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Jumblecat

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CHAPTER 1

THE SLIPPERS

Do you ever think that something isn't quite right? That the people you live with, your *family*, may not be your family after all? That maybe, just maybe, there was a colossal mix-up in the hospital when you were a baby and you ended up living with a bunch of revolting oddbods who couldn't possibly be related to you?

This is something Billy Slipper thought about every day.

He looked across the breakfast table at his twin sister, Mindy. How on earth could she be his sister? She was practically a different species, let alone his twin. For starters she didn't even look like him, with her blonde hair and a nose so flat and wide it resembled a

mushroom clinging to the trunk of a damp tree. Also she was tall, much taller than Billy, and unfortunately much stronger; if ever an argument grew out of hand, she would put him in a headlock and burp loudly into his ear, leaving him half deaf for hours on end.

Billy poured cereal into his bowl and reached for the milk. If Mindy really was his twin sister, then surely they should have some kind of special connection. If Mindy was in pain, would he feel it too? For a moment he thought about kicking her under the table, just to see if it hurt him as well, but something told him that wouldn't be a good idea. As everyone in the Slipper household knew, Mindy's temper was ferocious.

And then it came to him. It was obvious! If she really, really was his twin sister then they should be able to communicate using just the *power of their minds*. Telepathy. He would telepathise her. He put down his spoon and stared hard at Mindy, concentrating, calling her with his mind.

'Mindy,' he telepathised, 'can you hear me?'

Mindy was busy. Her doll, Tina Tippytoes, was not eating her breakfast properly. Every time a tiny piece of cereal fell out of her dolly mouth, Mindy whacked her around the head with a spoon.



Billy tried again. 'Oi! Mindy! Moose face! It's me, Billy!'

But the Slipper Telepathy Line wasn't working.

Eventually Mindy looked up. 'Why are you staring at me? You're such a weirdo.'

'Moose face,' he repeated, but this time he said it out loud.

Predictably, Mindy called for reinforcements. 'Muuuum!' she wailed, grinning wickedly. She knew she was getting her brother into trouble and she loved it. 'Billy called me moose face.'

Ah yes. Mum. Also known as Phillipa Slipper. Also known as Phillipa Slipper Kitty Kicker after her habit of kicking cats that lazed about on the neighbourhood pavements. She hated them. Actually, she hated all animals, but she really had it in for cats.

'Billy!' she barked, shivering with disgust, 'You are not to talk to your sister like that. How you can compare Mindy to a filthy, dirty moose is beyond me. They roll in their own poo, you know.' And she turned back to what she was doing, which was washing carrots, drying them with a hairdryer, then putting each super-clean carrot into its own miniature plastic bag.

Billy said nothing, even when Mindy stuck out her tongue at him. He was used to being told on

by his sister and told off by his mother.

That is, if she really was his mother.

Phillipa Slipper was very tall. As tall as any woman Billy had ever seen, and certainly way taller than his dad. She always wore her hair in a bun, coiled tightly on the top of her head, which of course made her look even taller. Like Mindy, her nose was flat and wide, though it looked more like a boxer's squashed nose than a mushroom. But the main thing about Phillipa Slipper was that she *couldn't stand dirt*. Not a speck, a mote nor a microblob of dust escaped her beady eye. If ever a smidgen of filth found its way into her house she dropped to her knees and got scrubbing straight away.

For example, last winter, after a particularly mucky meter reading by the gas man, she insisted on covering her house in plastic sheeting. First she covered the floors, then the skirting boards, then all the walls as high as she could reach.

'At last,' she said as she sat down on the sofa with a cup of tea, 'my house will never be dirty again.'

But that wasn't the end of it. As she sipped her tea she noticed a tiny stain on one of the cushions. It was a microscopic stain, invisible to the normal human eye. But not to Phillipa Slipper. From that moment she started to cover everything in plastic sheeting. The

sofa and cushions were first, then the television, the table, chairs, ornaments, even her prized collection of Victorian spatulas, were all covered top to toe in plastic. The kitchen was next, followed by the hallway and the laundry room. Three days later the whole downstairs of the house (apart from the oven and the toaster) was totally swathed in plastic sheeting.

Getting around the house was a noisy business. *Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch* every footstep. Scrunching from the kitchen table to the sink. *Scrunch, scrunch* into the living room. *Scrunch, squeeeeak* as you sat down on the sofa. But Phillipa Slipper wouldn't have it any other way. Her house was immaculate and that was all that mattered.

Billy finished his cereal as fast as possible. When his mother and his sister were around, he spent as little time as possible at home. It was just better that way, and besides, there were far more interesting things to do outside. He put his bowl in the sink and started to make a cheese sandwich for later. Sometimes he spent the whole day wandering in the nearby hills and woods and he didn't want to go hungry.

Picture this. Just as Billy was putting the cheese in between the bread, a solitary crumb rolled off the plate. It fell and landed on the plastic-covered floor,

making a sound no louder than an ant fainting on a hot day. Of course Billy hadn't noticed, Mindy hadn't noticed, but . . .

'BILLY!' bellowed Phillipa Slipper.

In an instant, she was on her knees searching for the crumb. Billy stepped back far too quickly and tumbled over her, sending the cheese flying out of his hand. All three watched in horror as it shot up into the air and, SPLAT, stuck to the ceiling, the only place that wasn't covered in plastic sheeting.





This time it was a roar. ‘BILLY!’

He scrambled to his feet, grabbed the bread and darted out of the front door, heading for Tumbledown Hill.



CHAPTER 2

TUMBLEDOWN HILL

It was his favourite place. There was nowhere Billy felt happier than in the woods around Tumbledown Hill. He knew it like the back of his hand; each tree and burrow and bird's nest was as familiar to him as his own bedroom, and yet every time he came here, he always discovered something new.

So far, he hadn't had a very successful morning. All that he'd found was a cracked pocket mirror and some bit of old bone that might have belonged to a giant squirrel or possibly a tiny dinosaur. Some days, as he roamed through the woods, he found real treasures. Only last week he'd found a dried-up stag beetle, an enormous acorn, some marbles and a leaf in the shape of Italy, all on the same day. These

were the sorts of things he took home. His mother called it useless junk. He called these treasures his 'Collectabillya' and they sprawled all round his bed, along the floor and right up to the edge of the skipping rope that Mindy had stretched across the room, dividing his half of the bedroom from hers. When Mindy was out, he would lie on his bed and daydream about his Collectabillya – dream about hunchbacks playing marbles in the woods, or escaped Italian convicts weeping at the sight of the boot-shaped leaf, or giant stag beetles using Mindy's head as a ping-pong ball.

He trudged out of the woods and crossed a field towards the bottom of Tumbledown Hill. After the cool air of the woods the afternoon sun felt warm on his skin. He lay down in the long grass, closed his eyes and thought about who might win a fight between the giant squirrel and the tiny dinosaur.

Just as the squirrel was getting the upper hand, trapping the dinosaur in an eye-popping headlock, Billy heard something. It was a strange, eerie cry. Certainly not human. He sat up and looked around.

Apart from a dog walker in a faraway field there was nobody about. It must have been the tiny dinosaur squealing in pain, he told himself. It

sometimes happened; really good daydreams got muddled up with real life. He lay down in the grass again and went back to the fight. He'd missed a bit. Now the dinosaur had got hold of some stinging nettles and was shovelling them down the squirrel's pants, though why the squirrel was wearing pants was anyone's guess. The fight was hotting up.

There it was again! The same eerie sound, but more urgent this time. He looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun. Near the top of Tumbledown Hill he saw something slipping and sliding down the hill. Billy stood up. It looked like a small animal of some sort, a badger or a hare or maybe . . . a giant squirrel! His very own giant squirrel. He'd take it home and hide it in the shed and feed it giant acorns and dress it in his pants and . . .

Just then, the creature completely lost its footing. It started rolling down the hill, slowly at first, disappearing into thick tussocks of grass, then re-emerging, still tumbling, gathering speed like a runaway train, bumping over hillocks, through brambles, getting faster and faster, coming straight at him. Whatever it was, Billy was determined to catch it. He steadied himself, spreading his arms out wide like a goalkeeper preparing to save a penalty.



THWACK! It crashed into Billy's stomach with enormous force, knocking him to the ground. He was winded, but somehow, whatever it was, he'd caught it. He lay there a while trying to catch his breath, the creature kerplumped across his stomach, as heavy as a sack full of cauliflowers.

Billy counted to thirty and then, without making any sudden movements, slowly lifted his head to take a peek.

It was a cat. Well, he thought it was a cat, but it was like no cat he'd ever seen. Everything was in the wrong place. The head was where a leg should be, the tail was where the head should be and the legs were sticking out all over the place. It was a totally jumbled-up cat.

As if it had been sleeping all along, the cat yawned, opened its eyes and stared directly at Billy.

'What are you looking at?' demanded the cat. Its wide, green eyes were inches from Billy's face.

Billy froze. He stared back at the cat, trying to think of something to say. What *do* you say to a jumbled-up cat that talks?

'Cats can't talk,' stuttered Billy, eventually.

'Of course cats can't talk,' said the cat, talking.

'But you're talking.'

‘Am I?’ replied the cat. It seemed genuinely surprised.

Billy sat up. The jumbled-up cat slid down Billy’s chest and onto his lap.

‘I’m hungry,’ announced the cat.

Billy felt his pocket. ‘I’ve got a cheese sandwich we can share. But there isn’t any cheese in it. It got stuck on the ceiling.’

He couldn’t believe he was telling a cat about the cheese. Nonetheless, he took the two slices of bread out of his pocket, gave one to the cat and kept the other for himself. Hungrily, they ate the bread together as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

‘Where did you come from?’ asked Billy.

‘The top of the hill,’ said the cat as it licked the crumbs off Billy’s trousers.

‘No. I mean before that.’

The cat thought for a moment. ‘I don’t know. But I’m here now.’

Billy studied the cat again, closer this time. It was ginger with patches on each of its paws as if it had walked through a puddle of white paint. Its tail was striped like a tiger and, if the truth be told, it was rather fat. Apart from its slightly crumpled

whiskers, the cat didn't seem to be injured by the fall. But the legs, head and tail were clearly all jumbled up. It reminded him of a plastic doll called Dobbie his sister used to have. At bath time, he'd pull off Dobbie's head, arms and legs and put them back in the wrong sockets. He didn't do it *just* to annoy Mindy – the doll looked more interesting, that's all. Annoying Mindy was a bonus.

'Don't you have anything else I can eat?' asked the cat, a little bit rudely. It hadn't even thanked him for the bread yet.

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'Nothing at all? Not even a sweet?'

Billy shook his head.

'What about a cough sweet? You must have a cough sweet?'

'But I don't have a cough,' replied Billy. 'Nor do you.'

Immediately the cat started making the most peculiar rasping noises.

'Kaaarrup! Kaaarrup! Aaairr kaaarrup!'

Billy giggled. He'd heard cats sneezing before, but never one pretending to have a cough.

'It's not funny. I actually have a nasty cough.'

'I'm sorry,' said Billy, still smiling.

‘It’s probably cat flu and if I die it’ll be your fault. One measly cough sweet, that’s all I wanted.’

Billy remembered the bone he’d found that morning, the one from the giant squirrel or the tiny dinosaur.

‘I’ve got this,’ he said, holding the bone close to the cat’s nose.

The cat sniffed and screwed up its nose in disgust. ‘Is that it?’ It really was very rude.

‘If you like, you could come back to my house and get something to eat there,’ suggested Billy.

‘How thrilling. A delicious feast of bread and old bone in your house,’ the cat replied sarcastically. ‘No thanks, dog breath, I’m a cat with standards. I’m off.’

And with that the cat tried to clamber off Billy’s lap. Its legs flapped around in the air and its tail swished around like a helicopter, but it just couldn’t get up.

‘You’re all jumbled up,’ explained Billy. ‘I don’t think you can walk.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I can walk.’

The cat tried even harder this time, but only managed to tumble off Billy’s lap onto the grass.

‘What’s happened to me?’ whimpered the cat as

it tried to stand on all fours. 'Why can't I get up?'

Billy remembered the cracked pocket mirror he'd found that morning. He opened it and held it up to the cat's face.

Now everyone knows that cats can jump very high, especially when they're scared, but nobody, not even the world's greatest cat expert (whose name is Professor Funkleschnit, and he knows everything about cats) could have guessed how high this jumbled-up cat would jump. The instant it looked in the mirror its legs sprang out in all directions. Two of the legs pushed off against the ground, sending it spinning up into the sky, higher than Billy, twice the height of Billy.



'MEEEARRRGHH!'

It landed with a thud in the tall grass.

'What's happened to me?' wailed the cat for the second time. Its fur was all puffed up as if it had been sticking its tongue into an electricity socket. It turned and glared at Billy. 'This is all your fault. I was fine until you came along with your empty sandwiches and your cheesy promises. Well don't just stand there, you fat-faced flop. Do something!'

As best he could, Billy wrapped his cardigan around the furious, frightened, foul-mouthed animal, picked it up and set off for home.