SIBÉAL POUNDER

NEON'S SECRET UNIVERSE

Unicorns are real,
they're just not what you think...

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BLOOMSBURY

My Name Is Neon Gallup and I Just Wanted to Say!

Everything you've been told about unicorns is a lie! UNICORNS ARE NOT HORSES WITH HORNS!

Almost no humans know this, and I shouldn't even be writing it down.

They don't have hooves, or manes, or particularly magical names. Unicorns, *real* unicorns, look nothing like horses. Unicorns LOOK JUST LIKE YOU AND ME. It's almost impossible to spot one unless you know what to look for. They are the most magical beings on the planet – more magical than witches and mermaids and elves – and much more hidden. They live in a parallel world to ours and they call it THE UNIverse.

Getting to the UNIverse is almost impossible, unless you find a way in.

But if you do ever manage to open a portal to the UNIverse, life will never be the same again …

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Welcome to Brunty!

October, 1996

Three days until Neon's tenth birthday

Neon Gallup was on a quest to be normal.

Even though her family had moved from place to place all her life, and Neon had met *hundreds* of people, not a single one of them had ever considered her normal. She was always the weird one! But *this* time would be different.

Since they were moving to a new town, Neon decided it was the perfect time for a reinvention – to make her as normal as possible. She started with her clothes, ditching her favourite colourful, sequined and glittery outfits in favour of black everything instead. You couldn't go wrong with black, she decided. Every item of clothing

she owned that wasn't black she had managed to dye before her parents had bundled her into the car. She'd kept her favourite tie-dye tights though.

'Look at the beautiful countryside, Neon!' Her father was smiling, almost desperately, as he drove them to their new life. Neon could tell he didn't support her efforts to blend in. Neither did her mother – who was fast asleep in the back, snoring loudly.

'Neon,' her dad prompted again. 'Look at the spectacular rolling hills!'

'I don't like green any more,' Neon said. 'It's the colour of celery, the *weakest* vegetable.'

'This is a very strange phase, Neon.'

'It's not a phase,' she informed her dad. 'You and Mum are making me move across the world, so I thought what better time for a reinvention.'

'Moving from Paris to Brunty is hardly across the world. You could fly it in a few hours. Is this *reinvention* the reason you've worn only black for the past week?' her dad asked tentatively.

'It's because I'm older and more sophisticated now.'

'Maybe you should also change your name, if you don't like bright colours any more,' he joked.

'Oh, I plan to,' Neon said. 'I'm thinking something snappy, like GLOOM.'

Her dad smiled 'I know you don't mean that.'

'Only because I wouldn't know how to change my name,' Neon said.

They bumped along the road in silence for a few minutes.

'Have you thought of a name for the new cafe yet?' she asked.

Her dad's face brightened. '*Oh yes*. We're going to call it Ratty's.'

Neon looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. 'As in *rats*?'

'Yes,' he said, pointing to the back seat, where four very large cuddly toy rats were squished and seat-belted in beside her mum.

'I was inspired by your mother's genius,' Neon's dad said proudly.

Her mum was an artist, and one of her most popular

creations, much to Neon's horror, was human-sized cuddly toy rats.

'Ratty's,' her dad said grandly, sweeping a hand in front of him as if he were imagining the sign. 'The cafe that celebrates rodents!'

'You can't do that,' Neon said quickly. 'You'll never have any customers –normal people don't like rats!'

'All the more reason to do it – we can change their minds,' he replied. 'IT'S ABOUT TIME SOMEONE WAS NICE ABOUT RATS!'

Neon stared at him in disbelief.

'And if anyone comes in to dine alone,' he went on, 'I'll pop one of your mother's large rats in the seat opposite to keep them company!'

They passed the welcome sign for Brunty, their new home. Neon groaned as they trundled through the town, past little ramshackle shops and wonky stone walls.

'Isn't it lovely?' her dad said as they stopped at the traffic lights. 'Your mother used to holiday here as a child.'

But Neon was no longer paying attention, because on the patch of grass next to them, a group of people in

matching tie-dye T-shirts were on their hands and knees, digging.

'Welcome to Brunty!' cried one of the strange people.

Neon stuck her head out of the window to get a better look.

'What are you digging for?' she asked.

'Oh, something *very* special! A treasure more precious than any other!'

Neon noticed their T-shirts had the words *The UHs* stamped on them.

'What does that mean, *The UHs*? Is it something to do with your search?'

'Oh yes …' the woman said mysteriously, but before Neon could ask any more questions, the lights turned green and they were off.

'I wonder what all that digging was about?' Neon's mum said sleepily.

'Ah, you're awake,' Neon's dad said. 'Just in time!' He took a sharp right up a little hill and came to a stop. 'We're here!'

The hilltop was peppered with pretty stone cottages,

along with one very crumbly cottage and an even more crumbly cafe.

'Those two are ours. They need a bit of work,' he said. 'Oh, speaking of work – did we mention we'd like you to help us in the cafe for a while, Neon?'

'Just for the school holidays, until we hire some staff,' her mum added.

Neon put her head in her hands in despair.

Working at a cafe that celebrated rodents was not going to help her quest to be normal one little bit!

Inside the cottage, things got even worse: the new house was more cobwebs than house. There were holes in every floorboard and cracks in the ceiling.

'Why couldn't we move to an ordinary house?' Neon groaned.

'Oh, it's not too bad,' her mum said. 'Why don't you go and check out your room? It's got its own little bathroom, and you can see all the way into town from the window.'

So Neon plodded upstairs and plonked her box of

things on her dusty bed. She stood silently at the window, looking out across her new town.

'New town, new me,' she said, wiping the dust from the window sill. Underneath the dirt something caught her eye.

A unicorn, no bigger than a small coin, was carved into the wood.

'Weird,' she whispered, touching it lightly with her finger. Much to her surprise, the carving clicked and the window sill popped open like a box.

'A secret compartment!'

She lifted the window sill, plunged a hand inside and hit –

'SLIME!' she cried.

Sticky bits of sparkling, stretchy goo stuck to her hand.

'Ugh, bleurgh!' she gagged, as she waved her hand about, trying to shake it off.

There was something else in there, just beyond the goo. A little sliver of something poking out. Reluctantly, she squelched her hand back in and grabbed it.

It was a small and very old envelope, soaked in slime.

There was something lumpy inside it.

Neon wiped away the goo to reveal faded writing on the front.

SECRET!
DANGEROUS!
DO NOT TOUCH!

She shrugged and tipped the envelope upside down, excited to see what special treasure lay inside.

A dented and very old lipstick case fell out.

Her excitement slopped away like the slime. 'Why would anyone hide a lipstick?' she mumbled as she popped off the lid.

Luminous green lipstick.

A small slither of paper was rolled into its lid. Neon unfurled it eagerly and read:

YOU NOW OWN THE RAREST OBJECT IN
EXISTENCE! IN OUR WORLD, AND
IN THEIRS …