

## The Greggs Family Zoo of Odd and Marvelous Creatures

By Kristin Luna

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A PATCH of sky over the neighbor's acreage turned a milky purple, like an old, healing bruise. Fourteen-year-old Alice watched the odd occurrence from the fence line, her legs resting between the dry, wooden beams.

Then, a peculiar-colored horse fell from the opening. Its weight met the earth with a muffled crack. The great horse whined, its eyes wide with shock. It attempted to rise, but only fell back down.

Alice scrambled to the top of the fence for a better look. She watched in horror as the horse panted and writhed on the ground. She wrestled with herself if she should help the creature. Back in Chicago, she wouldn't hesitate to help a hurt bird or dog. But things seemed different in Nebraska, where a dark, indigo horse with a broken, splintering horn between its inky eyes fell from the sky.

She gritted her teeth and hopped over the fence. Her grandparents wouldn't be happy to know she'd trespassed onto the neighbor's property.

The unusual horse seemed wary of her presence, so she knelt within a few feet of its head. The horse's eyes followed her cautiously. Its mane showed strands of silver between the deep purples and blues. The hair continued down around its neck and onto its chest.

"You sure are hairy, aren't ya?" she muttered.

The horse's ankle swelled rapidly. Alice moved a little closer slowly bringing her hand to the horse's shoulder. She hesitated briefly before laying it on the soft, indigo hair.

"It's gonna be alright," Alice cooed.

The sound of approaching hoofbeats drew Alice's gaze upward. A cowboy directed his jet-black horse close to the great, indigo beast without glancing at Alice.

Under his weatherworn hat, the old man's face was like a crude mask with small, blue marbles peeking out of the folds as eyes. A rolled cigarette rested in the corner of his mouth, a small chimney for smoke to move in and out.

Despite the cowboy's leathery appearance, he jumped off his horse with surprising agility. He walked toward the girl and the bluish-purple creature.

"Now ain't this somethin'," he mumbled. His voice was low, and his cigarette bounced with every word. "You know what you're lookin' at, kid?" The blue marbles looked directly at her.

"Looks like a unicorn to me," Alice said casually, staring right back into the old man's eyes.

"Sure is." The old man's eyebrows arched. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Depends." Alice shrugged.

"Depends?" The old man repeated incredulously.

"What's it worth to you?" Alice asked. If she'd learned anything from her poor neighborhood in Chicago, it was how much secrets were worth.

"I like your style, kid. Reminds me of a smart aleck I used to know." The man smiled, revealing two rows of browning teeth.

"Is it broken?" Alice asked, looking at the swelling leg.

The old man considered the horse. "Nah. Just a sprain, looks like."

Alice sighed with relief.

"Where'd you come from? You with the Wamsleys or Zimmermans?" the man asked, rolling up his flannel sleeves. He bent down to the indigo horse and put a toughened hand on its thick neck. The unicorn's body relaxed under the man's touch.

"Wamsleys. Betsy and Ralph are my grandparents."

"They puttin' you to work for the summer? Detasslin' or some such?"

"Yeah, that's what they want me to do." Alice hung her head and sighed. She imagined how boring it would be to break the tips off of corn in the summer heat.

"Not what you want to do, is it?"

"No."

"What's your name, kid?" The old man extended his hand.

"Alice," she said, taking his hand.

“I’m John Greggs. And I got me an idea, Alice. My knees aren’t what they used to be. How about you help me out on my farm for the summer?”

Alice smiled.

“I’ll take that as a yes. I’ll come by later to talk to Ralph and Bea. You go on now and tell ’em you found yourself a job, and I’ll fix this old girl up.”

Alice woke with the sunrise the next morning. She pulled on a pair of pants and her orange West Communities YMCA Summer Day Camp T-shirt. The shirt was starting to get tight across her shoulders, and moth holes let the light in on one side. She had received it with a free summer camp membership, an anonymous donation for underprivileged youth in her neighborhood. It was the best summer Alice ever had.

She snuck down the stairs and shut the front door quietly behind her. Alice walked down the gravel road to Greggs’ brick house.

Greggs sat on an old, wooden rocking chair on the front porch, smoking a cigarette and holding a steaming mug.

“Mornin’,” Greggs hooted.

“Morning,” Alice replied.

“Those the best shoes you got?” Greggs asked, scratching under his cowboy hat.

Irritated, Alice replied, “These are the only shoes I’ve got.”

Greggs shrugged. “Those’ll have to do. I’ll get you a pair of boots when those wear down in a week or two.”

Alice bit her lip, feeling heat brush her cheeks. The girls at school made fun of her raggedy tennis shoes. She had to put duct tape on the laces to keep them from breaking.

A cloud of dust ushered in a new, green pickup truck on Greggs’ drive. A sharply dressed, heavysset man got out of the cab. His stomach spilled over the top of his jeans, and his face was the color of a cherry tomato. He carried a hunting knife about the size of her forearm on his belt.

“Hi there, John. How’re y’all doin’?” The man approached tipping his hat.

The man gave Alice a curious look and leaned closer. Alice noted that he smelled like mint and chewing tobacco. “And who are you little lady?”

“She’s helping me for the summer, Artie.” Greggs’ bones creaked as he pushed himself from the rocking chair. He moved down the steps and stood next to Alice.

“Taking care of the unicorns?” The man winked at Alice, who stiffened at the mention of the creatures.

Greggs’ face remained ornery and cold. “You know I ain’t got no unicorns, Mayor. Those were nothin’ but parlor tricks my daddy put on for out-of-towners.”

“Really? Was it a parlor trick that killed my daddy’s brother when he was just a boy?”

“He was drunk and trespassing on our land. Wisdom says he was lookin’ for trouble. Besides, it was half a century ago. I think it’s lime you stopped beatin’ that dead horse.”

Mayor Artie’s face soured.

“What can I do you for, Artie?” Greggs grumbled.

“I know you’ve heard about the coyotes eating the local cattle. The Browns’ farm was attacked just last night. I’m stopping by all the farms out here, making sure your livestock is safe.”

“Okay,” Greggs mumbled.

“I’ve been talking to Sheriff Martell. We’ve been thinkin’ about paying all you farmers a courtesy visit. Checkin’ on your fences, securing them up for you.”

“Well, that’s mighty kind of you, Mayor. But I’d rather no one come on my property without due cause.” Greggs folded his arms in front of his chest.

“Coyotes gettin’ at your livestock ain’t proper cause?” Artie raised an eyebrow.

“Nothin’ I can’t handle myself.”

Artie narrowed his eyes, taking a step back toward the truck. “I don’t suppose one of your animals have been making a mess of those cattle? I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“I don’t got any animal that could’ve done that. Besides, I’ve talked to some of the other farmers. They say the marks are too clean to be coyotes.”

“Maybe you’ve got animals on that farm of yours that could make some clean marks. In fact, I’m sure you do. We’ll see what the other farmers think of that. I’ll be back, John, and I won’t come alone. You can count on that.”

The mayor hopped into the cab, kicking the truck into reverse. A cloud of dust followed as it barreled down the gravel road.

“What’s stuck up his butt?” Alice looked to Greggs.

Greggs sighed and uncrossed his arms. “That is one meddlin’, schemin’ man. Always looking for an excuse to poke around my land. C’mon, I’ll tell you about it around back.”

He put out his cigarette, eyed Alice’s shoes once more, and walked into the house, holding open the door behind him.

The sparse walls and mostly empty rooms made every footfall echo. The few items in the living room to the right—a couch, a folded-up blanket, a coffee table—trapped the smell of stale cigarette smoke.

A white blur of dog came reeling from the hallway and jumped up on the old man.

“Down, you darn dogs,” Greggs grumbled, although he gave a gentle pet on each of the two heads.

Alice’s eyes went wide. “That dog’s got two heads.” “Sure do. This here is Charlies.”

The white bulldog set upon Alice with reckless abandon, almost knocking her over. The two heads licked at her arms and hands with their stinking, slobbery tongues. Alice cringed at her coated hands wiped them on her pant legs.

“Keep a’walkin’, or they’ll just keep lickin’ at ya.”

Alice followed Greggs as Charles jumped against her back legs, making her knees bend with every other step.

Greggs paused briefly in the kitchen, where he gathered six apples, a stalk of celery, a pack of Pall Malls, and five boxes of black hair dye in a basket.

When they reached the back door, Greggs quickly shut the screen behind Alice, trapping Charlies in the house. Both of Charlies’ heads whined, and its front legs scratched at the door. Greggs ignored him and continued into the backyard.

A big, brown barn stood in front of an overgrown field, the paint peeling from its aging wood. A molding billboard rested against the side of it.

“All right, now,” Greggs said, stopping her before he opened the gate to the field. “You strike me as the type that’s seen some things. Didn’t even look shocked to see the unicorn in the back yesterday.”

Alice thought of her mother, who was often passed out from taking and mixing too many drugs. “Yeah, I’ve seen a few things.”

“An old soul. That’s what you got. I can always tell when someone’s got one.” Greggs studied Alice with his beady, sky-blue eyes, and Alice tried her best not to squirm.

“See that sign over there?” Greggs pointed to the aging but still colorful sign propped up against the side of the barn.

Alice looked at it and squinted. “I can’t make it out.”

“It says *The Greggs Family Zoo of Odd and Marvelous Creatures*.” Greggs leaned against the fence and lit a new cigarette. “My daddy bought this land for cheap from the government way back when. Wanted to make a name for himself raising cows, chickens, pigs, and the like. So he got this land, and he started clearin’ it out and puttin’ up this fence.

“One day, he was workin’ as the sun was just settin’ down. He told me he felt a chill all down his backside, and when he looked up, a little bit of the sky had turned black right above him. Daddy cleared out of the way—no tellin’ if that was gonna turn into a tornado or some such. But he kept watchin’ it. A creature with big ol’ wings fell from that black smudge of sky. Damn near died on its way down. Daddy took it to the barn and nursed it back to health, and the thing just stuck around. Not a friendly creature by any means, but it didn’t go nowhere. So Daddy named him Wayne and let him stay.

“Not a few months later, and Daddy found a strange horse runnin’ around on his land. Its hair was purple in the sunlight. And you can guess what it had stickin’ out of its head.”

“A horn,” I offered.

“Yep. It was a unicorn,” Greggs confirmed. He shifted his weight from the fence, sucked on the end of his cigarette, and opened the gate for Alice.

“Now, my daddy was no dummy. He knew them cows and pigs were gonna cost money, but he spent all he had buyin’ up the land. See, he and my momma came up with the idea of this little roadside zoo.

“You’d see backyard zoos all over Nebraska and Missouri back then. People had one or two jungle cats, maybe a bear. But there wasn’t a zoo quite like this one. No, sir. These strange creatures kept on fallin’ from the sky, and Daddy kept right on collectin’

'em. He took good care of 'em, and so did me and my brother. Daddy made a lot of money on the zoo, at first.

“But the thing is, people don't believe what they ain't never seen before. The zoo became a laughingstock in town. People called us crooks. Said we put cheap things on regular animals to make 'em look funny.

“One night, some local boys got drunk and hopped the fence. They wanted to see how we put the horns on the unicorns. They wanted to see how we fooled everybody.

“Well, it was no joke. One of them boys spooked a unicorn so bad that it stabbed him. Went clean through his stomach.” Greggs shook his head. “That was Mayor Artie's uncle. Of course, Artie wasn't even born at that time. But he's still got to remind me of the event as if he had been. He's been obsessed with that story ever since he was a boy. He's taken it on himself to investigate. He thinks I'm housing hellhounds or something evil. I've never seen a man so convinced of something in all my life.

“Anyway. Daddy had to close down the zoo after that boy died. Daddy died a few months after that. We had enough money to keep the farm goin'. And these creatures keep comin' from that same spot in the sky.”

“That's amazing, Mr. Greggs,” Alice said.

“Just Greggs, kid.” He looked amused.

“Okay, Greggs. Did your dad ever figure out what that thing is? Up in the sky?” Alice asked.

“Nobody knows what it is. It's like some other place started throwing their trash through it. All these unwanted animals and such, I think my daddy figured it was our job to take care of these dysfunctional creatures. So that's what we continued to do after he died. Now it's just me, as you can see. And I'm so old I'm practically growin' cobwebs.”

Greggs started toward the barn, carrying the basket full of odds and ends.

“So you've got all these unicorns in your barn?” Alice asked.

“Most of 'em. Can't keep 'em locked up all day, though. So I got the idea to dye 'em. You know, with hair dye?” Greggs shook a box of dye in the basket. “As soon as a new one comes through, I color the purple coat black. If anyone sees one of 'em from the road, all they see are black horses. You can't even see the bone on their heads from that distance.” Greggs smiled in satisfaction.

“Clever.” Alice wondered if Greggs didn’t have one or two screws loose.

“I know,” Greggs said, turning toward the barn.

A hissing sound stopped them both in their tracks.

“Careful, now,” Greggs whispered.

Alice noticed a dark figure on the barn roof, blocking the sun. The figure spread its enormous, black wings and jumped from the roof. It made a twirling and hissing sound as it dove. Then it screeched.

Greggs casually pulled Alice clear from the dark creature’s path. Alice clutched Greggs’ muscular forearm in panic.

The creature smacked into the ground face-first.

“And that’s Wayne,” Greggs said, leading Alice closer to the incapacitated creature.

“What the hell is that thing?” Alice grimaced.

“Daddy took to calling him a werebat. You know those stories about werewolves? Well, one of those mixed with a bat. Don’t he look just like that?” Greggs squatted next to Wayne and carefully rolled the creature onto its back.

Alice’s stomach turned with disgust. Wayne’s body, where it wasn’t covered in matted, black fur, was slick and shiny like plastic wrap. Dark dents and scars lined its hairless head. The bridge of its nose was ribbed, and huge nostrils flared at the base.

No matter how repulsive the werebat was, Alice felt a pang of pity for it. “What’s wrong with it?”

Greggs sighed and gathered Wayne in his arms. “Can you grab that basket, kid?” he said over his shoulder as he walked to the barn.

Alice grabbed the basket and jogged after him.

Greggs raised his voice. “I think ol’ Wayne here is supposed to be one of them horrific creatures. Like the ones on *The Twilight Zone*.”

“What’s The Twilight Zone?” Alice asked.

“Oh, hell,” the old man laughed, “never mind. Can you grab the door?”

Alice slid open the enormous barn door.

“Anyway,” Greggs said going into the barn, “Wayne can’t fly. I think he’s supposed to, but I ain’t sure. He keeps tryin’. And he keeps on fallin’. So your first



chore is to keep an eye out for Wayne. Can you do that?” Greggs plopped the creature onto a large, wooden worktable.

“What if he lunges at me again? I can’t carry him around,” Alice said, evaluating Wayne’s weight.

“He’s actually pretty light. See?” Greggs hooked his finger around one of Wayne’s ankles and half-lifted the creature from the table. “Don’t worry, kid, he’s all scream, no bite. Knocked all his teeth out from fallin’ so many times, anyway.”

“Okay,” Alice said, still unsure. “Just carry him in here if I find him like that?”

“Sure thing. Oh, and he gets six apples a day. Only the red ones, no Granny Smiths. Just mush ’em up real good and leave ’em out somewhere easy to find. I don’t think he sees real well.” Greggs unloaded the apples next to the worktable. “Now, ready to see some geese?”

“I guess so,” Alice said, following Greggs as he exited the barn.

Greggs led them to a chicken coop the size of a playhouse. Alice peeked inside. Gray, long-necked geese sat on nests. The white males flapped to the doorway, threatening Alice and Greggs away from the females.

Something clanged down a metal shoot below the coop. Bending over a bucket, Greggs picked up a marbled, brown egg. He rapped his knuckles on it. “Solid wood. About as useful as a sixth toe.”

Alice reached for the wooden egg in wonder.

“I don’t know what else to use ’em for but my whittlin’.” Greggs grabbed a second egg from the bucket and stuck it in his pocket. “Just put ’em on the table on the back porch. Also, feed the geese a couple handfuls of grain a day.” Greggs pointed to a large, broken-down ice chest. “Feed’s in there.”

Alice took note of the feed, and then quickly followed Greggs past the geese. He walked quickly, taking them to the edge of a small smelly lagoon.

“And these”—he pulled out the pack of Pall Malls from the basket—“are for the merlady. I call her Marilyn.”

“Merlady?” Alice’s eyes bulged.

Greggs whistled. The soupy surface of the lagoon broke, revealing the ratty, orange hair of the merlady.

As she pushed the top half of her body onto the small, grassy bank, Alice couldn't help but curl her lips in disgust. Marilyn's face wrinkled with extreme age. Bags of skin sagged from her arms and waist. Her breasts hung down to her bellybutton like deflated party balloons. Three slits on either of her cheeks opened and shut. Gills, Alice realized.

"Hey there, Marilyn," Greggs cooed at the wretched crone. "This is Alice. She'll be bringing you your cigarettes from now on. But don't you worry. I'll be here at sunset for our evening smoke, like usual."

Greggs squatted next to the merlady. He stuck a smoke in his mouth and lit the end for her. Marilyn sucked in deep. Using her brown fingernails, she plucked the cigarette from her lips and exhaled. She let out a satisfied-sounding sigh.

"I don't know if she knows what I'm saying, but she sure likes the Pall Malls." Greggs pulled one out for himself, lighting the end.

The two flicked the tips, letting the wind carry the ash, and looked out at the land. Alice sighed, crossed her arms, and watched the lagoon.

As she watched, the murky water parted again, this time revealing a three-headed snake twice the size of Greggs. Greggs' head was turned away from the lagoon, and the snake came closer and closer to the bank.

"Greggs," Alice whispered sharply to warn him.

He turned his head to the snake. The heads hissed, their green scales and black eyes sparkling in the sun. "Oh, don't worry, kid. They're vegetarians. Throw some celery to 'em."

Alice's hands shook as she peeled ribs of celery off the stalks. She limply threw the pieces in front of the snake. The three heads darted to the celery in the water, snapping the crisp ribs in their mouths. When they finished, the heads turned to Alice and hissed.

"Well, keep goin'," Greggs encouraged.

Alice threw the ribs carefully until the stalk was gone. The hydra hissed once more at Greggs, then slid back into the lagoon.

Greggs put out his cigarette stub, stood up and brushed off the back of his jeans. "Why don't you light another one for Marilyn before we go? Takes her no less than ten minutes to do it on her own with them webbed fingers."

Alice exhaled, dreading the experience. Her hands still shook from feeding the hydra. As she flicked the flint to ignite the cigarette dangling from the merlady's lips, Alice remembered lighting cigarettes for her mother. She asked Alice to light them when she was too strung out to do it herself.

"You okay, kid?"

Alice shook her head. "Yeah. It just smells out here, is all."

"Yeah, it does. But they seem to prefer it." Greggs held up his hands. "Don't ask me. I don't get it."

Greggs started back toward the barn, leaving Alice to one last, lingering look at the saggy merlady.

Alice ran to catch up with Greggs just as he opened the barn door. Greggs pointed to the empty table where he had set Wayne. "See? Gone already. Sneaking off, doing his sneaky werebat things."

Alice nodded, surprised that the werebat survived his earlier plunge.

Greggs pointed beyond the table to two long, wooden rows. They walked farther into the barn. In each stall, a black unicorn stood. Most contently chewed on hay, absently watching the old man and young girl.

"I've got thirteen unicorns. A few of 'em pass away when they fall, but most of 'em make it out okay."

Alice squinted at one of the unicorns. An unusual creature slept peacefully on its back. "Is that a cat or something?" she asked.

Greggs clapped his hands, waking the creature. Its yellow eyes opened lazily, then the little dragon rose and stretched out its wings and legs.

"Just a little whelp. We've got a quite a few of 'em around here. They seem to prefer the unicorns. Cute little things just curl up on 'em and sleep all day."

"That's a dragon, right? Don't dragons breathe fire?" Alice wondered. "Isn't that dangerous for the unicorns?"

"Not these little guys." Greggs reached over the gate and scratched the whelp on the head. The dragon rubbed Greggs's hand affectionately, "Can only puff smoke every now and again. That is, when they aren't sleepin'. And that's about all they do."

Greggs moved down to the next gate and opened it. Alice, recognized the unicorn that had fallen from the sky the day before. It lay on a blanket, its ankle wrapped.

“How is she?” Alice asked.

“She’ll be fine in no time.”

They studied the unicorn. Its eyes watched them passively as a dragon whelp curled up by its chest.

“So that’s it? Those are my chores?” Alice asked.

“Well, not quite. I’ll handle the jackalopes today. Poor things are blind and have antlers that go on for miles. Get tangled in just about everything. Then there’s Glen, the turtle about the size of my living room. He mostly just burrows underground, though. Just gotta check on him every now and again, make sure he’s still breathin’. The donkeys can be a handful. Not real donkeys. I just call ’em that because they look like a cross between a dog and a monkey. They hang in the trees in the middle of the field out back. But I’ll show you all that later.” Greggs turned back to the unicorn. “Your job for the rest of the day is to dye this old girl black.”

Alice swallowed. “I don’t know how to do that.”

“It’s okay, I’ll do it with you. It’s really as easy as readin’ the back of the box.”

Greggs opened the box and handed Alice a pair of plastic gloves.

Every day except Sundays for the next three weeks, Alice met Greggs on his front porch at seven o’clock in the morning.

Greggs provided her with a pair of sturdy, leather cowboy boots, just as he promised. Every day, Alice would put on her boots and pick up the wooden goose eggs and deposit them on the back porch. She cleaned the unicorn stables and touched up the coats when purple started showing through. Charlies joined her on most days, their heads nipping at her calves. She learned to wear jeans early on, saving her legs from the constant slobber.

Alice became more comfortable with feeding the hydra. She lit the merlady’s Pall Malls without comment, watching the old, withering creature puff. Marilyn shrieked at her when she wanted another one, and Alice lit them all without complaint.

Wayne kept jumping from high places. Sometimes from the loft in the barn. Sometimes from the roof of the house. And every time, Alice picked up his surprisingly light body and took him to a soft, shady area to regain consciousness. She became fond of the strange thing and his determination to fly.

Alice helped untangle the jackalopes, checked up on Glen the giant turtle every few days, and put up with the donkeys' antics.

The unicorn that fell from the sky recuperated quickly, with the help of daily injections of bute. Alice wrapped the sprain every few days, enjoying the excuse to spend time with the magnificent creature.

Greggs would walk around the farm, patting each of his creatures happily. The animals loved him and purred under his touch. When Charlies wasn't following Alice, he was by Greggs' side, pleading for scratches and adoration.

No new creatures had appeared since Alice had joined on as a farmhand. Every night, before Greggs smoked a cigarette with Marilyn at the lagoon, he'd ride out to the fence separating his land from Alice's grandparents' land. He'd wait an hour, and when no dark clouds appeared, he'd ride back.

After Independence Day, the coyote attacks picked up considerably. Farms to the south and to the west regularly reported dead or considerably torn up cattle, and the deaths kept creeping closer to Greggs' farm.

Alice and Greggs spent four days reinforcing the fence. Alice spent so much time hammering, her hands still vibrated when she went to bed at night.

Just as he had promised, the mayor returned two weeks into July. And he was not alone.

Alice had just finished collecting the eggs. As she set the last one on the table, she heard rapping on the front door. She felt a sense of foreboding, as no one had called on Greggs since she started working on the farm. Knowing Greggs was out in the barn with the unicorns, Alice hurried to him.

"There's someone at your door," she called, unable to hide the alarm in her voice.

Greggs shuffled up to the house, Alice following close behind. Charlies tried to get through the back door behind them, but Alice nudged him with her foot, forcing the two-headed dog to stay in the backyard. Both faces whined in unison. "It's to keep you safe Charlies. Now hush up!"

They walked wordlessly to the front door. Turning back slightly to Alice, Greggs exhaled and opened the door.

Mayor Artie, pudgy as ever, stood in the doorway just outside the screen door.

"Told you I'd be back, John."

“What’s this about, Artie? I’m in the middle of something.”

“So are we.” Artie turned to the side, revealing Sheriff Martell. The sheriff kept a thick, brown mustache and wore aviator sunglasses. His arms were muscled, and a tan line peeked out from his short-sleeved uniform. Behind the sheriff was a crowd of about twenty local farmers, all wearing scowls.

“What’s all this about, Sheriff?” Greggs asked.

“Afternoon, John. It looks like we have a problem.” The sheriff pointed to Gregg’s driveway. Alice squinted, just making out bloody cow parts lining the gravel road. A cow head lay closest to the front porch, its eyes watching the house lifelessly.

“Holy Hannah,” Greggs mumbled, covering his mouth.

“And it all points back here. To your farm full of creatures, John.” Artie smiled slyly.

“That’s not possible,” Greggs said, shaking his head. “Nothing I have could’ve done a monstrous thing like that.”

“And are we supposed to just take your word for that? Your family’s been keeping those creatures a secret for years. We need to know what’s back there, Greggs. For the safety of everyone and their livestock.” Artie turned back to the farmers. “Don’t you want to know what John Greggs has been hiding on this farm of his?”

They confirmed that they did.

Greggs looked at Alice by his side. His eyes looked old and watery. It’s hopeless.”

“Show them,” Alice said boldly.

“They’ll take one look at ’em, and think they’re dangerous,” Greggs spoke quietly. “They won’t understand, kid.”

“Then we make them understand. *I*’ll make them understand,” Alice assured him. She opened the screen door and addressed the mayor, sheriff, and farmers. “Come on. I’ll show you the animals. You’ll see that nothing on this farm could’ve hurt those cattle.”

Alice led the people through Gregg’s living room and out the back door. Charlies whined at the unfamiliar faces, and Alice patted both of the dog’s heads.

“This is Charlies. Watch out, he’ll lick you until there isn’t a dry spot left on you.”

The farmers peered over each other's shoulders. They stared at the two-headed dog, mouths agape. The mayor stood still, his arms crossed in front of his chest, sneering at the dog.

Alice smiled smugly. "Follow me. What you're really here to see is in the barn."

She led them to the fence and opened the gate. Charlies galloped next to a burly-looking farmer. The farmer patted their heads and chuckled, seeming to take an immediate liking to the dog.

Greggs put his leathery hand on the barn door. He looked at Alice, and she nodded at him. He slid the door open.

"Here's where we keep the unicorns," Alice said, matter-of-factly. She walked up to the first stall and pet the unicorn's mane.

Gasps sounded from the party.

"Is this really a ... a ..." a woman stammered.

Alice approached the woman, gently took her hand, and led her to the first stall. She placed the woman's hand on the unicorn's black mane.

"Yep. It really is a unicorn. See? Just as gentle as can be."

The woman's face lit up, and she watched the creature in awe.

The mayor yelled. "What in the world is that? There on that one back?"

All eyes landed on a little dragon whelp, which was licking itself unceremoniously on the backside.

Greggs cleared his throat. "That's a little whelping. Go ahead they love gettin' pet."

The woman moved slowly toward the dragon whelp. She lifted her hand to the creature, and the whelp stood and brushed its body against her hand.

"Aw," the woman cooed. "Look at you, so sweet."

Their fears subsiding, the farmers gathered around the stalls admiring the unicorns and the dragon whelps.

Alice smiled at Greggs triumphantly.

An older farmer who was petting a whelp looked over to the mayor. "You told us John had dangerous creatures back here, Artie."

"These little things are as gentle as house cats," the woman said, tickling a whelp's back.

“Are we looking at the same things, here? Look at these freaks! Who’s to say they won’t kill something or someone if they got out?”

The old farmer jiggled the lock on the stable door in front of him. “Looks secure to me. And if they did get out, I don’t see what kind of harm they’d do anybody. And these things sure didn’t rip up my cattle. Those cuts were too clean.”

“Go ahead and have a look around if you’re still not satisfied, Artie. All the animals on this farm are safe, kind, and secure.” Greggs smiled at the mayor confidently.

The farmers looked around the barn, some going outside to look at some of the other creatures.

Mayor Artie looked around incredulously. Alice slipped behind him and slid the knife off his belt. She handed it to Greggs, who nodded at her knowingly.

“Artie.” Greggs motioned the mayor over.

The mayor’s face was red and sweaty with rage. “These animals need to be destroyed. They’re dangerous, and it’s just a matter of time before they kill again.”

“The way I see it, it’s only a matter of time before you kill again.”

“Don’t you wish you could prove that.” The mayor smiled.

“You and I both know what killed all those cattle.”

Artie sneered. “Yeah, one of your freaks here.”

“No, I don’t believe so.” Greggs looked to the mayor’s knife in his hands. “This is your knife, isn’t it?”

“Hey, where did you—”

“You’re always showin’ this thing around. Awful proud of it, aren’t you?” Greggs slid the blade out of the leather hilt. “It doesn’t look like you had a chance to clean it recently. I can just make out some blood in the ridges. Oh my, is that cow hair in some of that blood, there?”

Mayor Artie swallowed and balled his fists.

“I’ll tell them, Artie. I’ll tell these folks their own mayor’s been cuttin’ up their cattle, just so he can get a peek at my animals. And now you’ve seen ’em. You’re lookin’ at my big secret. Now what do you say you stop this whole thing between us? Let sleepin’ dogs lie?”

Artie relaxed his fists, staring at his bloodied hunting knife. “All right. I’ll leave you alone.” Artie pointed his finger in Greggs’s face. “But if anything happens to anyone



visiting this freak show you call a zoo, you better believe I'll be all over you like white on rice."

"And so will I," Greggs said, holding up Mayor Artie's knife. "You'll leave me, Alice, and this zoo alone, or everyone will hear what you've done."

Mayor Artie swept his hand across his sweaty brow. He nodded once and turned to leave.

"Wait," Alice called. "Don't you think you should say something about the dead cattle and all those cow parts on Mr. Greggs' driveway?"

Greggs held up the mayor's knife. "What's this secret worth to ya?" He winked at Alice. She chuckled, remembering the first time they met when the unicorn fell from the sky.

Artie wheeled around and faced the farmers. "For all you still here, I just wanted to formally apologize to John. I was wrong." He flashed a contemptuous look at Greggs, and then turned back to the people. "You all can still count on me to track down the beast that killed your cattle. I'll find it, don't you worry about that."

The farmers watched Artie skeptically as he walked out of the barn. He didn't look back at Alice or Greggs.

Alice threw her arms around Greggs, and Greggs patted her back. "You're just what this place needs, kid. Someone who believes in it. Someone who thinks these creatures ought to be loved and admired, and not kept a secret. Now, c'mon. We've got a lot of work to do."

"What do you mean?" Alice asked, pulling away from Greggs.

"I mean we're gonna reopen The Greggs Family Zoo of Odd and Marvelous Creatures. You and me—whaddaya say, kid?"

Alice looked at the remaining farmers in the barn. They laughed with one another, petting the unicorns and the dragon whelps while they chatted. The joy on their faces was undeniable. Alice even caught a glimpse of Wayne in the rafters, watching the people. She loved the farm more than she had loved anything else.

"You belong here, kid," Greggs said, smiling proudly.

"I think I do."

“All right, then. Let’s show these farmers the rest of the animals.” Gregg started toward the door. “And tomorrow, we begin renovations. I need you here at six o’clock sharp, and not a minute later. We’ve got plenty of work ahead of us.”

Alice smiled as they walked out of the barn. “I’ll be here. Six o’clock. Not a minute later.”