

Chapter 2

Germaine's Tale

Silver Sky squinted. His eyes were trying to focus on a fuzzy ball of brown and white fur that scuttled across the dusty floor.

"Rat indeed!" grumped the fuzz ball. "The plastic horse thinks I'm a rat! Not very civil of him to just guess before asking. It's insulting, really. Do I look like a rat to you? Rat, hmm? What manners!"

Whatever the fuzz ball was, it was hopping mad, and shaking a walking stick at Silver Sky.

"I'm sorry," said the horse, feeling mighty flustered, and eying the stick with some suspicion. "It's just that you look like one, I think. I've never actually seen a rat before."

"Oh, is that how it is? He's never seen a rat before, yet he thinks he can spot one in a dusty attic with no trouble at all," said the perturbed ball of fur to no one in particular.

Rebecca had finally managed to climb up high enough to stick her head out of the top of the box to see what all the fuss was about. "Well, if you're not a rat, what are you then?" she asked.

"Oh!" squeaked the angry rodent. "There are two of you. I might have known; the box is marked *Odds & Ends*. So which are you then, the odd or the end?"

Rebecca wasn't sure what to make of that question, other than to feel rather insulted by it.

"I'm not an odd or an end," she grumped. "I am Rebecca, and this is Silver Sky," she added pointing to the model horse. "Who are you, then?" she asked tentatively.

"I'm not sure I want to tell you now," huffed the rodent.

"Oh, come now. Rebecca told you who we are, and as you can see, she's a doll and I'm a horse," said Silver Sky.

"Could have been a mule, but I didn't say anything," retorted the fur ball.

"And I thank you kindly," replied the model horse, rolling his eyes skyward. "But I must point out; we haven't seen anyone else in a horribly long time. We'd like to know your name."

"Oh, very well. I am Madame Germaine the 5th, daughter of Madame Germaine the 4th, daughter of Madame Germaine the 3rd, daughter of Madame Germaine the 2nd, daughter of the royal Matriarch and Grand Liberator Madame Germaine the 1st of the Samantha Gerbil Colony," she said, obviously very proud of her genealogy.

"You all had the same names? How dreadfully boring," Silver Sky said while Rebecca counted the "Germaines" on her fingers.

Germaine looked genuinely aghast. "It's tradition!" she squeaked, smacking the tip of her walking stick on the ground with a resounding thud, as if that should settle the matter.

"Where are the others, then?" asked Rebecca.

Germaine's face fell. "All gone, I'm afraid."

"Gone?" asked Silver Sky and Rebecca at once.

“Yes, one by one, they have gone. I’m the only one left.” Then, unprompted, Germaine launched into a story, as though it had been rehearsed for this day.

“Once upon a time,” she started, as most stories do, “in the Child Samantha’s fifth year, as time is reckoned, the first colony of this house was established by the husband and wife team of Madam Germaine and Reubin. They had three children; Germaine the 2nd, Reubin Jr., and Walden.”

Silver Sky and Rebecca clambered out of the box and sat next to Germaine to listen to her story.

“They were five Gerbils living in a small plastic cage, and, though they dug and dug, they could not get out.” Germaine scratched at the floor in mock demonstration.

“Later that year, though, Timothy got a kitten for his birthday by the name of Shadow. Shadow was a bad, mean kitten. He would lurk next to the cage and chase the family around the edge of the cage when Timothy wasn’t paying attention to him.” She acted out the scene while Rebecca and Silver Sky watched.

“Then, one dark and terrible day, when Samantha and Timothy’s family were away, Shadow pushed their plastic cage off of the table. Germaine and Reubin did their best to get the children to safety under a bookshelf the kitten couldn’t reach. In went Reubin Jr., Walden and finally Germaine the 2nd. But as Madam Germaine looked back, she saw that the senior Reubin was under the paw of Shadow. She ran back to try and help, but she was too late, he was gone,” she said with a sniff.

Silver Sky and Rebecca had scooted closer, frightened, but wanting to know how it ended.

“Shadow saw that Germaine was going to put up a fight defending her children. Hissing, he leapt at her, claws bared, yellow eyes beaming in anticipation of the hunt. She barely dodged the swipe of his paws, ducking behind him and biting his tail.” As she spoke, she continued to play out the action in the dusty floor in front of the two toys.

“He howled so loud that she stopped in her tracks, surprised at what she’d just done. A terrible mistake,” she said, shaking her head, “for he rounded on her, and bit back wildly. He missed her body, but got her tail, and swung her across the room, where she landed next to the bookcase where her children were hiding. No one knows what happened to the last inch of her tail, but the children hurriedly pulled her under the bookcase, so that Shadow couldn’t reach her again.” Germaine leaned heavily on her walking stick. Telling the story was wearisome.

“What happened after that?” asked Rebecca and Silver Sky in unison.

“After that, Germaine was left to care for the children on her own. Samantha was horribly distraught, thinking she had lost her favorite pets. The gerbil family couldn’t come out of hiding, you see, as now Shadow was always on the lookout. They couldn’t so much as try and steal a crumb from the kitchen without the kitten chasing them away.”

“That’s when the second colony arrived. Another pair of gerbils, Floy and Rogers, were brought home for Samantha. But they, too, soon began to be harassed by Shadow.

One night, when Shadow was asleep in Timothy’s room, Germaine snuck out from under the bookshelf where she and her children lived behind, and ran over to the cage the new arrivals were living in. She knew they had to be set free, or they, like her husband, would not live to see another day. Carefully, she climbed to the top of the cage, where a small latch held the lid on. As she pushed with all of her might, the latch slowly

gave way. Together they were all able to push the lid off. But when they did, it fell to the floor with a mighty crash! The gerbils barely made it to the bookcase before Shadow was there snuffling about. He was a very mad cat for at least three days after that, I bet!”

After making sure Rebecca and Silver Sky looked suitably impressed, Germaine continued. “That’s how she became known as the Grand Liberator. Any time The Family brought back anything in a cage, she and the others would work to free them, be it a gerbil, hamster or mouse. Eventually, there was a flourishing community living in the walls, basement and attic. It was decided that they needed to move beyond the house and explore outside, where they met voles and shrews and squirrels, and all sorts of other animals. It was much more free then the house, so many never came back.”

“Didn’t Sam get sad?” interrupted Rebecca.

“According to the stories, she was at first, each time her new pets would go missing. But she eventually caught on to what was going on. She began leaving food out for her missing pets.”

“Yep, that sounds like my Sam,” beamed Rebecca.

“But eventually, Samantha left. Two years later Timothy followed,” continued Germaine.

“Wait! What?” interrupted Rebecca and Silver Sky, at once.