of the way and headed in.

My heart dropped down to my tennis shoes.

Ocean Adventures, Fishing, Decisions

~ ~ ~

Orange boxes had been drawn above the couch, blue flowers next to the piano and red stick people under the window. Right next to the entertainment center, a large green number five was surrounded by two's and six's and almost all the letters of the alphabet. That piece of art covered most of the wall.

Things weren't any better in the kitchen. There were circles on the cabinets and pictures of flowers on the refrigerator. Even the kitchen table was covered with stick people. To make matters worse, the whole place reeked of fake, sweet mixed-up fruit. Not only were the drawings in marker, they had obviously been drawn with the scented kind.

I shook my head but the drawings and the smell wouldn't go away. My parents were going to kill me. I'd already gotten yelled at for the mark on my quilt. That was nothing compared to this. "I am going to be in some major trouble."

"Without a doubt." Jared sounded smug, like he was glad he wasn't me. "Not that I don't love what you've done with the place,

but really, what were you thinking?"

Once I got over my urge to hit Jared, I concentrated on the larger issue – which was where was everybody and when could I expect them back?

"Matt's at baseball practice until five, Mom and Dad won't be back from the university until six, and Aunt Myk is off showing Hawaii Howard around. She probably won't be home until after dinner." I bit my lip and surveyed the damage. "That gives us about an hour and a half before Matt gets home and another hour after that. I think we can keep Matt quiet with threats and torture but we'll still have to work fast." I grabbed Jared by the arm and led him to the closet where Mom kept the cleaning supplies.

"Wait a minute, Mouse." Jared backed away and stared at me. "It'd probably take two weeks to clean all this up. I think you have to accept whatever your parents decide to do to you and try harder not to go crazy next time."

"I didn't do this!"

"Then who did?"

Oh crud, where was Benson? He had to be somewhere, probably redecorating another part of the house.

I tugged on Jared's arm again. "Come on. We've got to find Benson. You look in the basement and I'll look upstairs. Let me know if you see any more drawings down there."

"Benson? The lizard? Why? Did you leave him out of his terrarium?"

"No!" I was beginning to lose my patience. "But he's obviously gotten out. We have to find him before anyone gets home."

Jared stared at me with squinted up eyes, like he didn't recognize who I was. At least the smugness was gone. "You have gone nuts,

haven't you?"

"We don't have time to talk about it right now." I thought I sounded as reasonable as anyone could at this point. "Please. Just go look for him before he does any more damage." I sprinted for the stairs.

I checked each room as I ran by. I didn't see any more drawings but I did find the markers on my bed. They were all capped and lying in a nice straight line, from darkest to brightest. My lamp was tipped over and the baby blanket was crumpled around it.

"Mouse! Could you come here? I'm in the basement." I'd never heard Jared sound so scared or unsure. His voice was as high as a preschooler's. I ran down the stairs, pinching my arm the whole way, hoping I'd wake up and laugh about all this. Instead, I ran right into Jared, who was standing at the far end of the room, rubbing his eyes.

Dad's collection of Jacques Cousteau DVDs lay on the floor. I'd never watched the DVDs myself but I'd caught glimpses of them. Jacques Cousteau was some old guy with a funny accent who liked to discuss nature as his friend Jim went on life-threatening undersea adventures.

Anyway, the TV was on and Benson kept pressing on the remote until Cousteau's voice was loud enough to shatter glass. A school of sharks surrounded some guy in a wetsuit (probably Jim). Benson turned lemon-drop yellow and sprang through the air. Landing on the screen and clinging to the glass, he pressed his nose against the belly of a shark.

"What's he doing? How come he's yellow?" Jared yelled.

I grabbed the remote and turned down the volume. "I think he's yellow because he likes it."

Jared pinched his arm.

"I already tried that. It doesn't work."

A muffled howl floated out from the laundry room. Great.

"Come on." I grabbed Jared again but this time he didn't resist. We both stumbled into the laundry room and I flung open the cabinet.

There was poor Snickers, tangled up in a bed sheet. Forks and spoons were tied onto his fur with long strings of dental floss. They clanked against each other as he tried to swish them off. I reached for a fork and yanked it free. Snickers didn't even hiss. I was pretty sure I knew how he felt.

"You've got to help me," I told Jared. "I'll take care of Snickers but we've both got to scrub."

Jared rubbed at his eyes and then he nodded. I guess there wasn't any fight left in him, either. "I'll go put Benson back," he said. "But we've only got an hour now. You know there's no way we're going to get everything cleaned up, don't you?"

"I know."

"I'm never going to find a lizard like Benson on the internet, am I?"

I yanked another fork from Snickers' fur. "If you do, I wouldn't recommend getting one. They make lousy pets."

~ ~ ~

"You know what the worst part was? Explaining why I drew all over the walls and furniture when most three-year-olds have more sense than that." I jiggled the fishing line lying next to me then tossed a flat stone into the lake. It skipped five times. A few weeks ago I would have felt proud. Now all I could do was sigh.

Jared tossed in a rock, too. It only skipped twice. "What'd you tell them?"

"I told them I was cracking under the pressure of fifth-grade homework."

"Did they believe you?"

"I don't know." I pulled in my line to try a different lure. "I think in a weird way they wanted to believe it. Mom said she was glad I was finally taking school more seriously."

Jared shook his head. Mine had begun to itch so I gave it a slight tap and yanked my cap down tighter.

"Did you just hit yourself in the head?" Jared squinted at me. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I've got Benson in there."

"Under your cap?"

"Well, I couldn't leave him home alone, could I?" I picked up a stick and dug into the sand. "Anyway, I'm grounded until I finish repainting the living room and kitchen. Plus I had to buy the paint with my allowance." I felt Benson's foot scoot out from under my cap. I pulled the cap down further.

"You really ought to take him out of there. He's going to get all tangled up in your hair."

By this point, I didn't really care what happened to him. But I took off my cap and turned Benson loose on the ground. He hummed while he rolled around, kicking up sand with all four legs. He buried himself in less than twenty seconds.

"If you're grounded," Jared said, "why are you here?"

"No one's home. Mom and Dad took Matthew to some sports store for a new bat and Aunt Myk went somewhere with Hawaii Howard. I needed a break from painting. Your mom told me you

were here." I swept my eyes across the lake as I took a deep breath of spring air. I usually enjoyed fishing at Coralville Lake but not this time. I had to keep one eye on a very bizarre lizard and one eye on Jared's watch to make sure I didn't stay too long. I had to beat everyone home.

Benson crawled out of his hole and patted the mound of sand he had made. He kept adding more sand to the top but it kept sliding down to the bottom. He was beginning to turn green.

Jared took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "How often does he change color like that?"

"It seems to be a mood thing." I should have enjoyed answering one of Jared's questions but I felt too overwhelmed by Benson. "I called Claire. My parents are gonna kill me when they see the phone bill but I had to tell her what was going on. Do you know what she said?"

Jared didn't take his eyes off Benson, not even for a second. I continued anyway.

"She said she really likes some girl named Jordyn and that Jordyn has an in-ground pool. She wants to join the swim team because Jordyn's on it. Then she told me all about her new bedroom and some boy with the bluest eyes she's ever seen. Can you believe that?"

Jared just grunted.

"What's happened to her? I told her everything and asked her what I should do. All she said was she didn't know!"

"You asked her what you should do? Do about what?"

How come he wasn't getting it? "Aren't you upset that Claire doesn't care about us anymore?"

"Are you planning on doing something? About Benson?"

"I don't know. That's why I called Claire."

"But she's not here! She doesn't know. You can't do anything, Mouse. We don't even know what he is yet!"

"I have to do something. I can't leave him by himself. And I can't go through the rest of my life with a lizard under my cap, can I? Maybe I should ask Aunt Myk what she –"

"No!" Jared slammed his hand against the ground.

Benson shot several inches into the air, turned a complete circle, then dashed straight for the water.

A picture of what he looked like after I'd pulled him out of the bath tub flashed through my mind. A bath tub was nothing compared to a lake.

"We've got to stop him!" I yelled. "Come on!"

~ ~ ~

That little lizard sure could cover some ground. I ran faster than I'd ever run in my life and still had to dive through the air like a baseball player trying to steal home plate. Just as Benson's foot hit the edge of the water, I grabbed his tail and held on tight. Seconds later my shoulder ached where I'd landed on it and grains of sand covered most of my tongue. Benson squirmed in my grasp, shot me an angry hiss, then dug his nails into the back of my hand. Jared came up behind us, huffing and puffing.

"Is he okay?"

I glared at Jared. "He's fine. And don't worry about me, even though he tried to rip my hand off."

"You're only bleeding a little bit."

"I shouldn't be bleeding at all!" I scrambled to my feet and tried to shake off the sand. It clung to my wet shirt.

“Maybe he just wants to swim.” Jared picked up the lizard and dusted him off. “You can’t let him go in the lake, of course, but maybe you should put a bigger container of water in his terrarium.”

“He can’t swim.” I dug at the sand on my shirt. “He just thinks he can. He almost drowned in my bath tub.”

“You shouldn’t have filled it so full. If you put in just an inch or two – ”

“Listen, Jared. I didn’t put him in the bath tub. He jumped in. I didn’t even know he was coming. You don’t have any idea what this has been like for me, so don’t act like you have all the answers. You don’t. He drew pictures all over my house and he keeps terrorizing my aunt’s cat. He won’t stay in the aquarium and I have no idea how he’s getting out. So I can’t keep him, okay? I’m going to let him go.”

I didn’t know that’s what I’d decided to do until I said it. But once I said it, I felt free for the first time in what seemed like a year. In fact, I actually smiled. Until I saw the look of horror on Jared’s face.

“You can’t do that! We’ll never understand what’s going on if you do!”

“I don’t care what’s going on. Not that much.”

Jared had put Benson on the ground and we were both blocking him from the water. Benson grabbed a stick and started writing five’s and two’s in the sand. My stomach flipped a little as I watched him. I’d taught him that.

“Then let me have him,” Jared said. “I can take care of him for you.”

“No.”

“Why not? It’ll be easier for me to study him if he’s at my house. Besides, I’ll take good care of him.”

I shook my head. Benson didn’t need to be studied. He wasn’t a

homework assignment. He was just a lizard. My lizard. Besides, Jared sounded like Benson would be better off without me. Like I wasn't responsible enough to handle him. But I was. I knew I was. I'd done pretty good so far, considering everything he'd put me through.

"He's mine, Jared. He's going to stay with me." And that was all. I'd just have to figure it out day by day.

Jared bumped his glasses out of his way and rubbed at his eyes. After a moment or two of intense rubbing, he forced his glasses back in place then let go with a huge sigh. "Are you sure? If you keep him, you can't tell anybody about him. If they knew what he can do, they'd take him away from you."

"I know. I won't."

"You can't let him go, either. Promise you won't get mad and just let him go."

"I won't."

"Because I think he'd die if you did. He'd drown or eat something stupid."

Jared was right. Without us, Benson probably wouldn't survive. He was smart enough to learn the alphabet but he wasn't smart enough to live on his own.

So really, there was nothing else I could do. It didn't matter whether I liked it or not. I was going to be spending an awful lot of time with a lizard under my cap.

Fears, Plastic Toys

~ ~ ~

“Would you please just stay put?” I readjusted my cap with my paint-smearred hand while lizard feet clawed into my skull.

Stupid lizard. I had to keep him with me constantly now. Storing him under my cap was the only place I could think of to hide him.

I still had no idea how he kept getting out of the aquarium. The lid clipped down on the outside. He shouldn't be able to remove it from the inside.

Then again, he shouldn't be able to attach silverware to an angry cat's fur with dental floss, either. This was no ordinary lizard. No ordinary aquarium would keep him from doing what he wanted.

I dabbed more paint on my brush and attacked another wall. If life was fair, I'd have been at Matt's baseball game. Instead, I was stuck here, repainting almost the whole house by myself. Aunt Myk usually helped when my parents weren't around. But not this time. She had to get ready for Howard.

Well, I'd had enough. I needed a break. Holding tightly to my wildly wriggling cap, I headed for some fresh air.

As soon as I opened the front door, Snickers appeared out of nowhere and dashed through my legs. Although I still held on to my cap, Benson managed to squeeze his way out. He jumped from my head and raced after the cat.

“Come back here, you rotten thing!” I took off after him. By the time I reached the front yard, Snickers had climbed up our birch tree. Benson was right behind him.

I was squinting into the lower branches of the tree when Howard’s rented car pulled into our driveway. Snickers was howling like his skin had been yanked off and Benson, just a few feet away from the cat, had turned a brilliant, dazzling orange.

Howard walked over and stood by my side. “What’s going on?” he asked, then peered into the tree. For one brief, exhilarating moment, I imagined shrugging my shoulders and walking away. Snickers would come down eventually and Benson, well, maybe Benson deserved to be left in the tree. I could tell Jared there was nothing I could do, that Benson took off and I couldn’t find him. But for some reason, I couldn’t walk away.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I can handle it.” I wished Snickers would shut up so Howard would go inside. Benson practically glowed within the leaves.

Howard cinched up his pants and stepped closer to the tree. “Looks like that cat is stuck. Maybe I should go after him.”

“No, that’s okay.” I grabbed onto his shirt to hold him back. The last thing I wanted was for Howard to climb the tree. He’d spot Benson for sure.

Snickers leaped several branches further up the tree and Howard backed away. “You know, I’m not sure I should climb up there, anyway. I’ve got an old sports injury.” He bent to rub his knee.

Benson immediately filled the neighborhood with noise. It sounded like my laugh.

Howard's head snapped up. "What was that?"

I pretended not to hear it and tried not to stare as Benson bobbed up and down just inches from the cat.

Howard's mouth fell open as he pointed at my lizard. "Well, no wonder Snickers is upset! What is that thing up there?"

"Thing? What thing?" Benson pranced back and forth on the branch above our heads, swishing his tail and laughing like a hyena at the hysterically screeching cat. It was getting harder and harder to play dumb.

"That orange thing! Don't you see it? Can't you hear it?" He took another step toward the tree and squinted up into the leaves. "It looks like it's dancing."

The front door flew open and Aunt Myk flew out. "Is that Snickers? Is he stuck?"

"I think he went after some very strange animal," Howard said. "I've never seen anything like it. I'm going up there to get your cat and check it out."

My heart plopped to the ground. Not only was Howard curious, it seemed like he wanted to show off for my aunt, too. I couldn't think of any way to stop him.

While Howard hiked up his pants again, Aunt Myk peered at Benson. His tongue dangled out of his wide-open mouth as he hopped from one foot to the other.

"What in the world is that?" she asked. "It looks like it's making faces at us."

Howard grabbed for the lowest limb. "I thought so, too. I'd love to get a closer look at it." As soon as he hiked himself up to the

second limb, he turned from the tree to look at me. "Ruth, have you ever seen it before? Is it maybe somebody's pet?"

I bit my lip and shrugged my shoulders. My mind raced while Howard reached for a higher limb. What if Benson drew a picture or wrote his name in front of Howard? What if Howard decided to keep him?

Th fear built up inside my head, but Howard wasn't making much progress at all. Still stuck on the second limb, his whole arm shook when he reached for another. His legs trembled and his knees wobbled. And then his foot slipped and he toppled to the ground. Benson shrieked with laughter as Aunt Myk rushed to Howard's side.

She sank to the ground and ran her hands across his pale face. "You didn't break anything, did you?"

He'd landed on his butt. Nothing else had even touched the ground. I was sure he was fine, although he looked like he'd seen a ghost. In fact, he was so white he looked like a ghost himself.

Aunt Myk rocked back on her heels and held out her hand. "Here. Let me help you up."

"No. No I don't feel like I should get up yet." I think he meant to smile but his mouth just looked creepy when he stretched it out like that. He rubbed at the knee that hadn't even hit the ground. "Old sports injury. Maybe a glass of water? Would you mind?"

She dashed into the house while Snickers continued to howl. Benson cocked his head and watched Howard in complete silence.

Howard's face was the color of raw pizza dough. Every breath he took went through his whole body with a shuddery sigh. He reminded me of Jared, the day we climbed the rope in gym class.

I snapped my fingers. "I know! I know what happened. You're

afraid of heights, aren't you? You don't have an old sports injury. You just didn't want to climb. You were afraid you'd fall. And that's why you did."

He stayed quiet for so long, I wondered if there was something else wrong with him. But then he glanced up with a look that was sad and hopeful all at the same time. Like a dog when it wants to share your snack.

"You won't tell your aunt, will you? She doesn't think I'm afraid of anything."

Aunt Myk came out with his drink before I could answer. She watched him sip, helped him up, then led him inside. I couldn't wait to tell her Howard's secret. But first, I had a lizard to fetch.

In less than three minutes, I climbed high enough to shoo the cat down and grab Benson. Balancing my weight against a nearby branch, I brought him right up to my face.

"Listen, lizard. You've got to stop running away. You're just lucky you were outside. If anyone saw you in the house, it wouldn't take them long to figure out I'm the one keeping you there."

Worse than that, I knew they'd make me let him go. And if I wasn't around to protect him, his life might be over, too.

~ ~ ~

That night, during dinner, Matthew plopped his elbows on the table and glared at me. "Give them back."

I topped his glare with one of my own. "Give what back?"

"My alien collection. I know you took them and I want them back."

I yanked on my cap, wishing that lizard would settle down or take a nap. He was seriously driving me crazy. "Get real," I said.

“Why would I want a bunch of plastic toys?”

“I didn’t know you had an alien collection,” Howard said. “I thought I was the only one.”

“You collect aliens?” asked Matt, all wide-eyed, stupid-looking.

“Ever since I was about your age. I loved those little guys. I got most of them from my grandma.”

“Me too!” Matt said, practically jumping out of his chair. “How many do you have?”

“Thirty-three.”

“Thirty-three! That’s a ton!”

“I wanted every kind there was,” Howard said. “I thought if I had one that looked just right, real aliens would come to my house and rescue it. I used to line them up in my window, stay up late and wait for them to come.”

“Oh my gosh!” Matt said. “I do that, too! Grandma, did you hear that? Howard’s just like me!”

Grandma nodded at Matt then smiled at Howard. Aunt Myk reached for Howard’s hand.

Every one of them was making me sick.

“If you can’t find your collection,” Howard said, “I’ll give you mine.”

Mom and Dad shared a smile. Matt’s face stretched into a hideously large grin.

“Goodness, Howard,” Grandma said, “that’s very kind of you.”

“Isn’t it!” Aunt Myk agreed. She sounded like Howard had just offered Matt one of his kidneys.

Oh, give me a break. It wasn’t a body part. It was just a bunch of dumb plastic toys he’d probably buried in his attic a thousand years ago. Why was everyone acting like he was some sort of hero? He

didn't deserve their admiration. He was a liar. And it was time everyone knew it.

"So," I said. "You got the collection from your grandma, huh? She must have given you all kinds of neat stuff. Like that rock you gave Aunt Myk. Although, it wasn't very cool of your grandma to lie to you about where it came from."

Howard blinked then stared at the bowl of green beans. Ah ha! He knew.

"Ruth!" Grandma said. "You just accused Howard's grandmother of lying. Why in the world would you do that?"

"Because she did. Howard told Aunt Myk the rock is part of the Dancing Stone. Anyone who knows the legend knows it can't be. So either his grandma lied to him or..." I gave Howard the sweetest smile I could manage. "Or Howard lied to Aunt Myk."

"My grandma wouldn't lie," he said, "and neither would I."

I wasn't about to let him get away with it. "Oh come on, Howard," I said. "You know my rock is way too colorful to be part of the Dancing Stone."

"Your rock?" he asked, scowling at me.

"Yup." I grinned. "Aunt Myk gave it to me."

Aunt Myk took a quick little breath.

"You did?" Howard asked, sounding like she'd thrown away his home-made Valentine.

I shifted in my seat. Maybe I'd gone too far. I hadn't meant to get her in trouble. "Anyway," I said, "it can't be the Dancing Stone because it isn't lava."

"The Dancing Stone is lava?" Myk asked, looking uncomfortably guilty. "But that's black, right?"

Howard set down his glass and cleared his throat. "Well, yes,

ordinarily. But then... any rock that's part of a legend wouldn't be ordinary, would it? Speaking of far from ordinary." He turned to me with a wide, fake grin. "Ruth, did you ever figure out where that lizard came from? It was so odd, I could have sworn it was changing colors."

It felt like he'd slapped me and I couldn't help but jerk my head. The cap shifted and my hand flew up, checking for uncovered lizard parts.

"Lizard?" Matt asked. "What lizard?"

"Oh Matt," Aunt Myk said, louder than necessary. "There was the strangest lizard in the tree today. And it was making the funniest noises. In fact, you know what it sounded like, Ruth? It sounded just like you when you laugh. Almost like it was imitating you."

My heart hammered warning messages against my ribs.

"Wow," Matt said. "A lizard with Ruth's voice. Scary. Hey Howard, maybe I don't need your alien collection after all. I mean, any lizard that laughs like Ruth has to be from another planet."

Howard's fork clattered to the floor. Bending to scoop it into his hand, he mumbled a string of apologies, then bumped his head on the table on the way back up.

"What else did it do?" Matt asked.

I wished he was close enough to kick.

"Well," Aunt Myk said, "it looked bright yellow when I first saw it but a second later, it was a reddish-orange."

All this lizard talk had to end before my heart exploded. I squinted at Howard. "You know what's even weirder? You're a painter, right? But painters climb ladders, like, all the time, don't they? How come you can do that when you can't climb our tree?"

Howard's face turned pasty white again. He was almost as good

at changing colors as Benson.

Myk laughed. "What are you talking about, Ruth? He did climb the tree."

"No, he tried to climb the tree and then he fell. He fell because he's scared of heights. And I just don't understand how a painter could be scared – ow!" A sharp pain ballooned up from my right shin.

"I fell," Howard said, watching me with unblinking eyes, "because my knee cramped up."

Wait a minute, wait just one darn minute. That pain in my leg was from Howard! I could still see the challenge in his eyes. He'd kicked me!

And now he'd turned to Myk with an I'm so innocent you should never ever doubt me kind of look. "I told you about my old sports injury, right?"

That's right, lie some more. How stupid could he be?

"Huh," I said. "But wouldn't that keep you from climbing ladders? I mean, if it's going to make you fall every time it happens? That's pretty risky. You didn't think the whole career thing through very carefully, did you?"

"Now, Ruth, really," Mom said in her dangerously low voice.

"I appreciate your concern," Howard said, more low and dangerous sounding than Mom. "But it doesn't happen very often. Anyway, enough about me." His hand squeezed Myk's. I was pretty sure she winced a little. "I think it's time we shared our news, don't you, Mykala?"

Aunt Myk smiled at Howard, took a deep breath, then looked around the table. "I'm so glad you've all had time to see how wonderful Howard is. I've never been so happy."

Hadn't she been listening to any of this? What about the rock, the job, the lies?

"Anyway," Aunt Myk continued, "When Howard goes home tomorrow, I'm... I'm going with him."

What? What? How could she, why would she –

"We're getting married."

WHAT??

Lies, Dolphins, Dirty Backpack

~ ~ ~

“Are you crazy?” Grandma Rose asked a few minutes later. I’d gone up to my room and was stuffing Benson back into his aquarium. I didn’t know where Grandma Rose was but I certainly heard her well enough.

But Mom,” Aunt Myk said. “I thought you liked Howard!”

“Of course I like Howard,” Grandma sputtered. “I liked Richie, too. But you didn’t know him well enough to marry him! And now you’re about to do it again. Didn’t you learn anything from your first marriage? What is wrong with you? Why don’t you think before you rush into things?”

That’s right, I thought. Let her have it, Grandma Rose.

Then I remembered Mom yelling the very same thing at me.

I was only eight at the time. I’d been climbing the huge old willow tree in our backyard when Mom rushed out the door. I’ll never forget the way her face twisted when she yelled up, “What is wrong with you? Why don’t you think before you rush into things?” But I hadn’t rushed; I’d been very careful, testing every step. I’d

wanted to reach the top but I hadn't wanted to fall. I wasn't stupid.

Thinking about that tree reminded me of the day Aunt Myk moved in with us. Dad had told me not to worry if she seemed sad. He said she was going through a rough time, that divorce was always hard but we could help her get through it. He said we should hug her a lot.

So when I caught her staring out the window that afternoon, I gave her a hug. "Are you sad?"

"No," she said, wrapping me in her arms. "I was just thinking I'd like to climb that willow tree."

"Really? Why?"

"Because I think it would be fun."

We went higher than I'd ever gone before. We climbed because it felt good.

Who was going to climb with me now?

It wasn't fair. I didn't want her to go. Hawaii was so far away, I'd probably never see her again. I'd already lost my best friend. I couldn't lose Aunt Myk, too.

Stupid Howard. It was all his fault. He didn't deserve Aunt Myk. He couldn't even climb a tree. He'd lied about why he fell and he'd lied about the rock, too. It wasn't anything special; it wasn't anything at all. Well. I certainly didn't want it anymore. I didn't need any reminders of Howard. I didn't need any reminders of Aunt Myk, either.

I'd show them both. I'd give it back. Then Aunt Myk would see how I felt about that stupid legend and the power of friendship. If friendship really was that powerful, if I really was Aunt Myk's aikane, her Hopoe, she wouldn't be leaving me now.

Where was that stupid rock?

“Ruth?” Aunt Myk sounded a million miles away when she poked her head through my doorway. Her bright and breezy voice must have already left for Hawaii. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

I didn’t even look at her. I was too busy kicking apart a pile of clothes, trying to find the rock.

“I know it seems like this is all happening pretty fast,” she said. “I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you sooner but it never seemed to be the right time.”

I got down on my knees and reached under my dresser. If I could find that rock, I’d give it to her now. Shove it in her hands. Show her that it didn’t even matter. I didn’t feel like dancing and I might never feel like it again.

“Howard asked me to marry him when I was still in Hawaii. I’ve been packed for weeks. I wanted to tell you but I didn’t know how. And then I was hoping that after you met him, you’d understand why I can’t live without him.”

“But he lied!” I shouted at her. “About the rock for sure and probably about his job, too! Why are you okay with that?”

“Oh Ruth.” Aunt Myk grabbed for my hand. “I’m sure you just misunderstood. Howard wouldn’t lie to me. Or to you.”

I squinted, trying to hold back the angry tears but it was useless. I felt them gathering in the corners of my eyes. Heavy. Hot. Less than a blink away.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m going to miss you. So much.”

The next thing I knew I was in her arms, burying my head in her fuzzy red sweater, never wanting to let go. “You’ll forgive me, right?” she asked. “You’ll understand some day, won’t you?”

I didn’t say anything at all.

She pulled away to mess with my hair. “You’ll get to see

Hawaii." I think she tried to smile but it kept slipping off her face. "We'll be getting married in the summer. We're going to have the ceremony on the beach. I want you to be my maid of honor."

"I'm not going," Grandma Rose announced as she strolled into my room. Grandma Rose wasn't much taller than me, but at that moment she seemed to tower over both of us. She jutted her chin so far up in the air all I could see was the inside of her nostrils. "You're making a huge mistake and I can't watch you do it. I'm staying home."

As Aunt Myk's face turned white, I wondered what it would feel like to have your own mother refuse to go to your wedding.

"I don't want to go, either," I said, before I even knew I was going to say anything at all. But it felt good. It felt right. As Aunt Myk's mouth sagged open, I felt my own chin raise.

"But you have to!" Aunt Myk's eyes darted from me to Grandma and then back to me again. "I need you there. Both of you. Ruth, you're going to be my maid of honor and Mom, you're going to give me away!"

Grandma shifted her feet closer to me and squeezed my forearm with cold, iron claws. "She doesn't have to go if she doesn't want to. She'll stay here with me."

No one in my family argued with Grandma. I would not be going to Hawaii. Even if a part of me wanted to go.

~ ~ ~

Sometime in the middle of the night, I finally remembered where I'd left the rock. After fishing it out of my backpack, I tiptoed into Aunt Myk's room. Her suitcases were all lined up against the wall, waiting for her to take them to Hawaii. I unzipped one corner of the

nearest suitcase and dropped the rock inside.

There. When she found it, maybe it would remind her that it wasn't any more real than her soon-to-be husband.

I crawled back into bed and stared up at my ceiling, knowing there wasn't any point in closing my eyes. I needed to explain to someone, anyone, what I'd done and why I'd done it. Of course Benson wouldn't know what I was talking about but it didn't really matter. I just needed a chance to sort it all out.

I turned on the light. The aquarium's lid was tilted and the baby blanket and lamp were back on the floor. Benson had snuck out. Again.

I knew I'd closed the latches good and tight before I went to sleep. How in the world was he doing that?

I leaned over the side of my bed and looked underneath it. He wasn't there, either.

He'd been there, though. He'd been busy, too. There was a smashed-up tube of suntan lotion, a couple pieces of dried-up, orange play dough and the cover of a Jacques Cousteau DVD. There was also a pile of broken seashells he'd gotten from the basket downstairs and the postcard Aunt Myk had sent from Hawaii. He'd piled strings of dental floss, three of my blue socks, and five large dice against the back wall. Over in the other corner several members of Matt's alien collection were lying on a couple of bologna slices. The rest of the aliens were lined up, biggest to smallest, around an empty bottle of dishwashing soap.

It was the empty DVD case that made me realize where he was.

I found him standing in front of the TV in our basement, swaying back and forth as a pelican dove into the ocean and came back up with a whopper of a fish in its mouth. The camera zoomed out and

the screen filled with rolling waves. Sunlight danced through the water, shifting the ocean from the palest emerald to the deepest royal blue. Four silver dolphin fins cut through the waves as seagulls soared through the clear sky.

Without saying a word, I sat next to Benson. I tucked my legs up close and pulled my nightgown over my knees. Benson greeted me with a soft hum then climbed onto my lap. We watched the dolphins and the seagulls and the pelicans as Jacques' voice droned quietly on. Benson wrapped his front claws around my thumb and leaned against my chest as the blues and greens from the ocean lit up his face. When he started humming again, I knew he thought it was beautiful, too.

"But it's so far away." A tear splashed down my chin. We continued to watch the ocean waves while Benson's tongue licked away my tears.

~ ~ ~

By the time Monday came, Hawaii Howard had left, which was good, but he took Aunt Myk with him, which was bad. Benson was still here, which was good and bad.

I still hadn't figured out how to keep him in the aquarium so I had to take him to school with me. Not just today, but every day until I figured out what else to do.

I'd picked the softest doll blanket I could find and laid it in the bottom of my backpack. I hadn't played with dolls since second grade, when Claire decided we were too old to play "House" or "Doctor" or even "Cruel, Insane Babysitter." But since I hadn't cleaned out my closet since second grade either, I still had a bunch of blankets to choose from. I figured, or really just hoped, Benson

would be fine in my backpack, as long as he didn't get squashed by my twenty-pound science book or mangled by my one-ton math book.

In fact, by mid-morning, I'd pretty much forgotten he was in there. In my mind, I was swimming off the shores of Hawaii when Mrs. Henson's pen tapped on the corner of my desk.

"Hi," I said. "Did you need something?" Several kids behind me laughed right out loud.

Mrs. Henson rolled her eyes around to the back of her head then brought them back up front again. She did that a lot. She'd freaked out just about everyone I know with that eye trick. "I'd like today's assignment."

"Oh, right." I reached down to get it but then I remembered. I had an irritable, ornery, color-changing lizard who could write numbers and letters in my backpack. What if he poked his head out when I opened it? What if he scrambled right out? I glanced up at Mrs. Henson. Should I open it?

"The rest of the class is waiting, Ruth," she said, answering my last question even though I hadn't asked it.

Tugging on my stubborn zipper, I hoped it wouldn't get stuck but hoped even more it wouldn't fly completely open. It didn't. For once, it actually opened just far enough for me to get my hand inside and fish around.

For one terrible moment, Benson grabbed onto my finger and I didn't think he was going to let go. Ever. Keeping my hand inside the backpack, I tried to flick him off. I scraped my thumb against my finger as Mrs. Henson hit her pen against my desk. As I gave my thumb one last hard whack, I had to cough good and loud to cover Benson's hiss. But I got him loose. Since he didn't seem to want

anything to do with me after that, I was able to pull out the assignment and hand it to Mrs. Henson.

Unfortunately, it was not only wrinkled and torn, it was also covered in what I figured was lizard pee. A picture of the inside of my backpack flashed through my mind. It wouldn't be much fun cleaning that out later.

Mrs. Henson held the assignment by one corner. Her nose, mouth and eyebrows all scrunched together in the middle of her face.

"You've really outdone yourself this time, Ruth." The kids behind me laughed again. "I can't possibly accept this. Bring me the garbage can. You'll have to do this assignment over. It will be considered late. I'll have to dock fifty percent off your grade."

That assignment couldn't handle fifty percent off its grade. Stupid lizard. He'd already made me fail the map assignment. I was going to flunk Social Studies because of him.

By the time Mrs. Henson returned from washing her hands, everyone had grown pretty restless. So it was a bit of a relief when she led us to the gym to practice for the end-of-the-year music recital.

Jared latched onto me as soon as I entered the gym. "How's the lizard?" he asked. "You've still got him, don't you?"

"Of course I still have him."

He stepped back and squinted at my khaki pants. "Which pocket is he in? I can't tell."

"I don't have him in my pocket, goof-ball. He'd never stay put in there. He's in my backpack."

"And where is that?"

"In Mrs. Henson's room." I didn't mean to sound impatient, but really, where else would it be?

“You left him there?” Jared didn’t sound patient at all. “By himself? What if he gets out?”

“He’s not going to get out.” But what if he did?

“Ruth? Jared?” said Mr. Kovacs, our music teacher. Mr. Kovacs tended to get a bit cranky around the end-of-the-year music recital. He stared at us like he’d caught us doing something truly nasty, like cheating or kissing. Of course there’s no way to cheat for a music recital and I’d never in a million years kiss Jared.

Mr. Kovacs drummed his fingers against his blue shirt. “Is there a problem?”

“No.” Jared almost tripped over the word in his hurry to get it out. But I was just as quick.

“Yes,” I said, ignoring Jared’s wide-eyed look. He was right. I never should have left Benson alone in Mrs. Henson’s room. Figuring I probably looked sick from all this worrying anyway, I clutched my stomach. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

Mr. Kovacs gestured toward the door and muttered something about the school nurse.

I sprinted for the door, slid around the corner and flew back to Mrs. Henson’s room.

Ketchup, Beans, Big Bird

~ ~ ~

It's good to hope and pray. Sometimes you actually get what you want. This was one of those times. Benson was still in the room and Mrs. Henson hadn't returned yet. But I should have prayed that Benson was there and behaving himself. Because he wasn't.

He stood on the back of Mrs. Henson's chair, squeezing ketchup from the plastic container he held between his front legs. He was using the ketchup to draw a dolphin's fin. He'd already drawn a sea of ketchup waves. The waves covered every window along the back wall of Mrs. Henson's room.

I snatched Benson off the chair, wrestled the ketchup bottle away from him, then stashed them both in my backpack. I recognized the ketchup dispenser. Somehow he'd gotten it from the cafeteria. I figured I'd deal with that later, after I removed the red ocean from my teacher's windows.

I grabbed handfuls of paper towels from the bathroom across the hall, then splashed one with water and left the other dry. Mopping with my left hand and drying with my right, I was making good

progress.

“Ruth! What are you doing here? And what is that all over the windows?”

Mrs. Henson. Of course. I’d finished cleaning the fifth window and only had one window left. But removing ketchup from school windows wasn’t like playing horseshoes. Being close to the goal didn’t count for anything.

“Ruth? What’s going on?” Mrs. Henson stood just inches from the glass, sniffing away. “Is that ketchup?” Her voice had gone from quiet and curious to loud and disgusted.

“Yes, ma’am.” I winced because I sounded bright and breezy, just like Aunt Myk. It was a good imitation but probably not a good time to do it. I hadn’t meant to, of course. Now I was stuck smiling at Mrs. Henson because imitating a bright and breezy voice practically requires a smile to go with it.

Mrs. Henson sighed, scratched the top of her forehead, then took a deep breath. “Can you explain why you’re in here cleaning ketchup off the windows when you should be in the gym practicing for the recital?”

“No, ma’am.” I stepped around her and continued scrubbing, hoping she’d see that at least I was trying to fix things.

“Does Mr. Kovacs know you’re in here?”

“He thinks I’m at the nurse’s office. I told him I was going to throw up.”

“And then you came in here and squirted ketchup all over the windows?”

How could I answer that? What if she called my parents and told them what I’d done? Then I realized my parents wouldn’t even be surprised. After all, I was still painting over what they’d thought I’d

done to our kitchen and living room. And they thought I'd done that because I'd cracked under the pressure of fifth-grade homework.

"I guess I've been feeling a little stressed lately," I said, thankful that I no longer sounded bright or breezy.

"About what?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Homework, I guess."

"I see." She sounded like she didn't see at all, or maybe saw too much. My parents believed me, but Mrs. Henson was in a position to know better. "You lied to Mr. Kovacs. And you've vandalized school property. Finish cleaning up and I'll let the principal know you're on your way. He'll decide what to do about this."

The principal, Mr. Jefferson, had to be at least 98 years old. Being ancient meant Mr. Jefferson didn't have much patience with kids like me. It also meant he wasn't surprised by anything. He'd seen it all before. Even, apparently, kids who were so stressed by fifth-grade homework the only way they could handle it was to draw ocean scenes on classroom windows with bottles of ketchup. He didn't even blink when I told him what I'd done. He asked if my parents knew how I was feeling and when I told him they did, he said he'd call them anyway. Then he said I would spend the next week helping the lunch ladies serve the other kids. I'd make up the work I missed after school and during the recess I was no longer entitled to have.

All in all, it wasn't the worst punishment I'd ever received from Mr. Jefferson. I didn't think I'd miss recess that much. When you're in fifth grade there isn't a whole lot to do during recess anyway but stand around and talk about the other kids. Besides, not having to take Benson outside seemed like more of a relief than a punishment.

Nope, not a bad punishment at all. Until I had to serve lunch to

Megan Harte.

~ ~ ~

Megan Harte moved to Iowa City in the middle of second grade. She came to school that first day with pink and purple ribbons woven through her French braids and a silver charm bracelet that tinkled up and down her arm whenever she waved it. And she waved it a lot. She also smiled a lot and giggled a lot and whispered a lot. By the end of the day everyone loved her. And she seemed to love everyone. Except me.

I don't know why she had it in for me. Maybe she just loved to tell short jokes. She knew a ton of them. Or maybe she didn't think girls should wear baseball caps. She told me that often enough. Or maybe she just wanted Claire to be her best friend. She certainly tried to make Claire like her best.

She almost succeeded, too. Within two days Claire was swept away by Megan's constant smile. Every time I asked Claire to come over, she already had plans with Megan. She sat next to Megan at lunch and they giggled together at recess. For almost two months. It was awful.

Then one day after school Colin Stingley pushed Jared. Jared's glasses flew off his head and skidded across the pavement. Wearing a big, evil grin, Colin marched right over to where the glasses landed and stomped them into tiny bits with his big ugly snow boot.

While Megan giggled behind her purple mitten, I ran over to Colin and smashed my blue glove right into his face.

I got blood on my glove, a two-day suspension from school, and grounded for three weeks. I also got Claire's friendship back. Claire said she couldn't be friends with someone who stood there and

laughed while her cousin got picked on.

After that, Megan gave up on Claire but hated me even more. She laughed at my clothes if she didn't like them (nearly every day) and announced whenever I got an answer wrong (nearly every class) and told anyone who would listen when I got in trouble (more often than I care to admit). And she'd been doing all of that almost every day since second grade.

So you can see why it would have made my day if Megan found a lizard in her baked beans.

"Oh, here you are, Mouse!" Megan said, smiling down at me. "I thought the class seemed quieter. No wonder Mrs. Henson has been in such a good mood."

I dipped my ladle into the deep tray of baked beans, wishing I could fling some in her face.

"Love your hair net. Did you finally get tired of wearing baseball caps?"

"Move it along now, Megan," said Mrs. Svenson, the lunch lady who stood next to me.

"But Mouse hasn't given me any beans yet, Mrs. Svenson."

Mrs. Svenson sighed then nudged my arm. I didn't care what Megan thought, but still, I felt my face heat up. Since I didn't want Megan to think she was getting to me, I ducked my head and stared into the baked beans. I dipped my ladle and pulled it back up again.

When Benson's foot poked out of the sea of beans, it was a deep brownish-orange, almost the color of pumpkin pie. Exactly the color of the baked beans. If I hadn't been staring so hard at the ladle, I wouldn't have even seen it.

A smile tugged at my face as I imagined what Megan would do if I plopped a live lizard onto her plate. Maybe she'd drop her tray and

run screaming through the cafeteria. It might make her so sick she'd never be able to eat lunch here again. Perhaps she'd have to move to another school.

"Serve her the beans, Ruth," Mrs. Svenson said.

Was keeping Benson secret worth missing this opportunity to get back at Megan for everything she'd ever done to me?

"Have you forgotten how to serve people?" Megan asked, making my decision easier. I held the ladle above Megan's tray. And then I grinned at her.

"Enjoy your lunch, Megan," I said, sweet as could be. My hands tingled and my heart thumped. I couldn't wait to see the look on her face or hear the scream I knew would come.

But then my other hand pulled at the front pocket of my khakis, yanking it wide open. The hand with the ladle aimed for that pocket. Before I even knew what my hands were up to, I felt the warm, clammy feeling of a ladle-full of baked beans soaking through my pants and right into my skin.

Mrs. Svenson dropped the hot dog she was about to serve right onto the floor. Megan exploded with laughter and so did everyone else standing in line. I just stood there, surrounded by that feeling you get when you dream you've gone to school in nothing but your underwear. Benson hiccupped from somewhere deep inside my pocket.

The next few moments went by in a hazy, slow-motion, hard-to-hear-anything kind of way. Somehow Mrs. Svenson removed me from the line and led me to the Office, where the nurse ordered me to change into the pair of sweat pants she pulled out of a closet. She handed me a bag for my khakis and I changed in the Office bathroom. The secretary told me the principal was at lunch and I'd

just have to wait for him on one of the chairs outside his door.

That should have been enough. I was in so much trouble already. But apparently Benson had been in those beans for quite awhile. Apparently he wasn't just swimming in them. As soon as I sat down to wait for the principal, the bag started to burp.

I scooped the bag off the floor and wrapped my hands around it, hoping I could muffle the noise. Benson must have eaten a lot of beans because he just wouldn't stop burping. A few burps later, the gas started bubbling out in other ways, too.

So there I sat, waiting for Mr. Jefferson, with my soaked khakis and my farting lizard in a sack between my legs. I coughed and gasped and sneezed to cover up the noises he made. I couldn't do anything about the nasty smell.

The secretary seemed relieved to see Mr. Jefferson when he finally returned from lunch. It also seemed like she couldn't wait to tell on me.

I got suspended for one day and grounded for a month. I spent the suspension day painting, missing Aunt Myk, counting the days until summer vacation, and wishing I'd never found a lizard in my backpack.

~ ~ ~

If you happen to have an ornery lizard who loves to draw all over everything, being suspended from school is not necessarily a bad thing. The worst part was it only lasted one day. Because I knew I couldn't bring Benson back to school, I spent the next day worrying and wondering what he was up to while I was gone.

When the dismissal bell finally rang, I sprang from my seat like a lit bottle rocket. I didn't wait for Jared. Grounded again, I couldn't

do anything after school but go home and I didn't want to walk with him. He moved about as slow as the hands on Mrs. Henson's clock. Besides, I was fairly sure I'd spend the rest of the afternoon cleaning up whatever Benson had decided to do with his day.

Then again, maybe everything would be okay. After all, I'd dug Dad's bowling ball out of the hall closet and put it on top of Benson's aquarium. I couldn't imagine a lizard lifting an 18-pound ball high enough to escape. But then I'd never imagined a lizard learning how to write the alphabet, either.

I didn't bother to think, worry, or even breathe on the way home. I just slammed one foot after the other against the sidewalk, thankful no one else would be home for awhile. Matthew had baseball practice and Aunt Myk had another life.

I plowed through the door then spun around, checking for damage. So far, so good. No letters drawn on the walls, no dolphins drawn on the windows. I headed upstairs.

"But Oscar, that's what being a good friend is all about." The voice, which sounded concerned and whiny all at the same time, filled the hallway and bombarded my ears. Where had I heard it before?

"Friends?" another voice asked, this one scratchy and old. "Who needs friends? When you live in a trash can, there's no room for friends."

That voice I remembered. Scratchy, old Oscar the Grouch. The other had to be concerned yet whiny Big Bird. Voices from *Sesame Street* were blaring from my room.

So much for the 18-pound bowling ball.

I forced myself to peer inside.

My bookshelf was empty and Dad's Jacques Cousteau DVDs

covered the floor. But the curtains were still on the windows and all the furniture was where it belonged. Benson lounged on my pillows, surrounded by every book I owned. I spotted the kitchen soap dispenser under *Maniac Magee* and an empty bottle of suntan lotion on top of *Captain Underpants*. Benson's eyes were fastened on *Charlotte's Web* laying open next to the pillows. He turned a page as I stood in the doorway and assessed damages.

It'd take less than five minutes to put all the books back. It was still spring, so no one would ask about the missing suntan lotion for another month or so. We'd probably gone through a gallon of kitchen soap by then but I planned on telling Mom there was a weird epidemic going around school and I'd felt the need to constantly wash my hands.

Benson grunted as I picked up some books. I didn't feel like talking to him. It looked like he'd stayed out of trouble, thanks to a load of books and *Sesame Street*, but what would happen when he grew tired of flipping pages and listening to 10-foot birds? If a bowling ball couldn't keep him in his aquarium, what could I do about him tomorrow?

Two words floated through my head as I tossed some soap-slimed books onto the shelf. *Give up*. I gathered more slippery books off the bed. Piled them on top of the others. Threw the empty suntan lotion bottle into my garbage can. Covered it up with some old homework papers. Put the leaking soap dispenser on my desk. Winced at how light it felt. Grabbed some more books which smelled like coconut and reminded me of swimming pools. And then my heart dropped down to my toes and clunked across the floor.

There, right under *Dear Dumb Diary*, lay the last picture I had of

Claire and me together. Aunt Myk had taken it for us, the day before Claire moved to San Diego. Our arms were wrapped around each other's shoulders and we were both smiling bravely at the camera, although it was obvious we didn't mean it. I'd hung that picture on my bookcase so I could see Claire's look of misery every morning when I got up. I loved that picture because she looked like she'd come back in a second if only she could, and it always made me feel better. But not anymore. Globs of lotion and detergent had eaten through the photo, messing up the colors and splintering our faces. It didn't look like me anymore and it certainly didn't look like Claire. In fact, we didn't even look human. The last picture I had of Claire was completely and utterly ruined.

Tears, Messages

~ ~ ~

The words, *give up*, banged against the sides of my skull. I should just let Jared have this rotten reptile and be done with it.

I thought I could handle taking care of a pet. I thought it might prove something to someone, although I didn't know who. Jared, maybe, though I didn't care what he thought. Mom, possibly, but she didn't even know I had a pet. Myself, probably, but this went way beyond anything I should ever expect of myself. This was, quite possibly, a life-time commitment to a varmint. Why did it even matter?

I sat on my bed and tried not to blink. The tears were right there, behind the backs of my eyes. But crying wouldn't do any good. All it did was waste time and make my nose run.

Still, I couldn't help it. I blinked. When the tears started they just wouldn't stop. It was the kind of crying that takes over your whole body. My shoulders shook. My eyes itched. I was making that shuddery-breath noise that sounds like hiccups gone bad. You just can't control crying like that. You just have to let it wear itself out

even if you know you look like a cranky baby and sound like a wailing idiot.

All that cranky wailing must have upset Benson. He clawed at my leg and howled like my aunt's cat. I pushed him away and continued to cry.

After awhile Benson came back, waving his front leg so furiously I couldn't ignore him anymore.

"What?" I snarled. "What do you want now?"

He shook a piece of notebook paper in front of my face before laying it carefully on my lap. My eyes were so clogged with tears the paper was nothing but a white rectangle with blurry edges. Trying to gain some control, I dragged my hand across my face and looked at the paper.

The words, *Why cry* were scrawled across it in blue ink.

And Benson held the pen between his toes.

~ ~ ~

I squinted hard at the lizard's face. A part of me listened to Bert and Ernie fight, while the rest of me wondered which seemed more unreal, *Sesame Street* or my own bedroom.

"Benson, did you write this?"

Benson closed his eyes, hummed for a few seconds, opened his eyes, then nodded.

I found it hard to stay on my bed. "Did you just answer me? You understood what I said?"

Benson nodded. His head turned the color of skim milk, watery white with just a tint of blue. Watching me with his humongous eyes, he drew a long pointy toe across the words he'd written.

"Oh, I'm okay!" I wasn't, or at least I hadn't been, but when a

lizard writes you a message, chances are nothing else is going to matter much.

Never expecting to have a conversation with a reptile, I didn't know where to begin. There was so much I wanted to ask him, so much I wanted to understand. What kind of lizard was he? Where did he come from? How did he end up in my backpack? Were there more lizards like him and if there were, how come no one knew about them? Why did he eat such strange stuff? Why did he do the things he did and how did he lift a bowling ball high enough to get out of his aquarium?

I glanced at the clock. It was 4:10. Matt would be home in 30 minutes, maybe less.

"Okay, Benson. We don't have much time. When Matthew gets home you'll have to go back in your aquarium, so let's try to do this fast. First of all, what kind of lizard are you?"

Benson jammed the pen into the paper and started weaving it back and forth. I watched the letters form under his toes: *What is akwaireum?*

I grabbed the green Mouse cap off my bedpost and cranked it down on my head. This was going to take awhile. I wasn't sure I had the patience.

"That's where you live. Where you're supposed to stay." I scrambled across the bed, set Dad's bowling ball and my lamp onto the floor, threw off the baby blanket and pulled the box off Benson's aquarium. That's when I noticed the perfect circle cut out of the aquarium's lid. It was directly below the hole I'd made in the box when Jared insisted Benson would need air.

"Did you cut that circle?" I wanted to kick myself for wasting time on such a stupid question. Who else would have done it? But

Benson was already scribbling away on the paper. “No,” I said, hoping he’d stop, too aware of the minutes ticking by. “I meant, is that how you got out? No,” I said again, wanting to scream but yanking on my cap instead. What was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I ask a decent question? “I mean, I know that’s how you got out this time. But I also know that hole wasn’t there this morning. I would have seen it. So how were you getting out before? And how did you cut through all that screen?”

Benson jammed the pen a few more times then slid the paper over to me.

Why stay akwaireum? Not like. Boring. Boring. Boring.

“Oh Benson, I know.” It didn’t seem fair at all anymore. “But if anyone saw you, you’d have to go. They wouldn’t let me keep you. They don’t think I’m responsible enough to have a pet.”

Benson lunged for the paper, moved the pen over its surface, then pushed it back to me as he watched my face with liquid eyes.

A pet? Me?

I bit my lip and tasted blood. This was not going well at all.

“No. I mean, I guess not.” I took a deep breath, hoping to find the right words this time. “But I’m taking care of you. Like people take care of pets. At least, I’m trying to. I want to. But it’s hard, Benson. I’m in so much trouble. You can’t draw on stuff anymore, okay?”

Benson stared at his message then cocked his head as he looked up. His whole body turned a deep shade of blue.

I pointed at the paper. I had to make him understand. “It’s okay to write on paper. But you can’t draw on anything else. And you can only write messages to me. It’s important. You need to stay in your aquarium when I’m not here.”

Eyes squinted, he stretched his neck and pushed the tip of his

cold, dry nose against my chin. Turning from blue to purple, he grabbed the paper again then backed away so I could read what he'd written.

Me? Like Wilbur?

I glanced at the clock. 4:18. I wracked my brain, trying to remember *Charlotte's Web*. I wasn't good under pressure. It'd been over a year since I read that book, but Benson must have read it today. Could I use that story to help Benson understand? 4:19 and still not sure, but it was all I had.

"Yes. You're just like Wilbur. Special. Some day we'll show everyone. But not yet. I need to figure out the best way. Until then, you can't let anyone know you're here. I still don't understand how you've been getting out, but you have to stop doing that when I'm not here to watch out for you. It's too dangerous."

Benson patted my arm, scampered across my bed, then dove through the hole in the aquarium's lid. After digging around in the sand, he lifted a pair of pointed pliers above his head and waved them around.

"So you used the pliers to cut through the lid." I nodded. He was smart. "But that hole wasn't there before. How did you get out before you cut the hole?"

Benson climbed on top of the water dish. Still holding the pliers above his head, he worked the tip through a slat in the lid then pressed the pliers against the plastic piece that held the lid closed. He pushed the plastic piece out of the way, dropped the pliers, slithered up the side of the cage, then bumped the lid off with his head. He jumped from the rim of the aquarium, landed on my bed, and bowed.

I was still clapping when the phone rang. I ran to my parents'

room and checked the Caller ID on their phone. Jared. It was 4:31. Matt would be here soon. He was probably on his way. But I really wanted to talk to Jared.

His voice screamed into my ear as I raced back to my room. "Mouse, I know! I know where Benson came from. I know what he is!"

I leaned against my wall and yelled back at him. "You won't believe what Benson can do!"

Jared laughed so loud I had to hold the phone away or risk a broken ear drum. "Oh, yes I will. I'll believe anything you tell me. I just watched a report on CNN about some Polynesian guy. His hut got crushed by a meteorite. They said a bunch of meteors have been falling into the Pacific Ocean. The guy said - "

"I can't stay on the phone. I'm grounded, remember? Matthew will be home any minute, so you've got to shut up and listen. It's about Benson - "

"So is this! They showed the meteorite that crushed his hut. It looks exactly like your rock."

"My rock?" I slid down the wall until my butt hit the floor. It was 4:33.

"Benson's tail was stuck to that rock when we first found him, remember? He was attached to it." Jared's voice was high enough to make dogs whine. "I think Benson came from the same place as that rock. And that rock is a meteor. Mouse? Benson's an alien!"

An alien. My eyes slid over to my bed. Benson was trying to build a tower by balancing Dad's DVD cases on their sides, like a house of cards.

"Mouse? Are you still there?" The tower toppled and Benson howled.

“Uh huh.”

“I think he traveled through space on that rock. He was probably in some dormant state, just like the shrimp eggs I entered in the science fair.”

“Door mat what?” Benson was grinning again. He’d managed to balance two of the DVD cases and place the third one, laying flat, on top of them. The first level of his house was complete.

“Not door mat.” Jared wasn’t screeching anymore. He was growling. “Dormant. Like hibernation. Kind of. If he was just a dormant egg, like the brine shrimp they found in the Egyptian tombs, he could travel through space without being affected by the freezing temperature or lack of oxygen. When the meteor landed on Earth, the egg must have found the right conditions to hatch and Benson was born.”

“Benson rode a rock through outer space?” I tried to make my voice sound all unbelieving, like Jared’s did sometimes, but it didn’t work. A part of me already believed what he said. Actually, it made perfect sense.

“You need to think now, Mouse. Because something you did to the rock made Benson hatch. Did you put it in the sun? Did you get it wet? Did you - ”

“It had some sand on it.” My voice sounded far away. Echo-y. I wondered if people sounded like that right before they fainted. “I washed it. But I dried it off right away.”

“That’s got to be it. I figured it was probably water. Remember how Benson ran straight for the lake, the day we were fishing?”

An alien was living in my room. I had taken an alien to school.

A door banged. My eyes flew to the clock. Matthew.

My heart, which had nearly stopped, started pounding in my

ears, faster than Jared's questions, louder than his voice.

"I've got to go. Matthew's here." I was just about to throw the phone on my bed when Jared's screeching voice stopped me cold.

"Wait! Listen! CNN's going to interview the guy with the smashed hut on Holly Wenger's show. You have to watch it. We might learn something more about Benson. CNN, 11:00 tonight. Promise you'll watch."

Matthew's big, noisy feet were clomping up the stairs. Benson's tongue swung back and forth as he worked on the third level of his DVD house. The kids from *Zoom* were dancing in my TV. Jared kept whining for me to promise. I hung up the phone and dropped it on my bed.

"Come on, Benson." I scooped him up and accidentally toppled his house. Benson howled. I dove across the bed and dropped him into the aquarium. I was fumbling with the lid when I felt Matthew's breath on the back of my neck.

"Hey, Rat Brat," he said. "What's with the lizard?"

I screamed.

Favors, CNN, Flaky Skin

~ ~ ~

Matthew dived onto my bed then climbed on top of my back to get closer to the aquarium. I sprang up and he toppled over. I stuck my fist right in his face.

“Get out of my room!” I’d used my fists to get what I wanted throughout most of my brother’s life, so he should have known enough to leave. But he didn’t. He just lunged to the other end of the bed.

“That’s one awesome looking lizard.” He rested his stupid chin on his stupid hand and peered into the aquarium. “What’s he doing in your room?”

I was all set to drag Matt across the hallway into his own room, when I realized it might be smarter to offer some sort of explanation first. I squinted at Benson, currently a mossy green, then cleared my throat to get the alien’s attention. “Yes, he is awesome but he never, ever changes colors. Because that would be just way too strange.”

Matt looked at me like I’d suddenly turned purple myself. “Well, duh. I wasn’t expecting him to change colors, doofus.” He turned

back to the aquarium and tapped on the glass. Benson blinked his humongous eyes. "What's he doing here? He's not the same lizard Aunt Myk saw in our tree, is he?"

I snorted like that was the most ridiculous question I'd ever heard. "Of course not." This would have been an excellent time to provide an explanation. Except I didn't quite have one yet.

"Did you steal him?"

"No. I'm watching him for Jared." I tried not to look surprised but I hadn't known what I was going to say until I heard myself. Taking care of Benson had turned me into quite the liar. I waited for Matt's next question, hoping I'd have another answer ready.

"Why are you watching Jared's lizard?"

"Because." I walked over to turn off the Zoom kids, stalling for time. As the TV screen went blank, the words just came out of my mouth. "Jared's sick. He's got the flu and he didn't want the lizard to catch it. He asked me to keep it until he's better." Was that really the best I could do? I did lie more often now but I had a long way to go before I'd be any good at it.

"Wow." Matt had apparently accepted my dumb story. He tapped the glass again. "So we get to keep him for awhile, huh? Jared will be sick for at least a week, don't ya think? This is gonna be so great." He stuck his fingers through the hole Benson had made in the lid. "Let's take him out. Do you think he'd try to run away? Let's take him out and see what he does."

"No!" I grabbed Matt's wrist and yanked it out of the hole. "We can't take him out."

"Why not? He won't go anywhere. We can shut your door. Hey, I know. Let's feed him something. What's he eat? Did Jared give you any food or should I grab a cricket from the - "

“I said no!” Geez, Matt had known about Benson for less than one minute and he was already driving me crazy. I’d have to cool his excitement or he’d never be able to keep quiet about this. “We can’t take him out. Ever. We can’t play with him or touch him and honestly, it’d be better for you if you didn’t even look at him.” Matt opened his cavern-sized mouth. I knew he was all set to argue so I raised my hand and shook my head. “No, Matt, I mean it. That lizard is bad news. It’s mean and nasty and it bites. Hard. Every chance it gets. You should stay away from it.”

“Ah, it doesn’t look so tough. It’s just a dinkster. How mean could it be?” Matt dipped his fingers through the hole again and wiggled them around. “You’re just saying that because you don’t want me to –”

Benson let go with the longest, eeriest, creepiest howl I’d ever heard in my entire life. He sounded just like a large, angry cat – if it was a witch’s cat possessed by 10 furious demons who were squeezing it in half. Then he jumped straight into the air. He spun around to face Matt’s dangling fingers before landing back in the sand. He narrowed his eyes, stretched his mouth wide open, twitched his tail like a rattle snake and lunged for my brother’s hand.

Matt, who’d barely gotten his hand out in time, scooted across my bed. His eyes were glued to Benson. All four of Benson’s feet were suctioned to the side of the aquarium. He bobbed his neck up and down, narrowed his eyes to slits and hissed.

Matt sprang off my bed. His fingers twitched as he backed out of my room. “Geez, Rat, no wonder Jared chose you to watch it. You two are perfect for each other. Whatever. Have fun, brats.”

A huge grin split across my face as I watched him go. I knelt in

front of the aquarium and pressed my hand against its side. "That was awesome!" I whispered. Benson placed his front foot against my hand, like we were high-fiving through the glass. "You can be down-right awful, can't you? You even creeped me out."

Seconds later, Matt's voice startled me again. "Does Mom know?" He leaned in my doorway, smiling but not meaning it.

"What?" Geez, why couldn't he just stay gone?

"Does Mom know you have Jared's lizard?"

What to do, what to do. If I lied and said she did, sooner or later (probably sooner) he'd say something to her. If I told him she didn't know, I could ask him to keep it a secret. But why would he? He'd always hated me and now he didn't care for the lizard, either. My plan to keep them apart had backfired.

Matt's smile grew right along with my silence. "She doesn't know, does she?"

"Oh, all right. No, she doesn't know. And you can't tell her, either. You know she'd never let me keep it."

"Sounds like you need me to do you a favor."

"Whatever."

"No, you really do. You really need me to keep quiet about this."

"What do you want?"

He pretended to think about it but I could tell he'd decided before he came back to my room. "I want you to do my chores. All of them, for as long as you keep the lizard. Or I'll tell."

I was stuck. What else could I do? I sighed, nodded, and kissed what was left of my free time goodbye. Never let anyone tell you it's easy to hide an alien in your bedroom. It isn't.

~ ~ ~

On school nights, 10:00 meant lights out. But since everyone else was in bed by 10:30 (except Aunt Myk and she no longer counted) I figured I could turn on Holly Wenger's show real low and no one would hear it. I gathered a bag of pretzels and one slightly sleepy alien onto my bed and settled down to watch CNN, hoping for some answers. It was hard enough taking care of Benson when I thought he was a lizard. I had no idea how to take care of an alien. If I was lucky, maybe Holly would have some information that would help me.

After giving half a smile to the camera, Holly Wenger got right down to business. "Good evening. A Polynesian man who recently lost his home plans to sue a U.S. government agency for damages. Why? He says this agency knew his home was about to be demolished and should have warned him. Here's Colby Barren's report."

A huge boulder surrounded by splintered boards filled the screen. My rock, the one Aunt Myk had given me, the one Hawaii Howard said was part of the Dancing Stone, looked exactly like that boulder.

The camera swung over to focus on the newscaster as he stood on the beach, microphone in hand. "Kannon Hongi lived in this hut off the Polynesian coastline for the past five years. But on March 23, a rash of meteors rained down on the Pacific Ocean. One of those meteorites landed right on top of Hongi's home, demolishing it and everything inside."

A skinny black man filled the screen. He wiped a long finger across his forehead then looked directly into the camera. "I lost everything. My home, my clothes. I have no money to rebuild. FEETLE knew these meteors were coming. They should have

warned me. They should have warned all of us.”

The camera returned to the newscaster. “And who, or what, is FEETLE? According to Hongi’s lawyer, FEETLE is an acronym for the Federal Exploration of Extra-Terrestrial Life Elements, and is a highly classified U.S. government agency that specializes in tracking mysterious or suspicious activity in outer space.”

A man in a wrinkled, bright green suit rested his hands across the top of a metal desk. The caption, “David Wolffe, Kannon Hongi’s Lawyer” appeared at the bottom of the screen.

“Not only did FEETLE know the meteors were coming,” the lawyer said, staring into the camera, “they knew the damage the meteors would cause. They also knew where they would hit.” He leaned forward in his chair, unclasped his hands and pounded the desk with his fist. “My client should have been warned. The fact that your government stood back and did nothing is an outrage.”

Colby Barren leaned across the lawyer’s desk. “How do you know FEETLE knew about the meteors?”

“I’ve been monitoring FEETLE’s activities for years. It’s not the first time this agency has withheld potentially dangerous information from the public. My client deserves compensation.”

Colby Barren was back on the beach, microphone in hand. “We tried to contact FEETLE for comment but none of our White House correspondents or Washington sources were aware of the agency. The White House press secretary told me the agency does not exist. He said no agency in the current administration has ever monitored activities in outer space, suspicious or otherwise.” Colby Barren smiled. “You be the judge. Back to you, Holly.”

I grabbed a pretzel stick. “Well, that was a huge waste of time. They never even mentioned aliens. Guess we’ll have to figure out

what's best for you on our own, huh, Benson?" I stuffed the pretzel into my mouth and reached for him. He wasn't on my lap.

~ ~ ~

As soon as I turned off the TV, I heard the music coming from underneath my bed. I lifted the tangerine bed skirt out of the way and watched Benson glide by with one of Matthew's aliens in his arms. One, two, three. One, two, three. Aunt Myk's ex-husband had shown me the dance steps when I was seven. Benson looked more graceful than Uncle Richie ever had. Graceful, yet sad. Maybe it was the slow rhythm of the waltz. Or maybe it was the way Benson dragged the lifeless thing in his arms as it bumped across the floor.

Benson shot me a small, toothless smile then placed the plastic alien on a piece of old, green bologna. He reached for a pen and scribbled across a pear-shaped scratch pad I hadn't seen in months. Tired of hanging my head over the side of the bed, I flopped down on the floor. From here I could tell the bologna had not only changed colors, it had become as sour as used gym socks. Breathing through my mouth so I wouldn't have to smell it, I wiggled under the bed to read Benson's note.

Friend? he'd printed in chunky letters. He pointed to Matthew's alien with another sad little smile.

I examined Matt's alien. Same bulging, overly round eyes. Same flattened head. Same long, slender neck. Even the toes were the same, thin as spaghetti in the beginning but squashed like fresh gum at the end. Except Benson's eyes never stayed still and his head always darted about. His toes clasped onto things or wiggled around all the time. My busy alien. Matt's alien, on the other hand, would rest on the rotting bologna slice until someone or something

moved it along. Real versus fake. Warm versus cold. Life versus plastic.

“Where is your family?” I whispered.

Benson watched me with shiny eyes then pressed the pen into the paper. *Like Wilbur*, he wrote. *No family*.

“Come on, Benson. Everyone has a family. Even Wilbur.” Didn’t he? I wracked my brain, trying to remember *Charlotte’s Web*. Pigs had oodles of babies, didn’t they? Of course. Wilbur had been the runt of the litter. And everyone had to have parents.

But Wilbur had been taken from his family.

“Did they send you here by yourself?” The thought of poor little Benson traveling through space all alone upset me so much I couldn’t stay still. Forgetting where I was, I bumped my head on the bottom of my bed. Benson turned a pale shade of pink as I rubbed the sore spot.

“Where are you from?” Benson looked confused. I tried again. “Where did you live before you came here?”

He blinked then wrote some more. *Dark place. Books. Then light. Then you*. He grinned.

“You don’t remember anything before that?” He slid his head back and forth. I sighed. Maybe Jared was right. Maybe Benson was nothing but a brown spot, a dormant egg, before I washed the sand off Aunt Myk’s rock.

I pictured all the grains of sand I washed down the drain that night. Oh. Crud. What if those grains of sand were really eggs? What if I’d washed thousands of Benson’s brothers and sisters into the sewer?

I held the back of my hand against the wooden floor and Benson slithered his way across my fingers. I lifted him close to my face,

rubbing his chin as I fought back the lump in my throat. I prayed I hadn't destroyed his family. But whether I had or not, Benson was alone. He didn't have anyone but me. And all I could do was pet him and rock him and pet him some more.

After awhile I realized Benson's skin felt scallier than it had the day before. Even his toes, which had been smooth and shiny, were now flaky and dull. A sick feeling settled in my stomach as I examined the rest of his body. Skin that I knew hadn't been there before dangled down from the top part of all four of his legs. As I carefully stretched out his front leg, the skin fanned apart, reminding me of duck feet. Where had it come from and what did it mean?

I didn't want to ask because I didn't know how much more I could stand, but the question floated out with a mind of its own.

"Benson, are you feeling okay?"

Benson rubbed his head against my fingers and hummed. I hoped what was happening to his skin was natural, like a snake getting ready to shed. Maybe lizards shed too. I thought I'd ask Jared but then I remembered. Benson wasn't a lizard.

Not knowing what else to do, I carried Benson into the bathroom, set him on the counter, and squirted some Jergen's hand lotion into my palm. I figured if his skin was dry, Jergen's might help. He hummed as I worked the lotion into his scales but when I finished, he didn't look any better.

"If you're from another planet," I said, surprised to hear my voice again in the oh-so-quiet room, "how come you can understand me? How come you can write English?" I didn't expect him to answer. I didn't expect him to know. I just wanted to wrap my mind around something other than his possible sickness, other than his missing

family. Besides, the fact that he could communicate seemed to blow a hole in Jared's alien idea. Sure, having a conversation with a lizard was bizarre, but having a conversation with an alien lizard seemed even more bizarre to me. What were the chances an alien would know English?

Benson jumped off the counter and I followed him back to my room. The extra skin dangled beneath him as he crawled toward the paper he'd left on my floor. I winced. The skin stretched like a flap of leather as he handed me his note. *By looking*. He pointed at my bookshelf then pointed at my TV.

"You taught yourself?"

Benson grinned. I tried to smile back but felt a tear slide down my face instead. He was smart; smart enough to learn my language. But I didn't think he was smart enough to take care of himself. What if I couldn't figure out what was wrong with him? What if... but I couldn't finish that question, not even in my head.

Summer, Water, Silver

~ ~ ~

I always looked forward to the last day of school, but this year was different. Without Claire, without Aunt Myk, there was nothing to do but worry about Benson. Already nervous about his floppy skin, I'd also been afraid he wouldn't stay hidden. Because my parents' summer break started a week before mine, Benson had been home all day with them and without me. I'd spent six hours every day wondering if he'd stay in his aquarium. Now I realized the start of summer wouldn't change anything. I'd still have to worry about Benson and keep an eye on him – probably for the rest of my life.

Because life was unfair, I growled at Matthew when he plowed into me. He had a load of water balloons and I knew he was headed to the park to celebrate the end of school. It was a tradition and I should have been right behind him. But I had an alien to think about.

So after sharing my less-than-perfect report card with my parents, I plodded up to my room to free Benson. Only he wasn't there.

I searched. Under my bed, inside my closet, around my dresser. I armed myself with pretzels and searched the rest of the house – everywhere and anywhere Benson had been or might care to go. As I swept the flashlight's beam under the couch, I heard Dad clear his throat.

“Lose something?” He sounded like he already knew I had and he'd already found it. Taking a deep breath and hoping my face wouldn't give me away, I forced myself to look up with a guilt-free smile.

“Now that summer's here, I thought I'd try to find my watch again. In case I need to get home in time for supper or something.”

Dad nodded as he rubbed his chin. A small smile flickered across his mouth. He knew I was lying. Had he seen Benson? Had he noticed Benson was no ordinary lizard? Possible explanations whizzed through my head and I cast them off as quickly as they came. The only thing to do was stay as calm as possible. Wait to see how much Dad knew.

He dipped one hand into his pocket, pulled it out then cupped his other hand over the first. His eyes didn't even blink while I struggled to look normal, struggled to stay still. Benson couldn't fit inside Dad's cupped hands. Could he?

“Is this what you're looking for?” Dad parted his hands to reveal what he had.

My knees turned to jell-o and I let out a huge sigh. Not my alien. Matthew's.

“You know,” Dad said, “Matt's been looking for this for weeks. Have you been hiding it from him, Ruth? Do you know where the others are?”

I shook my head. I knew where the others were but I didn't know

where my voice had gone.

“I found it outside this morning.” Dad turned the alien over and over in his hand.

As soon as my voice came back, I said, “I didn’t take it, Dad. Honest.”

Dad gave me half a smile. “I wouldn’t think so. Matt’s been pretty upset about it. Taking it would have been a really nasty thing to do. Well. It’s good that it’s been found, hmm?” I nodded until he turned and left. Then I rushed for the phone.

“Jared,” I moaned into the receiver, “we’ve got a problem.”

~ ~ ~

Ten minutes later, Jared peered under another bush as I hopped from the lowest branch of our willow tree.

“This is useless,” I said and planted my butt on the ground. “Dad found Matt’s alien this morning. Benson’s been out wandering around for hours. He could be anywhere by now.”

Jared plopped down next to me. “We’ve got to think. Where would he go?”

“He’s been cooped up in that aquarium for days. He’d want to go anywhere.” I yanked on my Mouse cap, wishing I could scream. “Maybe he’ll come back when he’s ready. Cats and dogs find their way home.”

Jared stared at me like antennae had sprouted on my forehead. “It’s okay if people see cats and dogs wandering around. It’s not okay if someone spots Benson. They’ll keep him, you know. They won’t return him, even if he writes your name and address on a piece of paper!” He knocked his glasses to the ground and rubbed his eyes until his skin turned pink. “They’ll figure out what he is.

They'll turn him over to the authorities!"

I picked a piece of grass and started chewing. I didn't want to tell him we might have more to worry about, but the truth was too big to keep to myself.

"I think there might be something wrong with him."

I could tell by Jared's open mouth and half-crazed eyes he wasn't quite ready to respond to that. I kept talking. "He looks different. He's scallier and more wrinkled up. At first I thought he was going to shed his skin. I was going to ask you about that. But..." I'd been afraid he'd tell me Benson was probably sick. I didn't know how to fix a sick alien and I didn't think I could take him to a vet. "But it's not just his skin anymore. His eyes look different, too. They're all stretched out and tight. And his tongue is sort of ...flatter."

"Geez, Mouse." Jared yanked a fist full of grass out of the ground. "How long were you going to wait before you told me?" He began ripping the grass to shreds. "Lizards shed but that doesn't mean Benson's going to. It sounds like he might be dehydrated. You've been letting him soak in the bath tub, right?"

"Of course not!" Jared could be so dense sometimes. "I told you. Benson can't swim. He'd drown."

"You mean you haven't been giving him any water at all?"

"Don't be stupid. I let him drink whenever he wants, as much as he wants." My eyes slid away from his face. "He likes to add salt to it though." I suddenly remembered a movie I'd seen about some people stuck in a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean. For them, drinking from the salty ocean had been worse than not drinking anything at all. Maybe letting Benson drink salty water hadn't been such a great idea. But how was I supposed to remember every little thing? How was I supposed to know what was good for an alien and

what wasn't?

"Water brought him to life, remember? He was dormant until you washed the rock. His planet's water must be just like ours. If he was home, he'd probably live right by the water." Jared fumbled with his glasses then hooked them around his ears. His eyes looked bigger now as he gazed at me through the lenses. "Everything he's been eating – the suntan lotion, the dish detergent, Matt's play dough, your shampoo – all those things either have lots of salt or some other element from the ocean. Play dough is loaded with salt and so is detergent. Suntan lotion has turtle oil in it. And I'd bet there's lobster and crab parts in your shampoo because that's how they make a lot of that stuff."

I just stared at him. How did he know all that? What in the world did he read at night?

"I'm sure," he continued, "Benson needs to get wet every once in awhile. We've got to get him some water to splash around in. He might die without it."

"We've got to find him first. I just don't know where to look. He's never been anywhere except our school."

Except that wasn't quite true. I could tell by Jared's wide, shimmering eyes he remembered, too.

"Coralville Lake!" we shouted at the same time.

~ ~ ~

Jared pedaled faster than I'd ever seen him pedal before. I watched the road spin out below my bike's tires as I fought back the image of Benson's drowning body. I knew exactly what he'd look like. I'd seen him nearly drown in my bath tub. A bath tub was nothing compared to a lake. We'd be lucky to even find him. Lucky?

I nearly wiped out on a loose rock as I crossed the entrance to Coralville Lake.

There were only a few people on the beach – a group that looked like an ordinary family having an ordinary snack and a couple of old people sitting on a blanket. Of course, everyone I knew was probably at the park and everyone else was probably waiting for a warmer day.

Jared dropped his bike next to mine. “See anything? Anything at all?”

I couldn’t answer because the lump was back in my throat, big and awful. It tasted like dirt. Jared held his hand up to his forehead to shield his eyes. Just like Benson had done the day I’d found him. I should have known right then Benson was different. But I didn’t notice. I never noticed anything. So here we were. And it was useless.

“There!” Jared screamed, knocking my cap off as his arm whirled around to point at the lake. “Do you see it?”

I followed his finger and squinted into the afternoon sun. I wanted so much to see Benson, to jump up and down with relief, to call him back. But I didn’t see a thing.

Jared grabbed my arm and wrenched me toward the water’s edge. “Do you see it now?” His voice was all high and whiny. I squinted harder. Maybe, just maybe. Yes. There. A brilliantly shimmering silver something out in the lake. It was too small to actually see, but whatever it was caused the sun to reflect from it like highly polished chrome.

“It’s him! We found him!” Jared tugged on my arm as he jumped up and down and I tried to keep from sinking to the sand. Jared let go and squinted at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Geez, Jared.” I spit his name out past the dirty lump in my throat. “How many times do I have to tell you? He can’t swim!”

Strangers, Hope

~ ~ ~

“But he is swimming. Look!” Jared jammed his glasses over my eyes. The lenses were smeared with something greasy and dotted with sand. But once my eyes focused beyond all that, I realized Jared was right. The silvery shimmer was moving in the opposite direction of the lake’s rippling water. Whatever it was had to be swimming against the current.

I shoved Jared’s glasses into his hands then splashed my way into the lake. I didn’t even feel the cold until the water reached my armpits and stole all the air out of my lungs. But it didn’t matter. I sucked in more air then lifted my feet. I pulled the water behind me and kicked the water away, full of strength, full of purpose. When Benson’s silver body was just a foot away, I leaned back and fanned out my arms. My legs were numb from the cold. But I didn’t care. I had to take just one moment to watch him swim.

The tip of Benson’s nose stuck out of the water as he lay stretched out on his back. His toes, those crazy, long spaghetti-like toes with the squished up ends, slapped against the ripples with a lazy,

dreamy ease. His front legs sliced through the air, one after the other, then cut through the lake and propelled him onward. Poetry in motion, my alien lizard, looking more at home than I'd ever seen him.

But the best part, the most beautiful part of all, was the extra skin that had worried me so much. I could see that loose flap under his right front leg as he reached for the sky. It fanned out like a kite then scooped the water away as Benson lowered his leg past the side of his body. It was there for a reason, not because he was sick. It allowed Benson to swim.

I loved that alien.

"Glad to see you," I said as I swam to his side. Benson turned his head and grinned. Words built up inside me, rushing to get out. I wanted to tell him how much he'd scared me; to ask him why he never considered how worried I'd be; why he didn't think before he just ran off and did whatever he wanted. But the water lapped the words away. I reached out to scratch his chin, glad I hadn't said them. I would have sounded like my mom.

"It's late," I said, instead. "And it's cold. We have to go now but we'll come again. I promise."

Lizard feet tickled my head as Benson snuggled down on my wet hair. I felt ten feet tall as I carried my alien safely to shore.

A grin split across my face as I broke from the water and displayed Benson in my outstretched hand. Benson turned lime green, imitated my giggle and waved his tongue from side to side. It was truly a triumphant moment for both of us as I marched toward Jared.

"Doesn't he look great?" I called.

I expected to be greeted with cheers but Jared only scowled from

behind his big, honkin' glasses. Geez, what was wrong with him? What did it take to make that boy happy? We'd found Benson, I'd brought him back safely, he looked healthier than he ever had, and oh. Crud.

Jared wasn't alone. A man, woman and two little girls stood next to him. The woman's mouth hung open and the little girls danced up and down. The man's hand was wrapped around one of the girl's shoulders. It looked like he was holding her back. If only I'd noticed them a little sooner.

"What is that!" The girl broke free from the man's hand and rushed toward Benson. Benson scooted up my arm then shrieked at the girl. His body turned tomato red. The girl screamed and ran to hide behind the woman's legs. No one looked amused.

"He won't hurt you," I said. "He's just scared."

I don't think anyone heard me. Jared had launched himself into some huge, overblown coughing frenzy. He stopped to glare at me then turned to face the others.

"We'd better get back to the hotel, Emily," Jared said, not even looking at me. "I'm sure Mom and Dad are wondering where we are."

The man stepped closer to the woman as he reached down to gather the other girl into their circle. His eyes never left my arm. He squinted hard at Benson. Benson started to hum.

"What kind of lizard is that?" he asked. Benson turned from red to pale milky blue.

"It's a rare breed from Afghanistan." Not only did Jared answer before I had a chance, but he sounded like James Bond, Agent 007, if Bond had been turned into a vampire from Transylvania. "Come on, Emily." Jared stepped between me and the family, shielding their

view with his outstretched arms. "Our plane will be leaving in an hour. We have to go back to the hotel so we can get home to British Columbia."

"British Columbia?!" we all asked at once.

"Yes," Jared said. He reached out to yank my wrist and I toppled toward him. Jared looked at the man. "We're only here on a short vacation with our family. I'm sure you'll never see us again."

Still grasping my wrist in his iron-like grip, Jared pulled me toward our bikes. I stumbled along beside him, trying to keep up. Until then I didn't know Jared could walk that fast. After he'd dragged me several yards, I couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"What were you doing back there? You sounded like Count Dracula."

"I was trying to save Benson!" He grabbed his bike. "If those people knew we're from around here, they'd try to find out who we are!"

"You're kidding, right? You sound like they'd try to hunt us down." I stuck Benson inside my cap, placed it on my head, then climbed onto my bike. My drenched clothes felt like ice cubes against my skin and I wasn't looking forward to the cold ride home.

Jared's eyes bulged, bigger than I'd ever seen them. They looked like they could explode right off his face. "What if they start asking questions? What if they start telling everyone what they saw? What if somehow it gets back to FEETLE?"

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"You said you watched Holly Wenger's show." Jared glared at me. "Did you sleep through it? I'm talking about FEETLE – the Federal Exploration of Extra-Terrestrial Life Elements that guy Hongi warned us about."

I laughed so hard I actually felt bad when I realized Jared wasn't laughing, too. Benson clung to my hair as I took a couple deep breaths and tried to calm down. It wasn't easy to reason with Jared because the laughter was still there, a bubble tickling the back of my throat and threatening to erupt. Somehow I managed to keep a straight face.

"You know they did that story just for fun, right? Holly Wenger and Colby Barren weren't taking that guy even half-way serious."

Benson twisted in circles under my cap. I could feel the snarls forming in my wet hair.

"That's because Holly Wenger and Colby Barren don't know there's an alien on our planet. Think about it. Doesn't it make sense that our government would know about something this huge? Doesn't it make sense that they'd deny the agency exists? They wouldn't want people to know about FEETLE or the possibility of aliens. Everyone would panic and riot and –"

"Geez, Jared, you sound like my grandma. This isn't a lost episode of Alien Avenger. Stuff like that doesn't happen in real life."

Benson hopped up and down on my head and my cap dropped to the ground.

"Aliens happen in real life. You can't deny that."

I bent over to pick up my cap. Benson scrambled to stay on my head, digging his nails into my scalp. I yanked the cap down, low and tight.

"There's no such thing as a secret government agency and even if there was, there's no chance those people who saw him have anything to do with it. Everything's fine."

Jared stomped his foot. Puffs of dust rose from the graveled parking lot. "Fine? You call this fine? This is not fine. This is a mess!

Besides showing off an alien to complete strangers, you nearly killed him – twice! You haven't been giving him what he needs to survive and you let him get away. You lost him!" His fists tightened around his handlebars until his knuckles turned white. "You're in way over your head. You're not responsible enough to handle this. You need to let me have him."

He let go of his handlebars and reached out his hand, like he expected me to give him Benson, right then and there. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to spit in Jared's palm.

"Forget it," I said. "Why don't you just go home?" I put one foot on my bike pedal and tried to push off with the other. But Jared held onto my seat with an iron grip.

"Be reasonable, Mouse. Please?" Jared's eyes shone, big and bright behind his glasses. It looked like he was seconds away from crying. "Unless Benson's family is hiding some place, he's the only alien on the whole planet. Don't you realize how huge this is? He needs someone to watch over him. Someone who's constantly looking out for him. Someone who understands the dangers. Someone who thinks things through."

"And I'm not good enough, is that it?" I squinted at him, fighting back the tears. "Let me go. Now!" I pushed with every muscle I had and ripped Jared's fingers right off my seat. Practically blinded by anger and tears, I almost ran into a mailbox on the side of the road. I silently screamed at Jared the rest of the way home.

~ ~ ~

Not responsible enough! Who did Jared think he was, anyway? The world's answer to alien safety? Once I got home, I stomped right past Mom. I was too mad to answer her questions about my wet

clothes, too upset to care when she demanded I change into something dry. Instead, I threw my wet self down on my soon-to-be-wet bed and tried to rub away the angry tears.

Stupid Jared. Why'd he have to go and say those things? In over my head. Someone who understands the dangers. Someone who thinks things through. Geez, he sounded just like Mom.

I used to think there might be something wrong with me because sometimes I lost things or forgot things or was unaware of things everyone else in my family knew about. But then Aunt Myk moved in. And it didn't bother me anymore because she forgot stuff, too. I realized some things didn't matter as much as everyone else seemed to think. Aunt Myk didn't worry about stuff like Mom and Dad did. She didn't get hung up on little everyday problems like losing watches or forgetting lunches or putting the milk away. She looked for adventure and fun, not lost library books or misplaced socks.

"I admired her for that." I bent over to drop a kiss on the top of Benson's head. He was curled up under my armpit. As I reached over to scratch his chin, he stretched out his neck, leaned into my fingers and hummed.

Admiring Aunt Myk had kept me from feeling too clobbered whenever Mom complained about something I'd done or had forgotten to do.

I fished out some pretzel sticks from under my pillow. I handed one to Benson and stuffed five into my mouth. He sucked on his while I chewed on mine. Even though I tried not to do anything except chew, I just couldn't stop the thoughts and doubts from piling up.

Jared said I didn't think things through. Mom said the same thing about Aunt Myk. She said that's why Aunt Myk and Uncle Richie

got divorced.

Mom wasn't the only one who believed Aunt Myk rushed into things. Grandma Rose had said it too, right after Aunt Myk announced she was moving to Hawaii. And I'd agreed with Grandma. Aunt Myk had abandoned us all for Hawaii Howard, a fake, a man she barely knew. There was nothing to admire about that.

I didn't notice when Benson hopped off my bed but I did hear him rummaging around underneath it. Moments later, he waved a piece of paper in the air as he weaved back and forth in front of me. The word friend jumped off the page. He'd included a long line of question marks, each one bigger than the last. He pointed under the bed.

"Oh, you're looking for the plastic alien, aren't you? You left it outside. Dad has it now."

Benson scribbled *Back?* then nodded as I read his message.

"No. I can't get it back. It's Matt's."

Benson's eyes squinted into slits, his shoulders slumped and his body turned a dark greenish black, like a TV screen before anyone turns it on. He slouched, sighed, then wrapped his tail around his hind feet.

He looked just like I felt whenever I thought about Claire. Tears sprang from my eyes. Thanks to me, Benson didn't have anyone, no real friends, no real family. What was I thinking, washing that rock, washing his brothers and sisters down the drain? Was Jared right? Wasn't I responsible enough to take care of Benson? Was I too much like Aunt Myk?

I wanted to scream, to smash something into a thousand tiny sharp pieces, or kick something until my toes ached. My head felt

too heavy for my neck and something large and ugly pressed against the back of my eyes. But then I got tired of feeling that way and somehow, for some reason, I couldn't stop thinking about that rock. I kept picturing it, still buried in the bottom of Aunt Myk's suitcase.

What if I hadn't washed away every single speck? What if a few stragglers still clung to it, just waiting for a bit of water to wake them up or make them hatch or whatever they had to do to grow big like Benson? If I could get my hands on that rock, maybe I could give Benson a family.

I grinned for the first time since I'd carried him out of the lake. "Benson, my friend," I announced, "we're going to Hawaii."

Waves, Lights, Lullaby

~ ~ ~

For the first time in my life, I stood at the edge of an ocean. The cool water lapped over and around my toes. The salty spray tickled my face and the never-ending pound of the breaking waves drummed in my ears. The ocean's power and size and the brilliantly shifting colors reminded me of how small I was. But instead of feeling weak, I felt calm. Peaceful. But tingly with life.

"Oh, Benson," I said, although he probably couldn't hear me over the pounding surf. "You've just got to see this." Eager to free him, my hand shot toward my cap. Before I pulled him out, I examined Howard's house one more time. Not a lick of movement. Matt had run off with some neighbor kid over thirty minutes ago, before we'd even made it up Howard's driveway. Aunt Myk had dragged Mom into some hidden room to show off her wedding dress and Howard had led Dad slowly through the house, showing him one stupid collection after another. I'd managed to escape without anyone even noticing. From the closed, quiet look of the house, I still had lots of time to share the ocean with Benson. My fingers closed around his

wildly squirming body while I flipped up my cap.

He laughed the laugh that sounded like mine as his toes clamped around my fingers and his tail jolted back and forth against my hair. I pulled him from my head to see his reaction. When his eyes widened, I grinned. I felt him sigh against my hand and I sighed, too. We stared at the ocean, awed by the exploding white surf, the shimmering emerald shallow water and the deep shimmering blue further out.

After awhile, he leaped onto my arm and scampered up my shoulder. Bouncing up and down, he pointed at something off to our right. I squinted. The sun glistened on the deepest blue of the water. It was beautiful, like nothing else I'd ever seen but it wasn't what he'd wanted me to see. He pushed against the side of my head until I faced the silver, triangular fin cutting through the rolling waves.

"A dolphin!" We'd spent so many hours watching dolphins on the Cousteau DVDs it seemed like they were movie stars. Seeing one in real life gave me such a thrill, I bounced, too. I had to stop, though, when Benson nearly toppled off my shoulder.

I grabbed for his tail and held on with both hands. His excitement, his joy pulsed through my fingers and filled me with a happy freedom. I watched the dolphins – at least four fins now – play in the sun-filled sea.

"They're beautiful." I brought Benson close to my face to make sure he heard me. He'd turned a brilliant yellow and his eyes sparkled with life, purpose, appreciation. I grinned. "I am so glad you get to see this part of our world," I shouted over the pounding surf. "You are one lucky alien, my friend!"

And then I noticed the shifting colors a few yards down the beach and my heart slammed against my ribs.

Howard. Unmistakably Howard. Heading our way. Closing the distance with a springing trot through the white sand.

I stuffed the wildly protesting Benson back under my cap and gave him a stern warning to stay put. But would he? He was so excited by the ocean and the dolphins. And I'd just shoved him in a dark place without an explanation. Howard was so close. Had he already seen the bright yellow lizard on my shoulder? Worse yet, had he heard me talking to Benson? Had he heard me call him a lucky alien?

Seconds later, Howard's voice rose above the crashing waves. "Ruth? What are you doing out here?"

I prayed Benson would stay on my head, tucked out of sight. Howard squished his way through the sand. His eyebrows had gathered into a dark fuzzy line above his eyes. He looked either very concerned or very confused.

"They're all looking for you." I shuddered. It looked like he had loads of questions he'd like to ask. Was he just curious about why I was out here or had he seen Benson? "They're getting worried, too. What made you come out here without telling anyone first?"

My cap slipped forward and I slammed my hand against it. There was no way I could answer his question with an alien turning contortions on my head. I shrugged my shoulders and tried a smile instead. Smiling at Howard was hard to do anyway but at that moment, when he threatened the safety of my secret and after ruining Benson's first view of the ocean, it was impossible.

"Well," he said, "you should probably go back and let everyone know you're okay. You are, aren't you?" He smiled but it failed almost as miserably as mine. "Because it seems like something may be troubling you. Care to talk about it?"

I shrugged my shoulders and widened my eyes, hoping he wouldn't notice my trembling knees.

"Okay then. I'll let them know you're safe and sound. Come back soon though. As soon as you're... done."

I watched him turn back toward the house, wishing my aunt had never met him. We were going to be in Hawaii for the next five days, and now, instead of enjoying it, I'd have to be on a constant lookout for Howard. I was certain he suspected something. And there'd been a definite challenge in his voice.

~ ~ ~

Later that night, I stood in the middle of Howard's bedroom with Benson's rock in my hands. I turned and twisted it under the bedside lamp, looking for grains, looking for life. There. Was that a fleck or just a shadow? The light flickered so much it was hard to tell.

"You can have it back." Aunt Myk's whispery-soft voice tore through me like a knife. I hadn't expected to get caught. Everyone had been so full of wedding plans I thought I'd have the whole night to myself. I was wrong. She leaned against the big desk in Howard's bedroom, watching me with squinted eyes.

She took a step closer and placed her hand on my shoulder. "Why'd you put it in my suitcase? I meant for you to keep it. To help you remember."

I stared at her, blinking quick because my eyes felt warm and heavy. If I wasn't careful, I'd start bawling like a baby.

"I don't want it!" The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them. I did want the rock; I needed it for Benson. But I also wanted Aunt Myk to know how much she'd upset me.

Aunt Myk bit her lip. "I know I should have told you about the wedding sooner. I didn't want to leave you –"

"But you did!" One of the tears I'd been holding back slid free and splashed against the rock. I wiped the back of my hand against my runny nose. "How could you leave me alone with them?" I didn't have to explain who I meant. She knew. Mom. Dad. Matthew. Grandma Rose. It'd always been them against us. And now it was just me against them. The rock glimmered in my hands as more tears splashed across its surface. "Who's going to climb the willow tree with me, Aunt Myk? No one else knows how to have any fun at all."

Aunt Myk's eyes shimmered in the lamp's light. For a moment I thought she'd cry, too. But then she stiffened her back and jutted out her chin. It was the first time I'd ever seen her look like who she was: Grandma Rose's daughter.

"You don't need anyone to climb with you, Ruth." She sounded like Grandma Rose, too. Firm. Sure. "Keep the rock. Remember to dance." She covered my hand with both of hers and the rock bit into my palm.

I held on tight to the rock while I shook free of her grip. "I don't feel like dancing. Everyone's gone. Claire. You. There's nobody left."

Aunt Myk reached over and touched my hair. I flinched and she pulled away. "Sometimes," she whispered, so low I barely heard her, "loving someone means letting them live the life that makes them happiest."

I watched another tear fall onto the rock, then shook my head. "But what about the people left behind? What about me, Aunt Myk? Don't you even care?"

I didn't wait for her answer. It didn't matter what she said. She

wasn't coming back. I raced down the hallway, slammed the door and threw myself onto the bed that wasn't mine. Blinded by tears, I soaked the pillow as the sharp edges of Aunt Myk's rock tore into my hand.

I don't know how many hours passed before Benson woke me for the midnight stroll I'd promised him, but my hand felt like someone had held it down on top of a lit stove. It hurt clear to the soles of my feet when I uncurled my blistered fingers. But it was worth it. As soon as I opened my hand, the rock lit the room with dancing turquoise lights.

~ ~ ~

The next morning, my eyes snapped open before the sun came up. I waited as long as I could to make sure no one was awake. After listening to total silence for almost thirty seconds, I raced to the dresser. I'd hidden the rock inside the bottom drawer in case it needed complete darkness to work – like in my backpack – and because I didn't want anyone to see the turquoise light. Now, as I stood in the front of the dresser, I felt torn between rushing to open it and leaving it closed. What if it wasn't done? What if it hadn't even worked?

I grasped the porcelain knob. Please, please let there be another one. Benson shouldn't have to dance with plastic toys.

Crossing my fingers, I yanked on the drawer and peered inside.

The rock's glow had dimmed to a weak glimmer, flickering like a failing Christmas tree bulb. That couldn't be a good sign, could it? I squinted, blinked, then sucked in a hopeful breath. The rock had also grown to almost twice its size. No, not grown. Something extra was attached to its top, a purplish bump that hadn't been there

before. With a smile threatening to split across my face, I reached out to touch it.

Memories of all those aching blisters poured into my brain. I dropped my hand and bent closer to get a better view. Purple and orange and blue swirls collided and exploded across the full length of the lump. It seemed to pulse, but I couldn't be sure. Maybe it was just a trick caused by the shifting colors. I rubbed the rest of the sleep from my eyes and dropped to my knees.

Slowly, stiffly, one end of the lump raised up. I held my breath, not daring to breathe. A fan-like something spilled out from under the raised end and quivered against the rock.

"A tail!" I said. My hands flew to my mouth. Too late to stuff the words back inside but I didn't want to risk calling out again. I jumped up and down on the balls of my feet, unable to stay still a moment longer. Life. Definite life. Moving and pulsing and growing stronger, right in front of my eyes.

I sailed across the room and moved my hands across the sheets, searching for Benson. He was a restless sleeper and could have ended up anywhere under the covers.

"Benson?" I whispered, hands still busy searching. "Wake up. There's something you have to see." An irritated grumble floated out from the foot of the bed. The covers stirred. I pulled them off then smiled into his blinking, slightly clouded eyes. "I know it's early, but I promise it's worth it. Come on."

I settled him onto my hand and carried him over to the dresser. The lump had stretched further across the rock. Smashed bubblegum-like toes, just like Benson's, stuck out on both sides now. The tail still quivered and the colors still swirled.

Benson cocked his head, his eyes large and questioning as he

looked at me.

“It’s your brother. Or maybe your sister.” I lowered my hand inside the drawer and tilted him off. “Go on, say hello. But be careful. The rock’s hot.”

Just like I did the first time, just like Jared did after I warned him, Benson reached for the rock anyway. His toes hovered over the lump, then rested against it. The heat didn’t seem to bother him a bit. He ran his toes down the full length of the lump. Then, rocking back and forth on his hind legs, he hummed “Rock a Bye, Baby” slightly out of tune. Tears filled the corners of my eyes. I didn’t even bother wiping them away.

When he reached the end of the song, the lump quivered all over then raised its head for the very first time. Large, oval lids flickered open. Deeply lit eyes, with all the blues and greens of the ocean, blinked at Benson – once, twice – before chubby cheeks crinkled up to form a smile on the newly born face. Colors shimmered and sparkled across the baby’s back. Pale yellow gave way to light orange which shifted to sky-blue. Through it all, a ruby red dot remained between the baby’s eyes. Benson pressed his nose against the dot and sighed.

He arranged his front toes like he was holding a pencil, turned to me and pretended to write against the bottom of the drawer.

I nodded then lunged for the bed to reach under the pillow for the notebook and pen I’d brought from home. The first several pages were filled with Benson’s side of our late-night conversations. I flipped to a blank sheet then laid the notebook and pen in the drawer.

Baby? How? he wrote in large letters.

“It’s the rock. Your mom laid eggs on it. When the eggs get wet,

they hatch. This one hatched last night.”

Sister, he wrote then nodded his head. The baby reached for Benson’s toe then stuck it in her mouth.

Benson pulled his toe free then shook it in the air while he grabbed the pen with his other foot. *Hungry. Needs food.*

“I think you’re right. Both times. She’s definitely a girl and I’m sure she’s hungry. There’s cat food in the pantry.” I grabbed my cap off the floor and laid it in the drawer. “Can you put her in my cap? We shouldn’t leave her by herself but I don’t think I can touch her yet. The rock’s too hot for me.”

He tugged the rock into my cap and climbed in after it. There was barely enough room for him but she was still connected to the rock and it didn’t seem like a good idea to loosen her just yet.

I wasn’t about to put all that on my head so I carried the cap in front of me. Not as safe, of course, but the house was so quiet I was certain no one else was awake yet. We’d just have to hurry a little.

When we reached the kitchen, Benson pointed to the coral photograph Howard had tacked on the wall. He crawled out of the cap and onto my hand. Leaning forward, he scratched *pretty like sister* onto my sunburned arm.

“Yes,” I whispered. “We’ll name her Coral. But come on now. Get in the cap. We need to get back to my room as soon as we can.”

After he settled in, I reached far back in the cupboard to grab a chipped, dark-blue bowl. Hopefully, no one would notice it was gone. The cat food was in a large metal can at the bottom of the pantry. I put the cap on the floor, right by my side. While Benson watched Coral, she watched me. I dipped the bowl into the can, planning to fill it up to the very top.

A floor board creaked. In the hallway. Which led to the kitchen.

My heart hammered warnings against my ribs. With shaking fingers, I scooped the aliens and the rock into the can. "Hide," I whispered. "Go as deep as you can and take Coral with you."

Benson dove and the rock disappeared. Hopefully there was enough air for them down there. Hopefully Coral wouldn't start to cry.

Howard's voice floated into the room from halfway down the hall. "I said I'd have the report to you first thing this morning and I will. Sure, it's 11:00 in DC but it's only 5 AM here. Have you forgotten the time difference?"

Why was Howard talking to someone in DC? This early in the morning? About a report?

As the questions whizzed around in my head, I whispered "Stay down, stay deep." I buried the bowl deep within the food. Good thing there was so much of it. Quickly, I yanked my fingers out of the can.

"What are you doing?" Howard's voice slammed through my body. His bare feet were just inches from mine.

Cat Food, Warning, Dust

~ ~ ~

I coughed, stood, backed away from the pantry and the hidden aliens. “Well, I – I – Snickers woke me up, meowing. I thought maybe he was hungry so I – ”

“You’re shaking!” Howard raised his hairy eyebrows then squinted hard. “And Snickers couldn’t possibly have awakened you. He’s in my bedroom. And the door’s shut. So. What’s really going on? Why are you talking to cat food?”

My heart clunked across the kitchen floor. I hated him just then. I really did. “I don’t know,” I said. “Why are you talking to someone in Washington, DC?”

His face reddened. “That’s really none of your business, is it? You sure look guilty about something, though. Mind if I take a look?” And he bent down to fish his hand deep inside the can.

I shut my eyes, sending every ounce of wishing power I had to Benson. Watch out for the hand, Benson. Stay away from the hand.

The floor board creaked again and I opened my eyes. Aunt Myk stood in the kitchen’s doorway, her head tilted to one side as she

watched Howard dig.

“I thought I heard someone out here. What are you guys doing up so early?”

Howard cleared his throat but I was faster. I rushed to Aunt Myk’s side and managed to pull up a few tears. “He thinks I buried something in the cat food. He’s way upset with me, Aunt Myk. And I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Well, that’s just crazy,” Aunt Myk said then switched to her sternest voice as she eyed Howard. “Why would you think she buried something in the cat food?”

Howard stood and dusted off his hands as he gave Aunt Myk a lop-sided grin. “I certainly didn’t mean to upset her. But she was digging around in there. And when I asked her about it she made up some lame story about Snickers and – ”

“I would never hide anything in the cat food,” I rushed to cut him off. Knowing I had to warn Benson, I added, in a high, clear voice, “Why would I hide anything in the pantry? Where people are going in and out all day long? It’s the worst possible place to hide stuff. He must think I’m dumb. And he doesn’t trust me.”

Howard grunted then took a step toward Aunt Myk, his hands held out like he was looking for approval. Or forgiveness. “I didn’t say I didn’t trust her. I didn’t say she was dumb. She’s trying to make me look bad.”

I pulled on her robe. “No, I’m not. I...” What I really needed to do was get them both out of here so Benson and Coral could escape. Looking for inspiration, I glanced all around the room and spotted the brilliant pink sky through the kitchen window. Perfect. “I just wanted to watch the sun rise on the beach. I wanted Howard to go with me.” The idea actually made my skin crawl, but not as much as

leaving him here in the kitchen. Now that Aunt Myk was upset with him, he might dig in the cat food forever to prove me wrong.

“For heaven’s sake, Howard!” Aunt Myk said. “She’s only going to be here a little while. Take her out and show her the sun rise.”

He turned toward me with squinted eyes and a fake smile. “I’d love to. Let’s go.” He wrapped his fingers around my forearm and pulled me toward the door. I was still in my pajamas but since they were really just shorts and a tee-shirt, I didn’t think it was worth making a fuss. And yet, Aunt Myk remained in the kitchen. Benson still couldn’t escape.

“Won’t you come with us?” I offered, craning my neck to give her my most pleading look. I really didn’t want to be alone with Howard just then anyway. But she waved the offer away.

“Oh no, I think the two of you could use some time together. Get to know each other. It’s too early for me. I’m going back to bed.”

“Okay!” I called, watching her go. “The kitchen’s all empty then!”

I winced as Howard’s fingers tightened around my arm. That last warning may have been too much.

~ ~ ~

The pounding of the surf filled my ears as soon as we stepped outside. A couple seagulls swept over the waves but the rest of the beach was deserted. I suddenly realized how alone I was. Howard still hadn’t let go of my arm.

“You don’t like me much, do you?” he asked.

“I don’t even know you.” I wished I had the guts to say Aunt Myk didn’t really know him either.

Finally letting go of me, he ran his fingers through his hair and stared at the sea. “I know you miss your aunt, Ruth. She misses you,

too. But you can come visit, any time you want.”

I glared at him. His invitation was just too ridiculous to ignore. “Come visit?! What am I supposed to do, pedal over on my bike? Drop in to say hi and pedal on home?”

“I know it’s far but – ”

The wind sucked the words and feelings right out of me. I couldn’t hold back even if I’d wanted to. “Why did she have to be the one to move? Why couldn’t you move to Iowa City? She’s got a family, Howard.” His name tasted like dirt in my mouth. “We need her more than you do. I’ll probably never see her after this.”

He didn’t say he was sorry. He didn’t even look sorry. He just grabbed my arm again and said, “Walk with me.”

He didn’t say anything more and I’d already said all that I could. I let the powerful sound of the ocean roar through my head as we walked along the beach. It almost cleared my mind, almost made me forget how close I’d been to getting caught. Almost, but not quite.

Howard slowed to a stop and swept his hand in front of us. “Take a look around you. A good look. Good enough to feel it.”

I didn’t want to do anything he told me to do, but I figured I’d look ridiculous standing there with my eyes shut. So I pretended to stare at the ocean.

The ocean gets in your blood,” he said. “It becomes something you need. Like air. If you were born here, could you ever leave?”

I had no desire to answer him. Instead, I wanted to scowl, to scream, to throw a fit or maybe even a fist at him. But when I turned to face him, I saw the softest, gentlest look in his eyes, like the eyes of a fawn. Like Benson’s eyes when he first saw the ocean.

Howard’s mouth twitched into a small smile. “Your aunt helped me realize how beautiful it is here. Somehow I’d forgotten. She

helped me see the beauty again. Because she loves it, too. She belongs here.”

He took a deep breath then dug his fingers into my arm. I winced. A scowl replaced his smile and when he spoke, it sounded like a growl. “I didn’t appreciate your little performance in the kitchen. You made me look like a fool. And we both know you were doing something you shouldn’t have been doing or you wouldn’t have lied about it. So from now on, watch your step. I don’t know exactly what you’re up to, but I know you’re up to something. And I’ll be watching.”

~ ~ ~

I gave Howard a few minutes to enter the house first then crept in the front door. The living room was empty and everything was as quiet as it had been before Howard found me in the kitchen. I longed to go in there now, to make sure Benson and Coral had escaped from the pantry. But I had no idea where Howard was and I just couldn’t risk getting caught in the cat food again.

I tiptoed to my borrowed room and locked the door behind me.

“Benson,” I whispered and glanced around the room. “Are you here? Please come out. It’s okay.”

He crawled out from under the dresser with a clump of dust on his head and Coral on his back. I sank to the floor in relief.

“Are you okay?”

He nodded. The dust clump fell to the floor but Coral held on.

“So! She’s no longer attached to the rock. That’s probably good, isn’t it? She must be growing, getting stronger. Did she eat any of the cat food?”

Benson nodded again but his eyes clouded over as he held up his

front foot and pretended to write.

"It's in the drawer. Hold on." I grabbed the notebook and pen then sat beside him. "I'm glad she ate. I don't know when I'll be able to steal more. Maybe I can snag some dinner instead." Benson loved all seafood. Since Aunt Myk fixed it for dinner almost every night, it was easy to get. I hoped Coral would like it, too. If not, there was always suntan lotion around. I wouldn't even have to sneak that.

Benson finished writing and pushed the notebook toward my foot. *Not carry rock. Too heavy. Pulled Korel off. Okay?* His eyes had turned from cloudy to brilliantly shiny, like he might cry.

"Oh, Benson, don't worry. She looks great. Jared pulled you off the rock and it didn't make any difference at all." I smiled at him then scratched his chin. Trying hard to make him feel better, I didn't think much about what he'd written until it hit me like an unexpected ocean wave.

"Where's the rock, then? Did you leave it somewhere?"

He turned a dark purple as he reached for the notebook. He ran a toe under the words *Too heavy* then added, *In can*.

I swallowed a sigh and continued scratching Benson's chin. No point in letting him see me worry. But I'd have to get that rock before Howard found it. For sure he'd be looking in the can again, if he wasn't looking in it already. I had no idea how to explain why the rock was in the cat food and I knew he'd assume I put it there.

"Okay. I'll just go get it." I tried another reassuring smile but failed. It was too risky to carry them both around in my cap right now. Still, it didn't seem fair to say what I had to say. I choked the words out anyway. I didn't have a choice. "You'll have to stay here with Coral. Howard is way suspicious. I have no idea what he'll do if he finds you. And you'll have to stay hidden. Under the dresser is

probably the best place. I know it's dark and nasty under there and I'm sorry. I'll try to come back as soon as I can."

Benson ducked his head then sprawled another message. *Sorry.*

My heart splintered right down the middle. Hawaii had been Benson's dream vacation but today it had turned into a nightmare. He was too full of life to spend hours stuck under a dresser. Stupid Howard.

"Oh Benson, it's okay. It's not your fault. Not at all. We'll figure out something. I promise. But first, I have to get the rock."

With Coral still holding tight to his back, Benson twitched across the floor and scooted under the dresser.

Laughter filled my ears as soon as I opened the door. And it was coming from the kitchen. Everyone was up now. Mom, Dad, Matt, Aunt Myk. Even Howard sat at the table, shoveling in oatmeal like this was just a normal day. I bit my lip and sighed. Digging for the rock would have to wait. I only hoped I got to it before Howard did.

Fake Headache, Hunting, Secret Place

~ ~ ~

Before then, I'd never noticed how often my family ate. There was always someone entering or leaving the kitchen. All day long. I had to wait until everyone settled down for the night before I could look for the rock. And even then I waited for another hour to be sure everyone was asleep. I dug deep into the can, feeling every inch but there was nothing except food. Howard must have found it. Anyone else would have asked who'd left it there.

That was two days ago. I kept waiting for Howard to say something, to call me a liar in front of everyone, but he never did. I couldn't figure out why he didn't question me or why he didn't tell Aunt Myk.

I was worried about something else, too. The day before I had noticed the notebook filled with Benson's messages was turned to a different page. I'd asked Benson if he'd been looking through it but he swore that he and Coral had stayed under the dresser. Either I was remembering wrong or someone else had been looking through it.

Because we couldn't take any more chances, Benson and Coral had to stay hidden all the time. I visited them, behind the locked door, every chance I got but still, I felt horrible for treating them like prisoners. Benson could no longer enjoy the ocean and Coral had never even seen it. I could tell she was just as restless and bored as he was. He kept her as busy as he could, teaching her how to write words and what they meant. But after two solid days, even the lessons had grown old.

So when Aunt Myk invited everyone to visit the woman who was planning the wedding, I launched into the greatest performance of my life. I slumped against the couch and claimed I had the worst headache in the world.

Howard raised his eyebrows and didn't look at all convinced, but Aunt Myk immediately suggested I stay home and rest. With half-closed eyes, I watched them all go and tried to keep the smile from busting out and giving me away. Aunt Myk said the final arrangements would take at least an hour, maybe two.

~ ~ ~

"Welcome to the real world, Coral," I said then set the cap on the sand. It took less than three seconds for her to jump out and stand up. Shielding her eyes from the intense sun, she turned slowly around, taking in the surf, the sea, and the miles of white sand. She looked exactly like Benson had that first day on my bed. I grinned. She'd had to wait longer but her first view of the world was much better than his had been.

I sat down next to her, leaned back on my arms, buried my toes in the sand and tilted my face up to the sun. Finally.

Having finished her circle, Coral dropped down on all four legs

then rolled in the sand. Benson laughed the laugh that sounded like mine, cupped up some sand in his front toes then rained it down on top of her. She giggled and he laughed again. I wished we could stay like this forever.

Benson buried Coral up to her chin then stopped and cocked his head. His feet plowed into the sand and sent it flying. He dove head first, deep into the hole he'd made and came back up with a tiny, colorless crab dangling from his gums. His tongue swished down to gather the whole thing into his mouth. He gulped, swallowed, and burped.

My alien had become a hunter.

Coral sprang free from the sand, slunk close to the ground and squinted her eyes. Her tail was stiff and arrow-straight, except for the very tip, which quivered and built up speed until she looked like a rattlesnake preparing to strike. Seconds later, she pounced, pulled at the sand, dove her head into the hole, then came up with an even bigger crab. I smiled, proud of them both.

Now that they knew what to do, they wouldn't stop. They pulled crab after crab out of the sand until I felt so itchy, I just had to stand. I'd had no idea there were so many crabs milling around just under the surface.

I was thinking about going back for a towel to sit on when the sound of flapping wings buzzed my ears. A bird, the size and shape of a rooster, landed several yards away from us. It looked just like a rooster too, with a red head and a high, full tail. Except long burnt-orange feathers flowed down its back and its tail was shiny black with just a hint of the darkest green and deepest purple.

An excited chorus of "uh huh huh" rose up from the beach. Sand flew as Coral dashed straight for the strange bird.

“Stop!” I yelled, “It might eat you!”

Completely ignoring me, she skuddled along, slipping and sliding but making great progress. I scooped Benson into my hand and ran to catch up.

Standing on her hind legs, she was just inches from the bird, calling “uh huh huh” with all her might. The bird didn’t seem too impressed though. Its black feet just clawed at the ground, digging for something.

Keeping one eye on the bird, I snatched Coral and brought her up to eye level. “You can’t just run off like that. It’s dangerous.”

Coral swung her tail in circles, trying to wiggle free of my grip. I grasped her tighter and delivered my sternest look. “No. You have to stay with me. There’s lots of things that would love to eat you. Dangerous stuff like - ” I couldn’t think of anything specific so I looked down the beach, hoping to spot an example. Nothing there, really, other than a few people too far away to worry about. I turned to look in the other direction. My mouth went completely dry.

Not now, not again! But there was no question in my mind. Howard. Trotting toward me, waving his arm above his head like some kind of lunatic. Wasn’t he supposed to be at the wedding planner’s? Why couldn’t he ever leave me alone?

He was close enough I could see the pineapples printed on his shorts and the challenging look on his face. Or was he just squinting from the sun?

I tucked the squirming aliens against my stomach to reach for my cap, but I’d left it behind when I’d run after Coral. I ducked my head, pretending not to see Howard’s wildly waving arm, then sprinted toward my cap. I snatched it up and squished the aliens inside. Cradling the howling bodies next to my own, I forced my

feet into the flip-flops I'd left next to the cap. In shoes never meant for running, I squeaked my way across the sand.

~ ~ ~

"Now what?" Gulping in buckets of air, I stared at the path behind me. No sign of Howard, thank God. He'd called out at least twice. Maybe three times. At one point, I'd almost dropped Coral but she'd slithered right up my leg and wedged her way back into my cap. Still, she'd turned the color of a Sunkist orange. If Howard had been anywhere near us during her climb up my body, he would have seen her. All I could do was hope I'd left him in the dust by then.

I looked around and wondered where we were. I'd cut through a line of beach houses then ran down a road that looked more like a path. Now, large shiny leaves surrounded us. Dozens of butterflies swarmed around red, waxy flowers. There wasn't a house or a building in sight.

I unfolded my cap to count heads and toes. The aliens stared back at me with their mouths open and their foreheads wrinkled up, like they could not believe how rude I'd been.

"That was rough." I ran a finger under one chin and then the other. "But necessary. No one can see you. Especially Howard. He's been nosing around from the very beginning and I don't trust him. He wants to get me in trouble. Besides, he already saw you at home, Benson, and if he sees you here too, I don't know how I'd ever explain it."

I lifted Benson so I could watch his face. "We can't just stand here and wait for him to catch up. Got any ideas?"

Benson grinned. Nodded. Pointed to the wall of leaves then

jumped to the ground where he picked up a stick. *Water*, he scratched across the sandy path. He bobbed his head and beat his tail against the ground.

“I don’t think we should head back to the beach. Howard could spot us easy.”

Benson glared at me, then sighed as he picked up the stick again. *Not beach. Listen. Follow water.*

And then I heard it, the whishing sound of falling water. Benson scratched at my toes until I looked down again. He’d written, *Not far.*

We needed some place to hide out for awhile and I needed time to think. I nodded my agreement and Benson scrambled up my leg to settle down next to Coral.

“Here goes nothing,” I said, then parted the leaves and dove into the wall of plants.

The leaves were moist and smooth against my arms but my flip-flops kept getting tangled in the vines. I’d only taken five or six steps before I felt like we should turn back. But the water sounded louder and the sun appeared brighter just up ahead. So I plunged on, careful to walk in a straight line.

I stepped out of the leaves just as quickly as I’d entered. Up ahead, a pond shimmered in the afternoon sun, reflecting walls of lava like a mirror with tiny ripples. A steady, light stream of crystal water sliced down the middle of a coal black wall then splattered into the pool. Smaller mounds of lava lay scattered all around the pond. Flowering plants splashed reds and oranges, pinks and yellows against the sharp black stones and filled the air with sweet perfume.

Coral sprang out of my cap and launched herself through the air. As soon as her feet hit the ground, she raced to the waterfall with

Benson right behind her. They stood underneath it, eyes closed and necks stretched high as the water dripped onto their heads. Giggling, they held out their front legs, toes spread wide to catch the droplets.

Remembering that Benson couldn't swim until he'd grown the flaps under his legs, I called out a warning. "Make sure she doesn't fall into the pond, Benson!"

I sat down on a chunk of lava to watch them play. My heart twisted with worry. Had Howard seen them? What could I possibly say to him if he had?

There were quite a few lizards roaming around Kauai. I'd seen them scurry under bushes. Their eyes didn't stick out like the aliens' and their body shapes were all wrong, but still, from far away, maybe Howard hadn't seen the differences.

I stuck my foot into the pond and splashed it around. I wanted this secret place to somehow wash away the worry that bombarded my brain. It wasn't fair that nosy Howard had wiggled his way into Coral's first day on the beach.

Well, no more. We only had two days left and I intended to make the most of them. I'd have to be extra careful, but I could do it. If I watched Howard close enough, maybe I could even find a time to bring the aliens back to this pond. He'd never find us here. We had to be almost a mile from his house.

I pulled my flip-flops back on, dusted the loose lava off my bottom and climbed across the rocks, determined to enjoy the waterfall with my aliens. Howard had already ruined enough of my fun.

As I headed toward it, the hairs on my arms stood straight up and a shudder sliced down my back, right between my shoulder

blades. I could almost feel the breath on my neck. I whipped my head around, certain Howard's face would be right there, grinning at me.

But it wasn't. With eyes that felt wide enough to pop out of my head, I scanned everything around me – the rocks, the trees, the plants, the pond. I didn't see anything out of place. Still, I couldn't shake that creepy feeling. I called the aliens, gathered them into my cap and headed back to Howard's house.

I'd miss Hawaii but I was glad we'd be going home soon. Howard was making me too nervous to enjoy anything.

Waterfalls, Cement, Regrets, Answers

~ ~ ~

Two days later, I stared at the words Coral had scratched into the sand. I'd just finished telling her about my house and she'd written *Not going* in huge, block letters.

It was the day after the wedding and our last day in Kauai. Because Howard seemed determined to show Matt how to fish from the beach, it'd been easy to sneak by with the aliens tucked under my cap. I'd been thankful we had this chance to play in the waterfall one more time. Until I read Coral's message.

"Of course you're going. You can't stay here by yourself!" I tried to laugh, like it was ridiculously funny, but my stomach turned sour. I cleared my throat and knelt down next to her. "You can't stay here because I can't stay here. We live somewhere else and we have to go home. Today."

Coral shook her head, pointed at the words she'd already written, then picked up the vine's stem to write more. *Here My home HERE*. She leaped onto my shoulder, pointed at the waterfall and then toward the edge of the pond. Then she looked right into my eyes. All

the air whooshed out of me like I was a punctured balloon.

The dreamy, loving look on her face reminded me of the way Benson looked when he watched the dolphins swim. It also reminded me of Howard when he said he loved the island too much to live anywhere else.

I wanted to tell Coral she couldn't survive here on her own, but I knew it wasn't true. She was quick and smart – Benson had already taught her everything he knew, as far as I could tell. She seemed to know enough to stay out of the water and she could hunt. She'd be fine without us.

But what about Benson? Coral made him happier than I'd ever seen him. She had become his world. I looked past Coral to watch her brother. He was building a chain of vines by tying pieces together. His toes slid over and around his work like he could barely handle the weight of his own legs. Like they were as heavy as volcanic rock. The knots looked complicated but I could tell his heart wasn't in it.

I placed Coral on the sand then sat next to Benson. He'd turned a dull gray, the color of a rain cloud. He smiled when he turned toward me but the smile only stretched his mouth. It didn't light up his eyes. As Coral scampered across the sand and started digging for crabs, he lifted his front leg in that heavy, hard-to-do way that was so awful to watch and placed it on top of my hand.

"She'll like Iowa City. She'll be just as happy there." My words gathered force and speed as I worked to convince myself. "We've got Coralville Lake and the Iowa River and I'll take you guys there every day..." Until school started. And then they'd be stuck in the house during the day and trapped in the aquarium every night. Who was I kidding?

I gazed at the waterfall and the beads of water leaping free from the downpour. Sailing through the wind, dancing in the breeze. Why couldn't we be free to do whatever we wanted, too?

"I love you, Benson." I choked on the words. It hurt.

Benson crawled into my lap and used his nails to scratch his answer into my arm. *I love you, Rooth.* That hurt more.

Once we were home everything would be fine. They'd have each other at least, so maybe living in an aquarium wouldn't be that bad. Or maybe there was another answer I just hadn't thought of yet. All I really needed was time to think. I stroked Benson's back while one bad solution after another marched through my brain. I shut my eyes and fell asleep with Benson in my lap.

~ ~ ~

I don't know how long I slept – a few minutes, maybe an hour – before the wind stirred and a sharp pain shot up from the top of my foot. My eyes snapped open and I squinted through the sunlight. A boxy, black camera lay just inches from my foot. Howard was racing toward the far end of the pond.

He must have launched the camera as he flew past and it must have landed on my foot. It pulsed with pain but that was nothing compared to the warning messages that hammered in my head. How long had he been here? What had he seen?

Benson had already scooted off my lap and buried himself in the sand. Except for his humongous, blinking eyes, he was completely hidden.

"Do you think he saw you?" I whispered the question out of the side of my mouth, even though Howard was too far away to hear. He was busy climbing his way through a bunch of volcanic rock.

“Do you think he was watching us? Do you think he saw –”

My heart skidded to a stop as I searched the sand. Coral. I’d been thinking about her and forgetting about her all at the same time.

“Where’s Coral, Benson?” I barely recognized my own voice. My throat felt scratchy and dry. The skin around Benson’s eyes turned a deep crimson. He started scrambling out of the hole he’d made but I pushed him back down.

“No. Stay put. I don’t know what Howard’s doing but I know he’ll come back. Try to blend into the sand. I’ll find Coral. Don’t worry.”

I was frantic. Coral was missing and it was all my fault. I’d fallen asleep when I should have been watching her. What was wrong with me? Jared was right; I wasn’t responsible at all. What if I couldn’t find her before Howard saw her?

Howard. Of course.

Wishing I had figured it out sooner, I sprinted toward him and nearly tripped over the camera he’d dropped on my foot. Not only was it big and ugly, but the word “feet” was stamped on its side in bold capital letters. He probably thought it was funny. What a doofus.

As I ran, I scanned the rocks and spotted Coral a few seconds later. Banana yellow with tangerine streaks, she was reaching her front legs toward the sky while balancing on the tip of a volcanic rock, not far from Howard’s outstretched hand. She crouched for a moment, then launched herself into the pond.

“She can’t swim!” I screamed at Howard, but he’d already dove in after her. I swam as fast as I could, struggling to reach them. The water seemed to hold me back when all I wanted to do was fly.

Howard’s head sprang up a few yards in front of me. With his

hair plastered to his face, he lifted his arm high above the pond then gulped in a mouthful of air.

"I've got her!" he called. "I'm bringing her in." He sliced through the water with one hand while he kept the other above his head. A long yellow tail dangled from his fist.

By the time I reached them, Howard was kneeling on the sand. Water dripped from his bent head.

"Is she okay?" I asked, peering into his cupped hand. Coral shivered against his palm, panting in quick bursts as she blinked her eyes.

"I think so." Howard ran the tip of his finger over her head. Not so tropical-looking now, she'd turned the same color as a band-aid. I cringed.

Howard stared at me, then at Coral, then back at me. "This is the same lizard that was in your tree. You brought it with you."

"No! Why would I do that? That's crazy." My heart beat so loudly I felt sure he'd hear it. I lowered my voice and tried to sound calm. "I've never seen it before. I mean, it was here when I got here. Running around on the rocks. Why are you here?"

"I've been looking for you. It's almost time for you to leave. You better hustle or you'll miss your plane."

Using Aunt Myk's bright and breezy voice, I tried to sound casual and unconcerned. "How did you know where to find me?"

"Just a hunch. I used to come here a lot." He stared at Coral then tilted his head toward me. "You really should go now. Your parents are worried."

I couldn't go. I needed to think. I searched the beach, hoping for inspiration, hoping for a miracle. All I saw were the words Coral had scratched into the ground. Great. I shuffled toward her message

and ground my foot deep into the sand. Howard watched while I kicked the words away. I couldn't tell if he'd seen the message before I destroyed it.

"Aren't you coming?" My voice lost some of its bright breeziness as I tried to read his face.

"I can't. There's a bit of an emergency at work. I've already told your parents and Matt goodbye. I hope you can come back soon. I really do."

I bit my lip and prayed for him to leave so I could gather the aliens into my cap and race back to his house. Only he didn't seem to be in any hurry at all. The emergency he'd told me about must not have been too urgent. "Don't you have to go, too?"

Once again he looked at Coral, still panting in his hand. "I can stay for a bit. Make sure it's okay."

Fighting back angry tears, I bit my lip again. This time I tasted blood. "I could take her with me. Then you could check on her when you get home."

"Didn't you just say you found it here? We shouldn't take it away from its home. That wouldn't be right. I'll just stay for a few minutes and then I'll let it go. Don't worry. It'll be fine."

Don't worry. It'll be fine. Fine, fine, fine. The words echoed through my brain as I headed toward my stuff. I jammed my feet into my flip-flops while I searched for Benson. When I spotted his eyes, I knelt down, hoping my body would shield him as I scooped him into my cap. I put the cap on my head then turned around.

"Okay," I called. "I'm going." I couldn't say any more. A wall of unshed tears closed off my throat. Every step I took felt wrong and heavy, like someone had tied cement blocks to my feet. Howard was such a creep. I hated leaving her with him. It felt like the biggest

mistake of my life. But no matter how hard I tried, I could not think of any way to separate them.

~ ~ ~

“We’re not leaving her for long, Benson,” I whispered as I headed down the path. I hoped he heard me because I didn’t dare remove him from my cap. “Howard won’t stay. We’ll just wait a bit and then go back. She’ll be okay.” If Howard didn’t do anything stupid. If she stayed put. If she didn’t jump into the pond as soon as Howard let her go. I tried hard to shrug that thought away. It made my head hot and turned my fingers cold. She’d almost drowned because of me.

“Don’t worry. She’ll be fine.” I’d echoed Howard’s final words and it felt like a hand squeezed against my temples. Howard had saved Coral’s life. But he’d also made me leave her behind. With him.

When Benson slithered across my head, my cap dropped to the ground. I bent to get it and Benson leaped onto the path. Using his nails, he scratched a message into the sandy dirt. *Leave Korel here.*

I shook my head. “Howard has to leave soon. He’s got some kind of painting emergency or something. We’ve got plenty of time to get her back.”

Benson’s wide eyes shimmered with unshed tears. His body had turned a dull and dingy blue. Every part of him shook when he wrote in the dirt again. *Korel belong here. Happy. Here.*

“Well, that’s just crazy,” I said. “I’m not going to give up and just let her go!” I stuffed him back in my cap and marched angrily away from his words. I knew she wanted to stay but she was too young to know what was best for her. She belonged with Benson. She belonged to me.

I clomped down the path for another minute or two, stopped, then turned toward the pond. Surely Howard had left by now. All I had to do was go back and get her. But I couldn't seem to lift my foot off the ground.

Coral was even more stubborn and ornery than Benson. And she didn't want to leave here. What if she didn't do what I asked her to do when we got home? What if she refused to stay hidden in my room?

I took one step toward the pond but couldn't go any further. With a heavy sigh, I looked down the path.

I knew she'd probably be safer here. And happier, too. But I didn't want to leave her. I loved her so much.

"I hate this," I said, turning in the direction of Howard's house. "I really, really hate this!"

~ ~ ~

I was still sniffing when I walked through the front door.

"There you are, Ruth!" Aunt Myk greeted me with a smile and a quick hug. "Your mom was beginning to worry about you. We're leaving in less than an hour. You didn't happen to see Howard anywhere, did you?"

The sound of his name almost sent me into a crying frenzy. I took a deep breath and forced the tears down my throat. "I saw him. He found me."

"Were you lost?" Aunt Myk laughed like she'd just told the greatest joke ever. I knew I wouldn't see her for a long time so I tried to smile. But I just couldn't get the smile past the lump of awfulness.

"When's he coming back?" she asked.

I shook my head. Didn't she know? "He isn't. He said he's got to

go to work.”

“Work? Are you sure? He’s not supposed to go back until next week. Besides, I know he wants to go to the airport with us.” She glanced toward the window. “He’ll have to hurry, though.”

Why didn’t she know? The lump of awfulness, having settled somewhere deep inside my stomach, twisted just a bit.

“He’s got some kind of painting emergency.” The words sounded wrong as soon as they left my mouth. What type of emergency would that be, anyway?

“Is that you, Ruth?” Mom called from somewhere down the hall. “You’re all packed, right?”

I would have answered but there were more important questions to worry about. Like, how had Howard found me? What had he seen? Why hadn’t he told Aunt Myk he had to go back to work?

Something else bothered me, too. Why did he have a camera if he was on his way to work? And why was the word “feet” stamped on it?

“Ruth, are you feeling okay?”

I stared at Aunt Myk’s face, not really seeing it. Instead, I saw Howard. Dropping his camera. Whizzing past me toward the pond. Waving at me from the beach. Catching me in the cat food. Falling from our tree. Talking about aliens.

He had an alien collection. But he hated Alien Avenger. He said it made people distrust the government.

The government. In Washington, D.C. The morning he’d caught me in the pantry, he’d been talking to someone in Washington, D.C. About some overdue report.

Could it have been a government report? For a government agency? An agency like FEETLE?

Or FEET, if a camera happened to be halfway buried in sand. Howard's camera didn't have the word "feet" stamped on it. It was stamped by the agency that owned it. And Howard had it.

Howard was just like Agent Swinner, the Alien Avenger.

My heart sank, fell to the floor, trembled uselessly under my flip-flops. But everything made sense now. He didn't want anyone to know he was scared of heights because it meant he was lying about being a painter – a job he'd made up so he could keep his real job a secret.

The rock, Benson's rock, had been Howard's to begin with. He didn't ask me about it because he wanted to keep it. He knew what it was and now, thanks to me, he knew what it could do. He had read Benson's messages; he'd read everything in our notebook so he knew all about Benson and Coral's birth and how the rock had ended up in the cat food.

He'd found me because he'd been following me, waiting for his chance to take the aliens. And now he had Coral!

Snot, Hopoe

~ ~ ~

“Aunt Myk, I have to go. I have to find Howard.”

Frowning, Aunt Myk laid her hand on my shoulder. “You can’t, sweetie. There’s no time. Your mom wants you to pack up your stuff. She’s upstairs helping Matt right now.”

“I’m already packed.” I wasn’t, but even if I never saw any of my stuff again, it didn’t matter. “I have to see Howard. Just for a few minutes. I’ll come right back.”

The frown didn’t leave her face and her fingers didn’t leave my shoulder.

I tried again. “I said some things to him, Aunt Myk. I was mad and I said some stuff I didn’t mean. I want to tell him I’m sorry before I go.”

A big sappy smile replaced Aunt Myk’s frown. Her fingers rubbed against my shoulder and then let go. “Your mom will kill me for this.”

“I’ll be back before she even notices.”

I dashed out the door, tore down the beach and raced full-blast

for the waterfall. From under my cap, Benson's nails dug into my head. I prayed we weren't too late.

I plowed through the vines that surrounded the pond then stopped cold when I saw Hawaii Howard. He was kneeling on the sand, aiming his camera inside one of those plastic pet carriers. Where had that come from? Had he brought it with him?

Of course he had. He'd planned on taking the aliens all along. He'd come prepared.

"I know who you are." I stood just a few feet behind him, so mad my legs trembled. From under my cap, Benson trembled, too. Howard turned toward me, dropped the camera, then scrambled in front of the carrier. His body blocked my view but I didn't have to see it. I knew what was inside.

He stared at me, mouth open, shoulders scrunched. He ran a hand through his black hair then pulled a smile onto his face. "Don't you have a plane to catch?"

I stepped forward, holding tightly to my cap because Benson continued to shake. "I'm not leaving without Coral. She's mine."

Howard positioned his butt right in front of the carrier's door then leaned back against the top. Still smiling, he said, "What are you talking about? You can't take a lizard on a plane. I was just making sure she's okay. I was just about to let her go."

"You have no intention of letting her go. You've been lying all along."

He just stared at me with that goofy smile plastered on his face. He didn't budge from the carrier.

"Listen, Howard, I don't have a lot of time here. And I don't want to play games with you. There's no one here but us, so there's no reason to pretend." I took a deep breath and tried to find the right

words to make him move, or at least take me seriously. “I know who you work for. I heard you talking to Washington. And I know all about FEETLE.”

His eyes struggled to stay locked on mine. I crossed my arms. Howard whipped his head around to stare at the pet carrier. When he turned back toward me, his eyes were twice their normal size.

“So this really is an alien?” His hand hovered over the carrier. “An alien! I can’t believe it! I mean, I wondered, I’ve been wondering. I thought I heard you say ‘alien’ that first day on the beach. And then there was the whole thing with the rock and of course I read all about it in your notebook but, but still, I never really, really believed it! I thought you were messing with me – that you’d planted the notebook in your room just to tease me. But you aren’t teasing, are you? You’re way too upset.” He slammed his hand against the sand then let go with a shout, like I’d just told him he’d won the lottery. He jumped up and started pacing in front of the carrier.

“An alien! An honest-to-goodness real, live alien! We’d all given up, you know. In fact, I was seriously thinking I’d quit FEETLE. It was just so disappointing, examining and testing all those meteorites and never finding anything. That’s why I gave the little piece to Myk. I could hardly stand to look at it anymore. But!” He pointed at the carrier like maybe I’d forgotten about it. “There’s an alien in there!”

He was shaking with excitement.

What was wrong with him? Had he forgotten what this was really about? Didn’t he even know whose side I was on?

“She’s mine, Howard!” I yelled. “You can’t have her!”

He dismissed me with a wave of his hand and started pacing

again. "But why? Why just this one tiny piece? There were so many, you know, washing up on beaches everywhere, huge, countless pieces. How come we haven't found any others?"

He was so obviously talking to himself; not paying any attention to me. I wanted to scream at him. What did it matter?

Still, all his questions started swarming around in my head. Because if the meteorites had landed in the ocean before washing up on all those beaches, they'd obviously gotten wet. And Jared said water made the eggs hatch. So how come aliens weren't hatching all over the place?

I shook the question away. All that mattered now was Coral's safety.

"You can't keep her. Give her back. Now!" I took a step toward the carrier. But he blocked me.

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't keep her; she's too important. Who knows what kinds of things we'll learn from her - about space, about her planet, about our own evolution. This is what I've been waiting for my whole life! My whole life!" He practically danced in front of me. I itched to slap the silly grin right off his face.

He'd gone completely crazy with excitement. As I watched, I realized how impossible it would be to change his mind, to save Coral, to make things right again. Tears trickled out of my eyes and I swatted them away. Why did I always cry when things got rough? It never did any good. All it did was make my nose run.

I wiped my nose then stared at my hand.

The rock had been covered in my snot the night before Benson hatched. It'd been buried in a pile of soggy Kleenex.

My nose had run the night I'd yelled at Aunt Myk, too. I'd clutched the rock in my hands as I'd cried myself to sleep.

And Coral had hatched the next day.

Jared was wrong. Water didn't make the aliens hatch. My snout did.

The aliens would not be here if it weren't for me. I gave them life. And I'd do whatever it took to protect them.

"Hang on tight, Benson," I said, then sprinted over to Howard's camera and dug it out of the sand.

Howard stopped pacing. "What are you doing?"

I gave him the briefest of smiles then flung the camera toward the pond. Within seconds, it sank into the water.

"You can't do that! Those pictures are priceless!" He sprinted toward the pond. I dashed to the carrier, fumbled with the door and grabbed Coral.

~ ~ ~

If we made it back to Howard's house, I figured we'd be safe. He couldn't get the aliens without telling everyone who he really was. And he wouldn't want my aunt to know he'd been lying all this time. Even if he didn't care about that, I figured he'd lose his job and maybe even his life if he exposed FEETLE.

I was a quick runner. Whenever we ran sprints in P.E., I finished in the top three, even though my legs were shorter than everyone else's. But I didn't count on Howard giving up on the camera so quickly. I'd taken less than ten steps before he splashed his way out of the water and yelled at me to stop. His legs were much longer than mine and I knew he was just as motivated. His house was at least a mile away and I had to get through all those vines before I reached the path. We were doomed.

Then I remembered the waterfall. Switching direction, I raced for

the volcanic wall. I clambered up the side, my feet and fingers digging into the sharp rock as I struggled to get higher. Because of his fear of heights, I figured Howard would never be able to follow.

As I climbed, Howard's yells got louder, closer. When I reached the top and pulled myself over the edge, I turned just in time to see him fall from half-way up.

He landed with a soft thump. The aliens bounced on my head as Howard stared up at us.

I glared at him, pleased by the slightly green color of his cheeks. There was no way he'd risk climbing that wall again.

"You can't get back to the beach from there," he called. "It's too steep. There's no other way down."

"I don't believe you. You're a liar!"

"Besides, there's nowhere for you to go. Except my house." He stood and dusted the sand off his shorts. "I'll be there, waiting for you."

"You can't do a thing in front of my family. You can't tell anyone who you really are. You can't give away your secret agency."

"Of course I can. Don't you realize what you've got on top of your head? Those are aliens!"

I wished I could sock all the wind right out of him. "You can't have them! They've already lost their home. Isn't that enough? They just want to live!"

He shook his head then squinted up at me. "We're not going to kill them, Ruth. We'll take excellent care of them."

"No, you won't. You'll lock them in a cage while a thousand people run tests on them! What kind of life is that?" Why didn't he understand? How could I make him understand?

I swatted the tears from my eyes, wishing I'd stop doing that. I

needed to concentrate. I took off my cap, wrapped my hand around Benson and held him out toward Howard. "This is Benson. His favorite book is *Charlotte's Web* and he's an excellent artist. He likes to watch Jacques Cousteau DVDs and he loves dolphins. The first time he saw a real dolphin, he had the same look in his eyes that you do when you talk about Hawaii." I gathered Coral into my other hand and held her out. "This is Coral. She's not as old as Benson but she's already just as smart. She loves seafood and she loves your island more than anything." I cradled them both to my side, took a deep breath and kept going.

"You said Aunt Myk was your Hopoe because she showed you how to appreciate Hawaii again. Don't the aliens deserve to enjoy and appreciate life, too?"

"They still can, they still will," Howard said, sounding a bit whiny about it. "Besides, I think you missed the point of that legend. Hopoe was a rock, remember? And yet, she still danced. The legend means that happiness comes from inside us. They'll be happy. They'll be fine. Like I said, we'll take excellent care of them. You have to trust me."

"Trust? You?" I laughed, but not in a good way. "You're so excited you're not even thinking straight!" I took a deep breath, trying to calm down so I could think. I needed to make Howard understand. I needed to make him care about these aliens as much as I did.

I squinted at him. "Do you know what really happened to Matt's alien collection? Benson took it. You were right. You can catch a real alien with fake ones. Benson loved those aliens because he needed a family. It's why we're here. We came so he wouldn't be the only alien on the planet. We came to give him a sister to love. You can't cage

them, Howard. It's not right, it's not fair. They're too smart and they feel, just like us!"

Howard looked at the ground then kicked his foot against the sand. "But," he choked out the word, cleared his throat, then said it again, stronger this time as he blinked up at us. "But. People need to know about them, we need to study them! This is a matter of world-wide concern, international security – "

"Oh, come on! Really? They don't mean us any harm. They deserve our respect. You used to know that! When you were a kid, pretending you had an alien in your closet, when you lined them up in your window. When did your love for aliens turn into a control thing? You don't own them, Howard, and you have no right to take their freedom. They want to be free. They deserve to be... free."

I waited, nearly breathless, for his answer. I couldn't think of anything else to say and time was running out, for me and for them. I bit my lip, willing him to understand what I'd just figured out myself.

And that's when Coral sprang from my hand and headed right for Howard.

Moa Waterfowl

~ ~ ~

“Coral, no!” I stuffed Benson in my cap, jammed it on my head then crawled down after her.

The same rooster-like bird Coral had chased on the beach had swept down from the sky, landing less than five feet from Howard. And Coral was flying down the volcanic wall as fast as her tiny legs could scramble. New tears squeezed out from my eyes.

She was fast, nimble, skating across the surface of the wall without a care in the world. I lumbered behind her, wishing I could fly, hoping I wouldn't fall because that would certainly put an end to everything.

By the time my feet found the ground, she stood right next to the bird, chanting the “uh huh huh” sound at the top of her lungs. A small smile flickered on Howard's face as he crouched down. He was less than a foot away. All he had to do was scoop her into his hand. I sank to the sand. It was over.

“Go ahead,” I shouted at him. “Grab her. What are you waiting for?”

He didn't move and he didn't answer. He just tilted his head a bit to the right and continued to watch Coral scream at the bird.

Finally, he said, "It's a moa waterfowl." His voice was soft and low. "Did you know you can only find them on this island? They say all domestic roosters can be traced to this bird. Pretty, isn't it? Although the alien doesn't seem to care for it much."

I shook my head. How could he sound so calm? Had he no feelings at all?

"Aren't you going to take her? Now's your chance. You know I can't really stop you. I can't beat you."

He tore his gaze away from Coral and smiled at me instead. "But you did. You already have. You're right. About everything you said. She deserves a happy life. She should go home with you."

Tears of relief streamed down my cheeks. I'd never felt so tired and so wide awake all at the same time. I'd saved them.

I crept closer, barely making a sound, but the bird ruffled its feathers and flew away. Coral turned toward me, a grin pulling at her cheeks as she pointed to where the bird had been. I reached for her and brought her up to my face.

"You'll see more of them, I'm sure of it." I ran a finger over the ruby dot on her forehead. "Be happy, Coral. I love you." I placed a kiss on the dot. She wiggled in my hand then turned a brilliant yellow. "Oh, and stay out of the water until you grow the skin under your legs. It shouldn't be too much longer." I placed her on the ground.

She smoothed the sand next to her then scratched the words into it. *Me? Stay here?*

I nodded. "Yes. You can stay." But oh, how I'd miss her!

My eyes swelled with fresh tears as I pulled Benson from my hair.

He blinked and cocked his head as I held him in my hand. It was hard to swallow. My throat felt like my heart had swelled right up into it. My nose was so clogged it was nearly impossible to breathe. But I forced the words out. "I love you so much, Benson. I'm going to miss you. Every day."

He pushed his squashed up toes against my cheek. Turning a milky white, his marble-sized eyes grew even larger as he stared at me. He shook his head, slowly at first, then faster. A low rumble gurgled in the back of his throat.

I placed him next to Coral. A tear rolled down my chin and splashed against the sand. Benson's whole body shook while he scribbled a message with his toe.

You. Sad. Don't cry. Not leave you.

Crouching next to him, I rubbed his chin then tilted his face toward mine. "This is where you belong. You'll be free here. You and Coral. It's the way it should be."

He wrapped his toes around my finger, then bumped his head against my hand. Stepping back, he scribbled again. *Thank you.*

I nodded. Swallowed. Stood. Tore my eyes from Benson to face Howard instead. Howard looked surprised, completely shocked.

"We better go," I told him. "I've got a plane to catch."

It felt like a thick rubber band linked me to Benson and it grew tighter and tauter with every step I took. For several moments, I couldn't turn around. I couldn't stand to watch the distance between us grow. The band was bound to break soon and my heart was sure to shatter.

And yet I did look back. One time, one final glimpse. Benson and Coral stood side by side under the waterfall, their heads tilted up to catch the spray as it danced across their faces. I wiped my eyes then

walked on. A terrible, lonely ache weighed me down, like I was dragging a huge volcanic rock behind me.

Halfway down the path, Howard put his arm around my shoulder. I didn't even wince.

"It's going to be okay," he said. "We did the right thing."

I nodded. I'd never hold Benson or Coral again. But my heart would hold that last image of them, my friends, playing in the waterfall for as long as I lived.

When his house came into view, I saw Aunt Myk waiting for us on the front porch with a bright and breezy smile.

Howard squeezed my shoulder. "She's happy here, too. She really is."

"I know." I sniffled. Sighed. Looked up at him. "Just take good care of her, okay?"

"I will." He grinned, then cocked his head. "Wanna race me?"

I nodded, needing to run, to do something to release all the pain and the tears and the heaviness. The wind rippled through my hair as I raced alongside my aunt's new husband. And I began to feel lighter. Freer. Not quite as free as the beads of water leaping from the waterfall, but close. My laughter blended with Howard's as I flew through the sand.

It's been almost a year since I left Hawaii. And I know I'll never stop missing Coral, or Benson, or my aunt Myk. Every once in a while a heavy kind of emptiness sneaks up on me and takes over my whole heart. But then I remember how happy they looked that last day. And sometimes I'm able to smile through the tears.

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About the Author

Diane Owens manages the Orion Middle School Library where she gets to hang out with two of her favorite things: middle grade books and the people who read them. She also helps young writers at the school through her participation in the Writers' Workshop class.

You can visit Diane online at allwritewithme.com. The site includes writing tips and provides a safe, encouraging environment for young writers to showcase their writing.

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