

HEROES & OREOS

“Mom!”

The scream startled the sleeping bats hiding in the upper eaves. They squealed and chattered then tucked into one another, shivering under their paper-thin wings.

Bexleigh watched them as she rose out of the nightmare. She looked around in a daze, searching for her mother, holding desperately onto the sense of her from the dream. But then her senses cleared, and she felt the cool earth beneath her and the prickly straw in her hair.

“It was just a dream.”

By her feet, Cecil was still asleep. His long eyelashes pressed down against his pink skin. She slid out from under the horse blanket into the damp air that made her shiver. Her teeth chattered as she hoisted her backpack onto her shoulder, hugged her arms across her chest, and tiptoed out of the stall. At his stall next to them, Buster nickered and reached out to nuzzle her hand.

“Good boy,” she said, brushed his silky nose with her fingers and gave him a kiss, inhaling the soft scent of him.

Then she hurried around the barn to get her morning chores done. When she finished and the sound of the horses munching their breakfast filled the room, she yanked open the big barn doors. The warm morning sun flooded the barn transforming the dark wooded stable into a thing of beauty, erasing the cares of the long night, the nightmare, and the creepy pig faced creature fast asleep in the hay. The dust she had created by her sweeping created an aura of sparkling magic.

“Where are you going?”

She jumped. “Oh!” Cecil appeared by the open barn doors with his hood off and spoke in a pitiful tone. His lavender eyes held a world of cares and his ears pressed sadly against his head.

“I need to go home. I-I can’t go to school like this. I stink like horse manure.” Bexleigh felt sorry for this odd creature, but her blood rushed to her cheeks in eagerness to leave and process this strange night. She left him to retrieve her horse and led Buster to the open barn doors. She hesitated and paused to look back at Cecil.

“I like the smell of horse manure,” he said. His ears perked forward and he smiled and blinked. Transfixed by his face, she searched it for error. Even now in the sunlight it was real. He was real.

“Good for you.” she said. “Then you are exactly where you should be. I do not like to stink. Look, Terry is on his way. Talk to you after school.” She mounted the big gray horse and turned to leave, the clacking of his hooves on the brick floor echoed through the barn.

Cecil frowned and his ears swiveled back and forth on his head. He pulled his hood over them and stepped in front of Buster, right beneath his wide chest. Buster snorted on him and raised a hoof, ready to strike as if he could see him.

“I must advise you of a serious matter,” Cecil said, and put his pig-paw up to stop them. “You told me last night you can see and hear the others. That is good. Now here is where you can help me: listen to them. Listen for clues about a missing item . . . hidden or stolen. They will say ‘blue gems,’ or ‘missing piece of the robe.’ That is what we need to find. Then tell me as soon as possible what you hear and what you see.”

A chill ran up her spine as hungry darkness crept into his eyes. The cool pools of lavender filled with deep purple in his rims like tears. Her stomach burned with uncertainty and hunger.

“I-I I don’t know, Cecil. I really need to go. I’d rather sing and get rid of them. Can you please move.” Bexleigh said and pulled Buster around him. She looked down the valley road and saw Terry’s red pick-up truck.

“Wait!” Cecil said. “How could I forget? Don’t let them see you can see. Don’t *ever* look them dead in the eye.”

Bexleigh hopped onto Buster’s smooth gray back, and he danced in eagerness for the ride ahead. “Got it,” she said, “I will keep my eyes averted. No problemo.”

She grabbed a handful of mane, kicked Buster, and off they went. The big horse pounded the earth with the weightless girl on his back. He galloped up the hill, around the edge of the field, then into the woods. He leapt with grace over an old low fence, a fallen oak tree, and an overgrown bush. Thick waves of relief flooded Bexleigh as the distance grew between them, the barn, and the little pig man inside.

“Good job, Buster!” Bexleigh, breathless and filled with the thrill of the ride, pulled him up to a soft trot and patted him on the neck. They arrived at the ridge above the little house just

as the rosy glow of dawn appeared above the treeline. It bathed the valley in soothing tones of peach and yellow and made the dewey green fingertips of the treetops sparkle. She walked Buster down the driveway and put him in his stall, where she tossed a flake down. Koolio, the orange tabby barn cat, appeared on the upper beam and rubbed his face in the rough wood. He jumped down and brushed up against her leg.

“Good morning Koolio!” She patted him, threw a handful of kibble in his bowl, and then jogged to the house.

Silence greeted her as if the house itself were still deep asleep. She yawned, longing to rest on the big soft couch she could see through the kitchen archway, but summoned energy and crept up the stairs and past the bedrooms on the second floor. Doors were cracked open but no one stirred, so she chalked it up as luck, then continued up the stairs to her bedroom. She pressed the door and it squeaked as it turned on its black hinges. Freddi was not in her bed. Bexleigh’s mind raced for a reason. *Probably got scared again and is sleeping with Aunt Pru.*

She pulled the robe from her backpack and locked it in the chest at the foot of her bed. Once she secured the robe, she showered, and let the hot water wash the hay and barn dust from her scalp. She put on jeans, and a clean hunter green t-shirt. This one bore a red badge embroidered with crowns and hatchets on the front, and block letters on the back that read, *Dublin Fire Brigade*. Her father, a volunteer firefighter, made it his mission to visit his fellow warriors at fire stations wherever he traveled. He brought her back his memories in the form of t-shirts. It was pretty much all she had to wear these days—ever since her “growth spurt.” She smiled at herself in the mirror. Green was a good color on her. It matched her eyes and the red waves of her hair.

Back on Buster they cantered up the hill. How peaceful the morning can be when she doesn’t have to face Aunt Pru’s frown and rudeness. The morning dew drenched her bangs and Buster’s legs as they flew through the tall grass. Soon, Bexleigh’s feet were also soaked and frigid, but her spirit warmed and rose with the sun.

Pretty good way to start the day.

“Good morning!” She called out, breathless and giddy, as she and Buster clip-clopped into the barn. She dismounted, put Buster in his stall and looked around. The barn was empty with no sign of the pig-faced creature. Relieved, she ran from the barn, down to the empty school hallway, and slammed her home room door open.

“Sorry!” She chirped. At the same time, Secretary Schmizzlebeld broke the silence with squeamish gaiety.

“Greetings, students! Happy Friday, boys and gals, and happy assembly day!”

The class cheered, and several students lofted their pencils in the air. A wad of paper struck Bexleigh’s ear. She didn’t need to turn around—she knew it was a gift from Sam. He had perfect aim.

“Homeroom teachers, please gather your students and head to the gymnasium. This is so exciting...I love it!!” A sharp crackle and pop were followed by a male hollering, “hang it up!”

Sam moved swiftly across the classroom and grabbed Bexleigh’s shoulders. “Easy, girl; whoa, nelly girl.”

“Ugh! Get off!!” She pushed his hands away. They ran up the bleacher steps in unison, laughing and he dove into an empty aisle.

“M’lady.” He swept his arm out for her to sit beside him. The two sat with their homeroom class on the hard, wooden bleachers. The gym echoed with the shouts and chatter of hundreds of students, the clomp of boots, and the squeak of sneakers on the slick gymnasium floor. When the principal walked up to the podium, a wave of shushes rippled through the crowd.

“Welcome and good morning, Butterbury Blue Boars!”

The room erupted in belly-filled boar bellows.

“Our assembly theme today is *personal best*. Today we celebrate those among our student body who give their best to our educational community to make our Boars shine.”

After another roar of the Boars, the assistant principal came forward and announced, “Welcome Butterbury’s very own award winning choir, Sounder Blues!! Everyone please join.”

Twenty-eight students gathered up front and sang three songs, ending with the school anthem, “Hail to the Boars.” At the anthem, all in the gymnasium stood up, swung their arms, and cheered in the silliness of it. Balloons were released, ticker tape thrown, and a jacket and several hats were cast into the mix from the baseball section. When everyone settled down, the athletic director stepped up to the podium.

“Today we honor those who have given their best to our community in athletics, arts, and service.” He sat down, and Terry walked to the podium.

There he is! Beleigh leaned forward with warmth for her new friend.

“Bexleigh Blake, please join me in the front.” Terry scanned the bleachers for her.

The warmth turned to cold horror while a murmur of surprise rose from the bleachers.

“Me?” Bexleigh slipped out of her seat into the foot gutter and attempted to disappear.

“Go ahead!” Sam reached down, grabbed her arm and forced Bexleigh to wave.

“Stop it!!” She laughed and dragged herself out of the stair pocket, then walked on legs that felt more like noodles down the wooden bleachers and across the gymnasium to the podium. Her sneakers squeaked with every step matching the cries in her soul that begged her to become invisible.

“Bexleigh,” Terry beamed at her. “Today we want to acknowledge you for giving your best to rescue our competitor’s horses from a dangerous situation. You were brave and showed you cared not only for the well-being of our visitors’ animals, but for the well-being of our school’s reputation. You have proven your skill in horsemanship and kindness, and we would like to honor you with a full scholarship. Would you like to be on the Cross-Country Horsemanship Team?”

Her mouth opened to say thank-you, but no words came out. She could only nod her head wildly and smile. The students whooped and applauded, and then from the edge of the bleachers, a teammate came forward with a helmet in his hands. He handed the helmet to her.

“Bexleigh, in honor of your mother’s memory, we give you her helmet and her number. She wore this helmet and this number years ago, and we want you to have it. We are thrilled to have you on the team.”

“Thank you!” Bexleigh’s eyes welled with tears of sadness and joy as she took the helmet from him. The smooth top felt like silk to her and she longed to hear the praise of her mother’s voice. She was the parent who gave Bexleigh words that made her feel like she could do anything, but mostly that she was cherished. She imagined her mother with the helmet on *her* head. She smiled weakly, waved to everyone, then walked quickly back past the bleachers and left the gymnasium. She ran beneath the stairway, sat on a bench in the corner, and clutched the helmet to her chest.

Sarah stepped out of the gymnasium into the stairwell where Bexleigh sat. She walked over and sat next to her. Bexleigh was surprised at how her tears came so quickly as if they had been waiting years for the chance to flow.

“Congratulations! I was just on my way to the bathroom and saw you over here.” Sarah said. “Are you okay?”

Bexleigh rubbed her eyes dry. “I’m fine. This helmet belonged to my mom. Sometimes I cry about her, and I don’t know why. I feel like a dork when I blubber. I hate it.”

“I know it’s hard. It must be awful. I’m so sorry.” Sarah put her hands out. “May I?”

Bexleigh set the helmet in her hands. Sarah ran her pale fingers over the fierce wild boar sketched in swirls of turquoise and navy on each side.. The sheen of the colors was worn down and the helmet had little nicks and dents. Bexleigh knew the helmet had been well used.

“This helmet is so cool! You must be so happy to have your own mom’s helmet.” Sarah held the helmet up and admired it.

Nothing can make up for what happened to my mom, Bexleigh thought. “Happy? Not really. Yeah, it’s nice, but she’s gone.”

“I know and I’m sorry. Her funeral was beautiful. Pastor Bob did a good job telling all those nice stories about her.” Sarah said.

Sarah smiled and handed Bexleigh the helmet.

“Hey, are you free today . . . after school to come over to my house?” Bexleigh asked, eager to change the subject. “I–I have a problem I need help with.”

Sarah paused and her dark eyes blinked quickly in thought. They hardly knew each other, and Bexleigh suddenly felt foolish and wondered why.

“It’s okay, never mind. It’s stupid,” Bexleigh said, and stood up. She brushed herself off. She could figure it out herself.

“No, it’s okay. I can come. No problem.” Then Sarah smiled. “But–do you have riding practice today?”

Bexleigh looked at the helmet and laughed. “I–I don’t know! I’ll let you know later.”

Five hours later, the dismissal bell rang. Bexleigh ran up to Sarah by the bus loading zone. “I’m free today! No practice. Can you come over?”

“Sure, but I need to use your phone when I get there to tell my parents.”

Sam slid out from a crowd of students next to the girls. They huddled by one of the yellow buses that rumbled to life, idled and spewed toxic fumes over the students.

“Uck I can’t breathe!” He shoved the girls away from the bus. “What are we talking about?”

“Just how my new friend is going to use my phone when she comes to my house.”

“Oh, they don’t believe in phones . . . part of their new experiment in living naturally.

They send pigeons and ride mail ponies around town.” Sam winked at Sarah. “You see those pigeons that poop all over the cars in the village? Yep, Bexleigh’s.” He swung his backpack over his shoulder and sauntered away.

Bexleigh turned to Sarah. “He’s a nut.”

“A cute nut!” Sarah added.

“He is such a snoop. He wants to be a detective when he grows up. If he ever grows up, that is.”

The girls laughed and climbed onto the white charter bus that drove a small crew of students up into the foothills. Sam climbed on after them. The girls ignored him and found a seat. He slumped into the far corner of his seat across from them and announced, “Nap time!” Bexleigh became completely distracted with Sarah or she would have pelted him with lunch leftovers. Carrots worked nicely.

The girls leapt off the bus at the top of Bexleigh’s long driveway.

“Race ya!” Bexleigh said and took off.

The black paved driveway ran down a hill into an open valley. The two raced down the steep driveway loudly, past the horse barn to Bexleigh’s little fieldstone house tucked against the side of the hill. A grove of towering pines stood guard against the wind.

Sarah won. “Wow, you’re fast in those flats!” Bexleigh panted and grabbed the pain in her side. Both girls leaned on their knees. Bexleigh fell against the front door and lifted the black metal latch.

“I’m on the track team! We didn’t have practice today either.”

“The house doesn’t have any outside locks, see? Mom and Dad restored it to be like the original from the 1700s. All the doors lock only from the inside with a bolt. You can’t lock them when you leave.”

“It’s cool! So pretty. I love the way the house is right on the hillside, and you have the beautiful meadow out front.” Sarah walked toward the green expanse.

“Oh, yeah, that’s nice for Buster. There is a river at the bottom he likes to go and cool off – down there, where you see the line of trees. I like it here. Well, I used to. A lot has changed.”

“Do you have any neighbors?” Sarah asked. “We have so many kids on our street. My mom babysits everyone, so our house is full of kids all the time. She has this huge craft cabinet and they do tie-dye t-shirts for every outing they go on. It’s fun for them, and I like to help, but

sometimes it's really annoying.”

“Sam lives about a half mile up the river. I used to see him a lot. We played in the woods as kids—our tree fort is out there somewhere. He used to row down the river in his canoe to visit. My mom made us cookies, so he came over a lot,” A surge of warmth filled her from the memory, followed by a dull ache in her gut.

“Then my Aunt Prudence moved in. One day when Sam came down the river to visit, she saw him from the kitchen window and freaked out.” Bexleigh continued. “She didn't know him, so ran out there and screamed like a Banshee at him. She accused him of trespassing and even though he said he was my friend, she made him leave. I was in my room reading and had no idea what was going on, so I ignored it. Anyways, here is the grand entrance.”

Bexleigh led Sarah into the mudroom, where they kicked off their shoes. Then she opened another door and they entered the kitchen. The plastered white walls of the old kitchen contrasted with the dark wood trim, and the beams that stretched across the ceiling held all sorts of pots, pans, and cooking tools on hooks. On the wall, an enormous fireplace with a heavy wood mantle and brick hearth held logs of burned wood in its belly. Bexleigh scanned the kitchen and searched for any of the dark shadowy creatures. It looked safe. For now.

“There's the phone.” Bexleigh pointed to a vintage call box on the wall as she went to the refrigerator. “It works. We had it converted to a push-button, so you don't have to dial.”

Sarah stared at the kitchen's overhead décor. “Are all of your pots and pans hanging up here?”

“Pretty much. Yeah. As you can see, it's an old house, and we don't have any cabinets, just a built-in over there for our dishes, so we have to hang our stuff from the beams.” Bexleigh poured two glasses of milk, grabbed her notebook out of her bag, and waited for Sarah to finish her phone call.

“All set!” Sarah hung up the phone.

“Let's go to my room and go over my notes.” Bexleigh led the way, and the girls climbed up three flights of twisting stairs, past two bedrooms, then arrived at a steep set of stairs. It was the attic entrance.

“Be careful on these stairs,” Bexleigh said. “My bedroom is up there.”

The girls carefully climbed the staircase, balancing milk, backpacks, and excitement, entered the room and closed the bedroom door behind them. The latch clicked with satisfaction

in its place sealing the room from invaders. The attic room, high up in the rafters of the home, had vaulted ceilings and exposed beams that cut through the air from side to side. There were two tiny square windows cut into the deep plaster walls—one captured sunrise, the other, sunset. Two twin spindle beds sat in the center of the room spread with multi-colored quilts.

At the foot of each bed sat a large trunk. Rusty brass latches held the trunks closed and locked. They were covered with old stickers from around the world—weary travelers full of interesting tales to tell. Other than that, the room was sparsely decorated. A single spindle dresser of drawers stood against the wall.

Bexleigh jumped on a bed, grabbed a stuffed St. Bernard off the pillow, and held it out. “This is George!”

Sarah smiled, patted George on the head, and sat down next to Bexleigh. She looked around the lofty space. “You have your own bathroom all the way up here? I like it.”

Bexleigh leaned over the foot of the bed and unlocked the cedar trunk with a skeleton key tied around George’s neck. She pushed the robe aside and wondered if she should show it to Sarah. Not yet. Instead, she pulled out a bag of Oreos. “Cookie?”

Sarah accepted a cookie, put it in between her front teeth, and pulled two books out of her bag.

“What’s that?” Bexleigh sat back down and grabbed the yellow book. “Concordance? What does that mean? Oh, is it about the Concord—the bird? Do they dance?”

Sarah spoke between bites. “It’s amazing. If you want to look words up in the Bible, this is what you need. It lists every place that word is found. I thought it would be good for today.”

“But I didn’t even tell you what I need help with. Is that other book the Bible? I don’t know . . . it seems silly to trust a book of ancient stories.”

“I always have it with me. You said you were in trouble, and so I decided to bring it. People in trouble usually need answers. We don’t have to use it, but it always has the answers I need.”

Bexleigh then wondered if she should tell the entire truth to Sarah. Sarah did not know there had been a dark snake creature that turned into a rat and then ran away from her. Bexleigh didn’t want to scare her new friend away, and it would be way too freaky to tell her. Instead, Bexleigh took the Bible from her and leafed through the pages.

She opened to a page with bright-yellow highlights. “Wow—look at these marks. Don’t

you get in trouble for the pen marks?”

Sarah smiled and pressed her finger on the highlighted page. “I don’t just read this, I study it. This has all the answers we need. I promise. Trust me. Once we get started, you’ll see.” She slipped her long dark hair into a ponytail, then pulled the Bible out of Bexleigh’s hands. She nodded to the pink notebook on the bed titled *The Cecil Diaries*.

“Is this what you want me to know about? Tell me everything.”