

## Chapter 1

# Meeting King Rudy

“I don’t want to!”

“Then you have to go to bed early.”

“No! I don’t have to unpack. I’m too young to unpack. You’re mean and I hate you!” Crash! Zoey slammed the door to her room as hard as she could and, scowling, slid down to sit against it, her arms propped on her knees.

Daddy was so mean. She had only been in her new room for a few days, and he wanted her to unpack and clean it up. She looked around at the big open cardboard boxes with things hanging out of most of them and kicked over the one closest to her. Out spilled clothes, some of which Zoey knew didn’t fit her anymore and an old pink backpack stuffed with toques and mitts. She scowled some more and gave the backpack a kick.

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Zoey's dad's old apartment was big enough for the two of them, but too small for their new family, which now included her stepmother Raechelle and her son Robert, when he's home between semesters at film school. The new townhouse was also closer to Zoey's mother's house. It made her one-week-with-mom, one-week-with-dad schedule easier, too.

Zoey loved being with Rae-Rae – her special name for Raechelle that no one else called her – because Rae-Rae was easy-going, kind, pretty, didn't yell, and always helped Zoey with her hair. And, though Zoey didn't want to admit it, the only reason her white trundle bed was made up and the twinkle lights woven into its iron frame was because Rae-Rae did it. She wanted Zoey to be comfortable in her new room. Then Daddy stopped Rae-Rae saying, "We've put the bed, dresser, and fish tank in place and now Zoey has to put her clothes and toys away."

Zoey reached over and started fiddling with the electric cord that controlled the twinkle lights, turning them on and off, on and off. They were as old as Zoey. Her dad said they were above her first crib when she was born seven years ago.

From the very beginning of her life, Zoey had gone back and forth between her mom's and dad's. They

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shared Zoey, and that made them a family. They told her when she was old enough to ask about having two homes. Zoey liked having two bedrooms, two televisions, two iPads, two complete sets of clothes and shoes, two bikes, and an elderly, retired comfort dog named Beans who belongs to Zoey's mom. (Daddy said no dogs in an apartment, but Zoey was going to keep asking.) She was used to having everything she wanted, when she wanted it, and where she wanted it.

There was a knock at the door. Zoey scooted over and switched off the twinkle lights completely. The room was dark.

"Zoey?" It was her dad. Zoey didn't answer.

"Zoey, open the door please."

Still no answer.

Zoey's dad (called Vince by everyone else) opened the door a crack. Zoey pulled her legs in and curled up into a ball behind the door, hiding her face and pretending to cry.

He switched on the overhead light and looked around the door. "Zoey, come on, get up and get your pyjamas on."

Zoey made crying noises behind her hands.

"You know, I can tell that's fake." Daddy came further into the room and started rummaging in one of

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the boxes. "Here's your avocado jammies. Get them on, get your teeth brushed, and you can tackle putting your stuff away tomorrow after school. C'mon!"

"No! I don't wanna!" Zoey stopped pretend crying and rolled behind a box, pulling a couple of them around her like a fort.

Daddy laughed. "How old are you, four?" He reached over and pulled her out from behind the boxes. Zoey shrieked and started giggling as he took hold of both her legs and tossed her onto her bed. "C'mon, kiddo. Let's go!"

It was another twenty minutes before Zoey had brushed her teeth, gotten into her pyjamas, had two bedtime stories, asked for a glass of water, and was finally in bed.

"Good night, Zoey!"

"Good night, Daddy!"

"Good night, Zoey!"

"Good night, Rae-Rae!"

Zoey's bedroom door closed and she snuggled down in her cozy flannel sheets. She slipped a hand under her pillow to reach for her mini-flashlight. She wasn't really scared of the dark ... well, maybe just a little bit ... but it was still her first week in her new room. The flashlight was nice to have nearby, just

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like her stuffed animals standing guard around the sides of the bed.

Zoey switched off her flashlight and slid it back under her pillow. She pulled her duvet up to her chin, feeling warm and sleepy. Then she heard a noise. A long, soft *urp*. She sat up and stared across the room. Was something moving around in her closet?

When she heard the *urp* again, she grabbed her mini-flashlight, and snapped it on. Zoey's eyes widened as she saw a tiny figure emerge.

"Hey, you're blinding me here!" The voice was a bit squeaky, a bit raspy, and ended on that *urp* sound.

Zoey turned the flashlight on a lower beam.

The little creature moved into the middle of the room. To Zoey's amazement, it was a small green frog in a hooded white bathrobe with a gold crest on one pocket. He was wearing a plastic shower cap with pink polka dots and he held Zoey's old broken toothbrush in one hand. He waved it at her. "This thing makes a dandy scrub brush, I tell you."

"So," the frog continued. "How you doing, kid? I've been living in that closet for a while now and I'm glad you're here. My name's Rudy. Rudy Too Toot."

Zoey was so surprised she couldn't speak.

"Well? What's the matter?" Rudy waved the

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toothbrush again. “Cat got your tongue? Hamster? Fish? Frog? Speak up, kid!”

Zoey cleared her throat and finally was able to whisper, “Hi.”

“That’s it? ‘Hi?’” Rudy hopped a little closer to the bed and adjusted his shower cap, which had fallen over one eye. “A frog comes out of your closet and all you can say is ‘hi’? Geesh!”

Zoey looked at Rudy for a long moment.

“Okay,” she said. “I think I’m dreaming. You’re not real. Frogs don’t wear bathrobes or live in closets.” Zoey switched off her flashlight, turned her back on Rudy and slid back down in her bed.

The room was quiet for a bit and then there was that *urp* sound again. Zoey felt something hit her ear.

“Ouch!” She sat up and clicked the flashlight on again. Rudy had thrown the old toothbrush at her and was now sitting at the foot of her bed, retying the sash on his bathrobe.

“Not real, huh?” The little frog glared at her. “I just showed you ‘real’, kid. I’ve been watching you since you brought Audrey home from Whistler. Remember her?”

“I remember,” said Zoey, rubbing her ear. “But Audrey didn’t live long. I was sad when she died.”

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“Yeah, I’m sure you were,” Rudy said, looking sad himself. “When word went out that she was here in Edmonton, I came to see her, but it was too late. She wasn’t meant to live here.”

“What do you mean? I made a nice home for her – we got a terrarium, special food, and everything!”

“Lots of animals are not meant to live anywhere but where they are born,” Rudy explained. “Audrey was a B.C. frog, a Whistler frog, in fact. You should have just enjoyed your visit and left her there, so you could maybe see her again someday.”

Zoey stared at Rudy. She was afraid he was right, but she didn’t like hearing it.

“I really wanted a pet and it was so fun to find Audrey and bring her home,” she said. “Now my dad won’t ever let me have a dog.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that now, kid.” Rudy picked up the toothbrush and rested it against his shoulder. “You’ll have a chance to have other pets.”

“What about you? Are you an Alberta frog?”

“Yup,” Rudy stood as straight as his stocky little body would allow and puffed up his chest. “Born and bred right here in Edmonton. A prairie amphibian through and through. And, not to brag, but I have a lot of responsibilities in my world. My

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actual title is King Rudy. But you don't have to call me that.

"Okay ..." Zoey said faintly. She wasn't sure how to respond.

Rudy hopped off Zoey's bed and headed for the closet. "I just stopped by to introduce myself. I've got some things I need your help with, but you've got school in the morning." He waved the toothbrush as he disappeared into the darkness. "See you soon!"

*Urp.*