

# MIKE THE MOOSE, MASTER OF MARBLES

By

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Chapter 1:

MIKE THE MOOSE COMES HOME

Mike the Moose waited on the top shelf next to Oggie the Purple Orangutan and Gaggle the Yellow Giraffe. He'd been waiting in the gift store for nearly a year for the right people to come. Several shoppers came, but they merely picked him up, turned him over, a few rudely squeezed his belly and all of them thoughtlessly stuffed him back on the wooden shelf among his friends.

“Stupid people,” said Mike the Moose. “Do they think I'm a head of lettuce? Don't they know quality and sophistication when they see it--not to mention massive intelligence? People!” He muttered, slumping back on the shelf.

The following morning a couple came in, mulling around the gift store. They roamed the aisles idly examining the many treasures--knitted mittens, a bracelet of wooden beads, a hand-painted scrimshaw. The man found a carved and painted, multi-colored walking stick, a deck of cards with pictures of a nearby lighthouse and a toy train station. The woman, a short but attractive blonde wearing a quilted coat, strolled over to the shelf filled with animals and picked up Louie the elephant, and finally the brown moose.

“Oh look at this,” she called to the man. “Is he cute or what! A little moose--a mooseling.”

“Little moose? Mooseling! You Stepford wife,” said Mike the Moose. “There is nothing little about me. I madam, am Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles and I'll have you know I am of prodigious proportions, especially my antlers which grow a bit taller every day. The only thing

little around here is your intellect!” Said Mike in an enormous huff. After all no one, especially a moose, likes to be patronized.

The woman couldn't hear a word Mike said.

The man was balding and beneath his thick black glasses you could see there were bags under his eyes. He walked over and glanced at Mike the Moose.

“Yeah cute,” he grunted in bored disinterest.

The woman put Mike back on his shelf, continued down the aisle and the couple left the store.

“Thank goodness,” said Mike, though a little disappointed. “I wouldn't want to live with them anyway. She was O.K., but he was pure grouch.”

Still, Mike's antlers sagged a little but he proudly pulled himself up and continued to wait on the dusty shelf.

A moment later, the bell on the shop door tinkled again. The couple returned and the woman was heading straight for the animals.

“What's this about,” wondered Mike, feigning disinterest, but his heart beat considerably faster. Is it possible they would be his family, the parents he so longed for, a Mom and Dad who would understand how magnificent he, Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles truly was? Mike tried to act nonchalant as they approached, but his eyes were much wider than usual and he even forced a toothy grin. But the woman paused before she got to Mike—stopping to smile at Louie the Elephant and when she did, Mike's heart sank. But she didn't pick Louie up and instead she continued down the shelf until her hands cradled Mike and lifted him up. She was smiling, turning him around and even, rather rudely, upside down.

“Hey lady, I’m not a melon,” protested Mike the Moose, and then, catching himself, he softening his usual perk and gave her an antler to antler smile.

The woman couldn’t hear Mike.

“Adorable,” she said passing him to the man.

“Yeah,” said the man lifting him up until Mike was nose to nose with the man’s own rather crooked beak, “actually, he is pretty cute.”

“Great,” said the woman, “then we can get him?”

She didn’t wait for an answer but carried Mike the Moose to the clerk at the counter.

Mike was in a swoon. “A home, a home,” he cried with joy waving goodbye to Oggie and his buddies. “See you guys. If they have kids I’ll put in a good word for you,” said Mike waving goodbye.

“That’ll be \$35.40 with the tax,” said the clerk.

“\$35.40,” said Mike outraged. “I’m worth \$100 if I’m worth a penny. I demand a mark up!”

No one heard him.

“\$69.50?” said Mike slightly less insistent.

But neither the clerk, busy at the register, or his new parents heard a word. Money was exchanged and the clerk began to stuff Mike in a plastic bag.

“Oh, no need for the bag,” said the woman whose blond hair fell to her waist. “Save the trees!” She smiled at the clerk.

“She’s pretty for a non-moose,” thought Mike. “Smart too, and does that imbecilic clerk really think I want to get stuffed in a plastic bag where I could suffocate, or even have a bad

dream?”

Once in the car, the man and the woman took a second look at Mike the Moose.

“He actually is cute,” said the man with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. “But we need to name you,” he said lifting Mike up to his face, jokingly pretending the toy moose could talk.

“Any ideas Susan?”

“Excuse me,” said Mike getting huffy. “Do you honestly think a moose of my standing just arrives without a name? Do you think a stork dropped me nameless from a cloud? You people are going to need a lot more help than I thought.”

The couple froze. The man was so startled that he dropped Mike, but he dove and made a quick save and caught Mike in mid air.

“Oppffff,” groaned Mike as the man grabbed his tummy.

“Oh I’m really sorry about that,” said the man politely. Then he felt really stupid-- realizing he was talking to a moose.

The woman was too startled to speak at all.

“You heard him too?” said the man.

“Michael I did!” said the woman.

They starred incredulously at Mike the Moose.

“Hmm,” thought Mike the Moose, “his name is Mike too. So he does have some class.”

“Susan, I swear the moose talked to us,” said the man.

“I heard him too,” said the woman.

“DAAA” said Mike the Moose. “Of course I talk. I’m nearly three in moose years. Now in people years that’s, ...ah...23,” said Mike calculating on his hooves. “Don’t you think by now

I'd know a word or two?"

The man and the woman looked like they'd seen a ghost.

"But, but you speak!" She said.

"Aren't you the quick learner," Mike said impatiently. "Of course I speak. You expected maybe sign language? With hooves? Maybe antler signals? Or a "Howdy" sent telepathically?

"But," said the woman, "you're only a stuffed..."

Something instinctive stopped Susan from saying "toy" and that was a very good thing because being called a "toy" was one of the things that made Mike blow a gasket.

"You're just a...a tiny moose," Susan said, quickly rephrasing.

"Madam, if I'm coming home with you, you'd better know a few things," insisted Mike. "FIRST. My proper name is Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles. SECOND, I am exceptionally bright. In fact Oggie the giraffe says I'm 'precocious.' THIRD, I am handsome with great, grand antlers...though that's obvious. FOURTH, I expect to sleep in the same bed with you guys. And finally, FIFTH, I am exceptionally afraid of crockigators--we don't have any at home do we?"  
Asked Mike showing obvious concern.

After a stunned pause the man replied, "Well no Mike, we don't have a single crocodile or alligator. No crockigators. But we do have other stuffed..."

The man a stopped in mid-sentence, also having nearly blown it.

"...that is, we have other little animal creatures like yourself. We have Boris the bat, Buffie the buffalo, Mousey the mouse, and Honks the duck. Oh, yes, and Pogo the purple piglet."

"Cool. I have friends," said Mike the Moose, "I want to meet them..." Mike paused a

moment before continuing...“as long as they know their place,” said Mike raising his antlers high.

“Well they do stay in the bedroom with us,” said the man.

Mike looked annoyed and began tapping his front hoof.

“But,” said the man, “they don’t sleep with us. They like sleeping in the red Radio Flyer wagon we have in the corner of the bedroom.”

“Which of course is not intended for me,” said Mike,

“Oh no,” said Susan. “You will sleep in bed with us.”

Mike nodded approvingly. Things were working out.

The car pulled up into a house with dark, brown shingles. A friendly, flower lined walkway led to the front door.

“Welcome home,” said the woman warmly.

Mike smiled.

“This is the living room, Mike,” she said entering a big room with a fireplace.

Suddenly Mike heard the pounding of what seemed like hundreds of little feet accompanied by a great deal of growling and barking.

“Oh my God, we have crockigators,” Mike screamed, his antlers rose in full alarm, “quick bar the door.”

Three huge dogs bounded into the room panting, circling, barking and wagging.

“Oh sorry, Mike,” said the man. “I forgot to tell you. They are your other brothers, Kola, Cooper and Eddy.”

“DOGS.” said Mike the Moose. “Flea-laden creatures that scratch and demand walks? We have dogs?”

Cooper, Kola and Eddy were equally curious about Mike the Moose when Mike held the little moose him up for them to see. Cooper, thinking Mike was a toy, nuzzled his snout into Mike the Moose’s belly. Mike the Moose nearly fainted.

“No, No, Cooper” said the Mike. “This is Mike the Moose. He is your new brother and you mustn’t touch him.”

Cooper seemed to understand, stopped in his tracks, and just wagged.

“Go get a bone instead Cooper,” said Michael.

Cooper trotted off while Mike tried to comfort Mike the Moose who was in shock and mumbling.

“Neat house and my people seem O.K. But those dogs are over the top,” thought Mike the Moose.

“Michael and I have to go out for a bit,” said the woman to Mike the Moose. “How about you rest here on my pillow? Have a nap. This was quite a busy day for you.”

Mike the Moose considered. Usually he expected to go with his folks. On the other hand his antlers were a little droopy.

“K,” said Mike. “I could use a little nap.”

Mike’s new mom set him gently on top of a big fluffy white pillow. Mikes eyes started to slide closed when he felt his mom’s cheeks on his own.

“Welcome home, Mike the Moose,” said Susan. “Welcome home.”



“Thanks, Mom,” said Mike the Moose. He liked the sound of her voice and he liked saying the word “Mom”.

“Ah Mom?” asked Mike.

“What Mikey,” she said.

“This is my permanent home right? I don’t go back to the store again do I?” Mike asked trying to be casual about the question.

“Mike,” said his new mom, “this is your home and you are as much a part of the family as I am. Forever and ever.”

A big smile came across Mike’s face. It had been a totally acceptable morning.

## Chapter 2

### MIKE THE MOOSE DISCOVERS CHRISTMAS

When Mike the Moose awoke the next morning, the winds outside were blustering and the Leaves swirled and the trees bent this way and that.

Michael, usually the first to awake, hopped out of bed and did a major stretch. Cooper, hearing that Michael was up, came in bounding towards the bed where it was tradition for Michael to give him a long good morning belly scratch. Kola, always in a grizzly mood in the morning—and for that matter at noon or at night--growled at Cooper's interruption, seeing no reason why man or dog should ever interrupt a good night's rest. Finally Eddy, the big black Labrador-bloodhound mix, rose from his bed, his tail excitedly rotating like an airplane prop.

Mike the Moose was sleeping on the pillow next to Susan and they awoke together.

"Morning Mike the Moose," said Susan, then to Michael, "Hi honey."

Before long the entire family was in the kitchen with the coffee brewing and the toaster toasting. Susan placed several slices of golden brown toast on a plate.

While Susan and Mike ate, Eddy, Kola and Cooper munched, crunched and slurped, each devouring a heaping bowl of dog chow.

Mike looked around the big kitchen. Everywhere there were bags and boxes-brimming with wrapping paper, tinsel, Christmas ornaments and wreaths. There were fully wrapped boxes and boxes yet to be wrapped. Susan had nearly finished displaying her Christmas village collection. There were trains that circled, skaters dancing to music, ceramic churches, homes, banks, and a post office. There were mechanical Christmas elves and a rocking reindeer that

swayed to the tune of Blue Christmas and a dancing Santa that twisted to the beat of an old rock and roll favorite—*Blue Suede Shoes*.

“My mom is sure into Christmas,” thought Mike.

Susan picked up Mike the Moose.

“The one person I’ve not yet shopped for is you Mr. Mooseling,” she said with a wink.

“As the newest family member, what should I tell Santa you want for Christmas?”

“Wow,” thought Mike. “I never had a Christmas present before.”

In fact, Mike had never considered the possibility of getting a gift.

After a moment's pause, he said, “Well, is there any chance I could have, I mean if it's not too much trouble, ah, you see I have this collection,” said Mike, proudly opening a bulging velvet sack that he carried.

“What’s that Mike?” Susan said.

“It’s my marble collection. I won each one from my friends at the store. I have star marbles, several clearies, and biggies and smallies. You have to admit it’s the most beautiful marble collection in the whole world. See,” said Mike taking his marbles out, one by one, to show her.

“Mike they are just beautiful,” Susan said. “Why you have blue ones, and a pink one, even a gold one, and a clear one and one with a star that sparkles inside. What a fine marble collection!”

Mike’s chest nearly burst with pride.

“I have twenty-four,” he said.

“So you would like more for Christmas?” Susan asked.

“Well, twenty-five is a perfect number. It’s a fourth of a hundred.” Mike said, demonstrating his vast mathematical knowledge.

“I’ll talk to Santa,” Susan said. “He’s pretty good at getting kids what they want.” She winked at Michael who smiled from the other side of the breakfast table.

That afternoon Susan left for the mall.

“Let’s go Mike,” she said sweeping Mike the Moose into in her handbag. Mike’s head rested just above the top of the handbag.

“What’s a mall mom?” Mike asked.

“Blocks and blocks of stores selling everything you can imagine,” Susan said.

“But you’re not taking me back to my store are you?” said Mike looking worried.

“No, No, Mike. We’re only shopping for a few presents--and for your Christmas marble,” Susan said.

“Oh,” said Mike quite surprised and then excited.

“Another thing mom.”

“Yes Mike,” said Susan

“This mall. It doesn’t have any crockigators does it? I’d really just as soon not go if it does. I don’t like crockigators...and I especially don’t like their teeth.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Susan said. “I’ll be with you.”

“And they don’t too many kids do they? Kids always pull my antlers,” said Mike concerned.

“There’s always kids at malls Mike,” Susan said, “but I won’t let them touch you. You’ll stay right here with me,” said Susan patting her handbag. “Besides, I need your shopping advice Mike.”

“K” said Mike the Moose smiling.

Mike had never seen anything like the mall. They passed store after store with displays and signs and window manikins that were almost like real people. There must have been fifty stores, all selling different items. There were kids too, licking ice cream cones and listening to iPods through ear buds. The children eyed Mike, but Susan kept her handbag close, keeping Mike safe from their sticky grasp.

“So where’s the Marbles R Us?” asked Mike as they passed a Toys R Us.

“They don’t have a store only for marbles,” said Susan, "but there is a big toy store that carries marbles in many sizes and colors. You get to choose any marble you want."

“Any one?” Mike said in awe.

“Yep,” said Susan.

“How much can I spend?” said Mike

“Any one,” said Susan with emphasis.

Mike was impressed.

Meanwhile Susan saw a sweater she liked and she stopped to try it on. It was pink and wool and it had a picture of a Christmas elf holding a kitten. She'd set her handbag down and was slipping the sweater over outstretched arms when it happened. Someone wrenched her handbag off the table, making off with it as fast as could be. Susan, busy modeling the sweater in the mirror, hadn't see what happened and she didn't know the handbag had been taken.

Meanwhile during the commotion, Mike the Moose had been knocked to the bottom of the handbag and was bouncing around in the dark, crashing into Susan's lipstick, the car keys and her hair brush. The sudden rough bouncing just didn't feel right to Mike. Susan had been so careful not to jostle him, but now the handbag swung wildly in every direction. Rear up, antlers down, Mike tried to repeatedly to right himself.

"Mom, slow down. This not unacceptable," he yelled.

But he was jostled as roughly as ever. Gathering his strength, Mike made a determined effort to right himself, and succeeded, popping his head above the rim of Susan's handbag. He was horrified by what he saw. Susan wasn't carrying him at all. It was a kid, a pimply teenager maybe eighteen-years-old with bleached hair, freckles, three rings in his ear and one in his lip. He wore a black T-shirt with a picture of a guitar shaped that was shaped like a red skull and the words--SKULL AND BONES BAND. The boy was moving at a near run, looking back every few steps.

"Help, emergency, police," called Mike. "911, 411, amber alert, code blue, red alert.

SOS, mayday.”

Mike hollered every cry for help that he'd ever heard, but no one responded and no one seemed to care.

“Are you nuts,” Mike the Moose screamed at the teenager. “Take me back to my mom this instant,” Mike demanded.

But the boy hadn't heard Mike and he kept going as fast as he could.

Meanwhile Susan decided she didn't like the pink sweater enough to buy it, and she returned it to the rack. She turned for her handbag, but it wasn't there.

“Oh, I must have left it at the other sweater table,” she thought, walking to the adjacent sweater counter. But the handbag wasn't there either.

“Oh no,” thought Susan. “It has my keys and lipstick and rogue and...” Suddenly Susan's face went pale. “And MIKE THE MOOSE,” she suddenly realized. “Oh no, Mike the Moose is gone!”

She hurried to the checkout counter.

“Call security immediately,” she said to the bored checkout clerk.

The clerk raised her sleepy eye lids and stared blankly at Susan.

“NOW,” said Susan. “There is a thief in the store and my handbag is gone.”

The clerk mechanically pushed a button under her register and a tiny red light began to flash. Moments later a broad man wearing a blue security uniform came up to her.

“What's up Marge,” he said to the clerk.

“Someone took my handbag,” Susan answered for her, “while I was trying on sweaters.”

“Show me where,” said the guard who said something into the walkie-talkie clipped to his shoulder as they walked. Soon a second security guard appeared. He had a clipboard and started taking notes.

“Handbag’s contents?” he asked Susan, running down his list.

“Car keys, lipstick, wallet, brush...about ninety dollars cash and credit cards...my driver’s license, and the most important thing of all...”

“Yes,” pressed the guard.

“Mike the Moose, my mooseling!” said Susan with considerable urgency.

“Your what lady?” Asked the guard.

“My mooseling. A little moose with tall brown antlers!” said Susan.

The first guard looked at the second guard who shrugged.

“This is important,” Susan said. “We just got him a few days ago and he was in my handbag. I must get him back-- he’s a very special moose.”

Both officers rolled their eyes now.

“We’ll sure do our best ma’am,” the second guard said.

The first guard talked into his walkie-talkie again while the second guard made a phone call to Michael for Susan. He told Michael what had happened, and asked him to bring a duplicate set of car keys for Susan.

By now the pimply teenager reached his car in the parking lot, carrying Susan’s handbag under his arm. Mike saw that there were two other kids waiting inside the car.



“Let’s go. Let’s go,” said the thief to the kid behind the wheel.

“What’d we get?” said the driver.

The teenager started to rummage through Susan’s handbag muttering.

“Keys,” he tossed them on the floor, “lipstick...ah here we go,” said the kid,

nearly ripping open Susan’s wallet.

“The wallet has credit cards and about 90 bucks in cash,” he said.

“What’s that?” said one of the kids, yanking Mike the Moose out the handbag.

“Let me go. Unhand me. Don’t you know crime doesn’t pay?” hollered Mike the Moose furiously. “Are you deaf as posts? All of you will go to the hoosegow when I finish with you.”

“Just a dumb stuffed toy,” said the thief tossing Mike to the car floor.

“How dare you call me a toy--or dumb,” bellowed Mike the Moose from the floor, trying to dust himself off. “I have twice your IQ and judging from this mess...,” Mike pointed with his hoof to dozens of crumpled, yellow Super-Pounder with Cheese wrappers scattered throughout the car, “if anyone around here is stuffed it’s the three of you.”

Mike stood tall, his antlers fully erect, and tried to confront his abductors who hadn’t heard a word.

The driver-flipped through Susan’s credit cards and debated aloud.

“We could try to use them, but how do we explain the name “Susan”?”

“How about we call Molly and have her come and buy stuff?” said the driver.

“Look,” said the smallest of the three, a kid with glasses and brown, wavy hair, “lifting a handbag is one thing, but credit card theft is a whole other ball game.”

“Who cares, let’s use ‘em,” said Mike’s abductor.

While the boys argued over what to do, Mike saw his chance. He carefully squeezed himself forward under the seat inching towards the car keys that hung in the steering column. He forced himself ahead, sliding in between the driver’s unlaced tennis shoes which had an aroma unlike anything Mike ever smelled before—that of a skunk eating Lindenhurst cheese in a garbage truck. The smell made Mike woozy but he bravely continued forward until finally, standing up on his two back hooves, he could almost grab the car keys—but not quite.

“My hooves won’t reach them but perhaps my antlers can,” thought Mike.

“Who says you’re the boss?” the driver shouted, grabbing the credit cards out of the hand of Mike’s abductor.

The three boys continued quarreling, which distracting from seeing Mike slip his antler into the key ring. Mike gave one enormous antler shake, loosening the keys, and they fell to the floor, the acid rock blaring from the car radio muffling their fall.

Mike stealthily carried the keys back under the seat and hooked them on a seat spring, just as the boys finished arguing about the credit cards.

“Just in time,” thought Mike as

“Dude,” said the driver, “We need to beat it.”

“K,” said the others.

“Where’s the keys?” said the driver patting his hand over the ignition. “You got ‘em?” he turned to the others.

“I don’t have ‘em. You do,” said the other two.

“Funny. Funny. You guys are a riot. Now whoever has them, I want them now,” said the

driver getting red faced.

“I don’t have ‘em,” said the teenage abductor.

“Me neither,” said the other.

The driver looked worried now and all three teenagers got out of the car to search the pavement around the car.

Mike saw his chance to call for help. He stood on his hind hoofs and put all his weight against the car horn, and then he dashed back into Susan’s handbag. As fate would have it, the horn stuck, blaring loud and endlessly.

“What’s with you guys,” yelled the driver. “Who hit the horn? Shut it off!”

“It won’t quit,” said the teenage abductor repeatedly banging the wheel.

Mike had to hold his hoof over his mouth he was laughing so hard.

The three boys lifted the car’s hood and they frantically searched for the horn wires, holding their hands over their ears while the horn honked and honked.

The teenage abductor was the first to notice they were too late to get away. A white and black mall security car with a red light flashing on top was heading straight for them.

“Dump the handbag NOW,” he yelled, tossing it to the driver.

The driver grabbed the handbag and ran while Mike was getting tossed inside it--like a shirt in clothes dryer. The driver ran to a trash can and quickly stuffed the handbag deep down inside, burring it under the trash. Then he walked nonchalantly back to the car.

The security car came to a stop next to the boy’s car with the horn still honking.

“Problem guys?” the security guard rolled down his window.

“No, no,” said the driver. “Just a stuck horn.”

“Turn the key on and off a couple times,” suggested the guard. “Might clear the horn.”

The three teenagers sat motionless in the car, looking bewildered.

“It’s worth a try,” urged the guard.

“You see, we lost the keys,” said the driver.

That peeked the guard’s interest.

“License and car registration,” he said. He nodded to his partner who radioed the car’s license plate to his station. “Where did you say you lost the keys?” he asked.

“It was in the ignition, honest,” said the driver.

“Ah huh,” said the guard doubtfully. “Did you look under the seats?”

“We did, but they’re not there ,” muttered the driver.

From inside the trash can, Mike the Moose was struggling to lift his head over the rim of the handbag. He’d managed to acquire a half eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich stuck unceremoniously on top of his head. It looked like Napoleon’s cap.

“There must be a way for me to get the guard’s attention,” thought Mike. “If I could tip this bin over,” he rocked back and forth, “he’ll surely hear it and come”

Mike started rocking as hard as he could, but the bin only teetered a little. In the distance Mike saw a white dog sniffing from can to can. Mike whistled his loudest, and the dog’s ears perked up. The dog, wagging excitedly, making his way to Mike’s bin.

“So,” said Mike to the dog “I bet you can’t do what dog’s do at trash bins.”

The big white dog took the challenge and leaned into the trash can, raising his leg. The

can tilted just a little, and as it did, Mike ran at the trash's side can as hard as he could. Sure enough, boom, the trash can came thundering down, spilling papers, old receipts, a banana peel and a sun bleached copy of *Teens Today* magazine onto the parking lot.

The guards look up, surprised by the racket.

The big one ambled over to the trash can.

The three boys looked at each other, wondering if they should try to run, but they were trapped.

“What’s this,” said the guard, picking up the handbag.

“At last,” muttered Mike the Moose eyeing the guard from his place in the bin. “What took you so long? I’m Mike the Moose and I am not accustomed to spending afternoons in a trash can.”

The officer walked away with Susan’s handbag, leaving Mike on top of the trash, the half sandwich still on his head. Mike’s heart sank.

Suddenly the guard stopped in his tracks. Something he’d seen finally registered, and he returned to the can. He pushed aside a faded newspaper revealing Mike the Moose, looking as disheveled as a mooseling ever looks.

“It’s about time,” demanded Mike. “I do not pay my taxes for mediocre protection! I do not pay them to be left in a trash heap while you ignore me and rescue a handbag. Good thing you came back because I have your badge number.”

Of course the guard heard nothing, but he cocked his head to the two-way radio clipped

on his shoulder.

“Didn’t the lady say something about a stuffed toy?’ he asked.

“Stuffed? *You* call *me* stuffed? You--with the body like the Michelin Man. And how dare you refer to my distinguished personage as a TOY!” said Mike, wiping the remainder of the peanut butter sandwich off his antler.

Oblivious, the guard lifted Mike by one hoof, dangling him upside down.

“Looks like a cow or maybe a buffalo,” said the officer into his walkie-talkie.

Mike was beside himself.

“A buffalo! What Police Academy graduated you Sherlock? Do a moose and a buffalo have a thing in common?” said Mike quite beside himself.

“A moose, yeah, it could be a moose,” the guard confirmed. “Tell the lady to calm down. We have her toy.”

“TOY!” groaned Mike the Moose. “This is over the top. You just won an all expenses paid trip to an ophthalmologist.”

“Tell the lady to meet me at security. I’ll bring it to her,” said the guard heading to his car, handbag in one hand and Mike upside down in the other.

By now the town police had arrived and the three culprits were sitting in the back of a squad car.

“Told you crime doesn’t pay!” said Mike the Moose taunting them. “I wish they could hear me,” he thought.

When the officers reached the Mall Security Center, Susan came running up.

“Oh, Mikey,” she said lifting him from the guard’s arms. “I’m so glad you’re back. What

an unimaginable first day!” “Thank you so much officer, Sir,” she smiled and shook the security guard’s hand vigorously.

“No problem, ma’am” said the guard. “Here, I think you’ll want this too. Car keys and the wallet are still in there” he smiled handing back her handbag.

“Mom you’re practically suffocating me,” said Mike squished up against Susan’s chest. She was holding him so tight he felt the circulation leaving the last two inches of antler. Susan didn’t care. She wouldn’t let go of Mike. Never again would she lose sight of her little mooseling.

“Where to now, Mom?” asked Mike as the car turned out of the mall.

“Home,” Michael Susan said. “I’m taking you home.”

On the ride home, Mike remembered he didn’t get to shop for his new marble but he didn’t even care. He was that so glad to be safe with his mom. Susan smiled reading Mike’s mind. She knew what was in her pocket, though Mike didn’t. There was a small clear marble, a star filled cluster, and a big antique one, black with red squiggly lines. They were three of a whole lot of reasons why this would be Mike’s best Christmas ever.

### Chapter 3

#### MIKE THE MOOSE GOES TO SPAIN

“Did the tickets come in the mail?” Susan asked Michael who was thumbing through a stack of bills, catalogs and fliers.

“From NorthStar Travel?” Michael asked, handing Susan a thick white envelope.

“Great,” she said ripping open the envelope to remove the single air ticket inside.

“Isn’t there a mistake,” said Mike the Moose looking up from Susan’s lap? “One ticket?”

“Not to worry Mikey,” Susan said. “Mooselings don’t need a ticket. You travel in my handbag.”

“I’m not that fond of your handbag you know,” said Mike.

“It won’t happen again,” Susan said, clutching Mike a little tighter. “I won’t let the handbag out of my sight, and on the plane you can ride securely in my seat belt.”

“K,” said Mike with little conviction.

On Wednesday Susan headed out the door with a suitcase and a bag brimming with presents. Mike was in his usual position in Susan’s handbag with his head just high enough for him to see.

In line at the airport, the security guard told Susan to put her handbag through the X-ray scanner. She placed the handbag in the plastic scanner box, first removing Mike.

“The toy too,” said the guard.



“TOY!” said Mike indignantly.

“Here we go,” thought Susan knowing the word would annoy Mike.

“Do I look like a toy? Said Mike. “Do you think I wind up? And no way am I going through that X-ray thing. I read it could make my bones brittle.”

Susan nonchalantly slid her hand over Mike’s mouth while Mike continued his muffled protest.

The guard heard nothing.

“He prefers not to be X-rayed,” said Susan to the surprised guard.

The guard looked incredulously at Susan but then, assuming she was kidding, he smiled accommodatingly and went along with the joke.

“Sure lady,” he said. “I’ll check him by hand,” he said squeezing Mike like a sponge.

“Hay,” yelled Mike. “What are you the Gestapo? Unhand me.”

The guard, holding Mike upside down by the leg, handed him back to Susan.

“Mom!” Mike huffed in protest.

“Just doing his job Mikey,” Susan said.

“Not very well if he could mistake ME for a toy,” muttered Mike.

Soon they were seated on the plane with Mike the Moose comfortably propped up in Susan’s lap. The stewardess, wandering the isles, did a double-take.

“Tell me that woman isn’t chatting to her toy?” She thought.

The flight was uneventful except for a bit of air turbulence over the Azores when the plane dropped several hundred feet. Mike was jostled and got splashed with a drop of Susan’s Cabernet.

“Next time I want a flight with no bumps,” huffed Mike.

The plane hit another down draft.

“Mom call the stewardess and make her prove the captain has a valid pilot’s license,” said Mike. “My friend Buffie the Bat is better flier than him.”

Susan offered Mike an explanation of air turbulence which calmed him.

After landing, Susan presented her passport at customs booth. Unfortunately, the friendly immigration officer joked that her moose might need a passport too. It was the wrong thing to say because now Mike demanded a passport all his own.

“It’s discrimination against four legged creatures,” insisted Mike. “She gets a passport. I don’t even get my picture taken. I intend to complain to the Department of Transportation and the Surgeon General,” said Mike stamping his hoofs.

“Surgeon General?” Susan questioned under her breath but just softly enough so Mike couldn’t hear.

They got their luggage and Susan hailed a cab.

“Hotel Colon Imperial.” she said to the driver.

The ancient yellow taxi sped off through Madrid’s crowded streets.

The cab held for a red light at the next intersection,. There was a man in a tan suit standing under a store awning at the corner, and when he saw the cab stop, he opened the rear door and jumped in. The cabby sped ahead even before the light changed.

“Stop driver. Right now!” Susan yelled, reaching for the door handle. “This is my cab not his.”

But the man reached over and grabbed Susan by the arm.

“Susan,” said the man. “I am not here to hurt you. Let go of the handle.”

“Help. 911. Policia,” yelled Mike the Moose.

“Susan,” said the man continued to restrain her arm. “Susan Grossman. Please relax. I am a friend. I am from the U. S. State Department and we need your help.”

“What are you talking about,” demanded Susan, “and why are you in my cab. And how do you know my name?”

“I’m Agent Harry Malone,” the man explained, opening a black wallet and flashing a gold badge and picture ID.

The ID card read: US Department of State, Special Intelligence Division.

“He doesn’t look especially intelligence to me,” Mike whispered to Susan.

“Mike!” Susan hushed him.

“Ah, no ma’am, the name is Harry--not Mike. It’s Agent Harry Malone,” he said.

“What could you possibly want with me,” asked Susan, not at all sure she shouldn’t be screaming for help.

“It’s a long story. But in a nutshell, you Susan are the spitting image of Margarita Melagrosa De la Rosa Gustamante,” explained Agent Malone. “Amazingly like her and that’s why we badly need your help. Our file indicates you speak fluent Spanish. You have to help us. It’s a matter of national security.”

“I’m on vacation,” whined Susan, “I’m supposed to be relaxing.”

“We can’t always choose when our country needs us,” said Agent Malone looking very grave and serious.

“But, I’m just me,” said Susan. “I’m no secret agent. What can I do and who is the woman you think I look like?”

“It’s like this,” said Agent Malone. “We need you to go to the office of an important local official to retrieve something. They’ll give it to you if they think you are Margarita Melagrosa De la Rosa Gustamante. We will train you. I know you can pull it off.”

“But, but...” Susan protested.

“And what about me?” said Mike the Moose standing extra tall on his hoofs to look important.

Malone heard nothing.

“It’s my country too,” said Mike putting hoof over heart proudly.

“Mike,” Susan said, “hold off. This is not the time.”

Agent Malone could have sworn he saw Susan talk to her toy. He scratched quizzically behind his ear looking uncertain.

“Some kind of phone or listening device is it?” asked Malone.

“Oh he’s my mooseling,” blushed Susan knowing Malone wouldn’t understand.

Now it was Malone who wanted out of the taxi.

“Maybe I should talk to my husband about this?” Susan asked. “How do I even know you’re for real?”

“You may not discuss this with anyone, but we are headed for the State Department offices here in Madrid. Ambassador Melvin Goodings is in town and he will verify what I say. He wants to meet you. But one thing you must remember. If anyone, even Ambassador Goodings’ secretary asks who you are and why you’re here, you say that you are a member of

the press here to do an article for US WorldView,” said Malone.

“OK,” said Susan dubiously.

The taxi wasn't air-conditioned and the hot Spanish sun beat through the windows. Mike, a cold weather creature by nature, began to wilt. His proud antlers drooped and seemed to weigh a ton. Susan was feeling disheveled and her makeup started to run. The dark mascara circles around her eyes made Mike giggle.

“What?” asked Susan.

“You look like my friend Rudy the raccoon,” laughed Mike.

The taxi pulled into a gated entrance to the compound. The American flag flew proudly next to the yellow and orange flag of Spain. In the center of the circle there was a fountain with a statue of Christopher Columbus. A marine in a neatly pressed uniform stepped out of the guard booth and peered into the taxi.

“Sir,” saluted the soldier seeing Agent Malone in the back seat.

Malone pointed to Susan. “She's with me.”

“Me too,” insisted Mike the Moose. “I'm with her which means I'm with him,” explained Mike to the soldier who heard nothing.

The taxi pulled up at the entrance to the building and Malone got out.

“Put her bags in the holding compound,” said Malone to a waiting soldier. “Please join me Susan,” he said, holding open a big brass door that led to a tall marble hallway.

Agent Malone's office was filled with computers, papers and pictures of Malone

with various dignitaries. Mike liked the picture of Agent Malone in front of a World War II airplane. In the center of Malone's desk Susan saw a black and white 8.5 x 11" picture of woman who, except for the obvious difference in clothing, looked remarkably like her.

"Drink?" Malone asked.

"That would be great," replied Mike the moose. "Carrot juice straight up."

"Yes," smiled Susan shoving Mike down in her purse. "Do you have a Coke?"

Malone reached into a small refrigerator and handed Susan a cold Coke.

"How's this?"

"Better than O.K.," said Susan whose tongue felt like a sand dune.

They chatted a while. Malone was also from New York, but the Bronx. Finally he took the picture off his desk and showed it to Susan.

"She really does look like me!" remarked Susan. "A little different nose, and her hair is darker, but otherwise it really could be me."

"Now you understand why you are so critical to Operation DataGrab," said Malone.

"I'm critical too," said Mike the Moose."

"Yes, of course you are Mike," said Susan forgetting herself and making Agent Malone more uncomfortable than ever.

"We have learned," Malone continued quickly recovering, "that several top Q3 Agents plan to harm American interests in Spain. I won't give you too much detail for your own protection. But we know their attack plan and that their leader has a list of all the Q3 agents in Spain. Their leader is Generalissimo Alfonso Ramonito Crakov del Buston. This woman," Malone held up the picture of Margarita Melagrosa De la Rosa Gustamante, "used to be the

General's secretary but is now his lover.

"But, surely he will know the difference if he sees me?" Susan said.

"The General would, yes," said Agent Malone. "But with proper training you can fool his aides. It is most important that you fool his second in command, Captain Jorge del Pogo. So the plan is to teach you her every habit; how she smiles, how she walks, what she likes to eat, when she sleeps, the words she favors, what she reads... everything. When you have her mannerisms down perfectly, we will wait until the General is out of town and then we act. The plan is to divert the real Margarita Melagrosa De la Rosa Gustamante and send you to the General's office. Your job is to download critical files from his computer. If you get them, the U.S. can shut down his entire network."

Susan's nodded, confirming she understood the plan.

"Way too risky," said Mike the Moose. "This is not for me or my mom. But we would be willing to do a little surveillance say, by the pool? You know, over Pina Colladas?"

"But what do I tell my husband?" said Susan ignoring Mike's objection. "He'll wonder where I am."

"With your O.K.," said Malone, "our agent in New York will visit him this afternoon. He will explain that you are delayed helping the State Department. We'll assure Michael that your safety is paramount."

"And my safety? Is that Paramount too?" mumbled Mike the Moose. "Is it even United Artists?"

"Of course your safety is important Mike," said Susan forgetting herself again.

Again it seemed to Agent Malone that the lady he was betting the whole mission on was

talking to a stuffed animal. But he waved off the thought as preposterous.

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Next morning the sun streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows of their room at the Hotel Colone, throwing a sun rainbow on the multicolored walls. Susan woke and stretched in bed, feeling refreshed after a wonderful night's sleep. She lifted Mike the Moose up to her face.

"Morning, Mikey. Wonderful day," she said, kissing the end of his pointed moose nose.

"Let's stay in bed and watch TV all day mom," said Mike, clearly not eager for the hot Spanish sun to wilt his delicate antlers.

"I don't see why not," Susan said. Then it all came back to her. "Oh my Mikey. We can't. Don't you remember? We start training today with Agent Malone."

For Mike, it was like remembering a bad dream.

"Oh yeah," he said wistfully. "I wish we could just play. This was supposed to be a fun trip."

"I'm sorry, Mikey. I wish we could play too. But they really need us. On account of my resemblance to Margarita," said Susan.

"Do I look like her too?" asked Mike.

"Of course not. But perk up your antlers. I need you with me. It's a little scary and I need a real man, ah, a real moose by my side," Susan said.

Mike felt better and more than a little important.

Susan got dressed and poured hot coffee from the big silver pitcher on breakfast cart brought to her room. The coffee was as thick as hot chocolate and just as rich and tasty. There were delicious hot rolls and pasties served on colorful china, British Marmalade and a bowl of



fresh fruit. There was a huge Chrysanthemum in a vase on the breakfast cart. Susan dressed, slid Mike into her handbag and hurried downstairs.

At precisely 8:35 A.M. a black Ford Torus pulled up at the hotel entrance. The driver got out and opened the back door for Susan.

“Agent Ricardo,” he quietly introduced himself to Susan. “Agent Malone will meet you at the embassy.”

Off they sped through crowded alleyways as the cool morning began turning into another sweltering Spanish day.

Malone stood up politely when Susan entered.

“Did you get breakfast?” he asked.

“Thanks, I’m all set,” said Susan

“Very well then, let’s begin. Let me see you walk,” said Malone.

Susan looked puzzled but walked back and forth across the room.

“Way too prim,” said Malone. “Here, watch this.”

He flicked a switch and a wide movie screen lowered from the ceiling. On the screen, a woman who looked remarkably like Susan came out of a restaurant and walked down the street. She moved gracefully yet with a great deal of movement in her hips, one step rolling into the next the way a leopard walks.

“More like this?” asked Susan, again walking across the floor. This time her hips rolled back and forth.

“Very good,” said Agent Malone clearly impressed.

“Mom!” protested Mike the Moose, embarrassed to see his mom walk that way.

They spent the rest of the morning watching films of Margarita Melagrosa De la Rosa Gustamante. There were pictures of Margarita eating, dancing, arguing, applying makeup, getting in and out of cars, sitting and standing. Every imaginable movement was covered.

Mike was bored to his antlers but he had to agree with Agent Malone when he told Susan how quickly she picked up Margarita’s mannerisms. The afternoon was devoted to makeup—to showing Susan which cosmetics Margarita used, how she applied her lipstick and how she darkened her eyebrows. A colorist came in and died Susan’s hair a perfect matching shade.

Mike complained he was board so Susan had the colorist take a small section of fur just back of his antlers and color it too—but ever so lightly. When the colorist finished, Mike spent the remainder of the afternoon going from mirror to mirror admiring himself, then pretending he was talking to a People Magazine reporter about his new look.

“Image is everything,” Susan heard him say as he shifted positions in the mirror.

Susan watched more films and learned about Margarita’s family and friends. In one film Margarita was at the theater, seated with the General in his private box. The General was shorter than Susan expected for so important a man. The little Turkish cigars he puffed kept his head in a constant cloud of smoke and when the General talked, smoke spilled out of his nose and mouth. Mike the Moose swore it came out his ears too.

“He looks like a Chinese dragon,” laughed Mike.

The General had dark, puffy eyes and heavily greased hair. He rarely spoke when he entered a room, but the eyes of his men followed him everywhere, searching for a hint of anything they could do that might please the General. He wasn’t a handsome man but one thing

was certain. The General was in charge.

Susan felt an instant dislike for him and knew if their paths crossed her biggest challenge would be to feign affection. Agent Malone assured her that it would never happen. The General would be out of town when DataGrab went operational, and Malone would have the computer disk and Susan would be heading back to the U.S. long before the General returned.

Mike didn't like the General either, and he felt no need to hold back about it. General Toad Face, he called him, though he liked Margarita's looks and Mike was instantly fond of her big, gray Abyssinian cat.

"Can I meet her mom?" Mike asked.

"Sorry, Mikey. We won't be crossing paths with Margarita and if we do, it won't be for tea," Susan said.

Susan's training continued for another week when Agent Malone announced, "Susan, you have done really well. DataGrab can go operational."

Susan paled.

"Are you sure I can pass for her? And what about the General's travel plans. Don't we have to wait 'til he leaves Spain?"

"You do Margarita better than Margarita does Margarita," quipped Agent Malone. "And the General will be in Istanbul next week visiting the French Foreign Legion's General John Louis du Papin. The two of them go way back and when they party, they are incommunicado the whole week. So next Tuesday--we roll."

Susan looked worried.

"Can we review it one more time?" She asked.

“Why not,” said Agent Malone. “Next Tuesday we pick you up at the Hotel Colon at 8:35 AM. At the same time across town, our agents will lace the real Margarita’s coffee with sleeping drugs. She’ll be knocked out all day. We intercept the General’s limo, and switch his driver with our look-alike and then you will meet us at the General’s limo. Now you tell me the rest,” quizzed Malone.

“O.K.,” said Susan. “The driver gets me into the General’s compound. Captain Jorge del Pogo greets me and I tell him the General has sent me to retrieve some papers from his study. I tell Captain del Pogo that the General is anxious for them and I warn Captain del Pogo the General will be furious if there are delays. Captain del Pogo will probably call the General to confirm all this. But if he does, his call will be diverted to a State Department impersonator.

“Then Captain del Pogo will lead me to the General’s study, where as soon as he leaves me, I insert this tiny drive,” Susan held up a tiny USB flash drive. “The drive has a downloading program that will retrieve the files you want and when the screen says GAME OVER, I extract the drive. I also take a few papers from the General’s desk, it doesn’t matter which ones, so it appears that they are what I came for. Then I call for Captain del Pogo and ask him to see me back to my car.”

“Excellent,” said Agent Malone. “Excellent. I’ll be right back.” Malone turned and left his office for a moment.

“Now for my part,” continued Mike the Moose, “I stand by to watch and be sure no one is coming while mom is at the computer. Then I...” but Susan interrupted Mike.

“No, Mike. You won’t be there. This is dangerous and you will wait for me at the hotel. Period. No argument. Our suitcases will be packed and as soon as Malone gets the drive, you and

I are off to the airport to go home.”

“No way am I staying put,” muttered Mike the Moose under his breath. “Wherever you go, I go.”

“Not going to happen Mikey,” said Susan who overheard him. “I am your mother and I won’t put you at risk. Besides, you don’t think it might be weird if Captain del Pogo sees Margarita Melagrosa De la Rosa Gustamante arriving with a mooseling? What would the Captain del Pogo say about that?”

Mike had to admit his mom had a point.

Agent Harry Malone returned noting that Susan was at it again. She was talking to her stuffed toy. Malone had come to admire Susan during the training period and even to think of her as level-headed. Except for this moose thing...

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Tuesday morning came faster than Susan thought possible. She was so nervous it took three tries to get her lipstick right, raising the stick ever so high over the center of her lips and thin at the extremes the way Margarita did—though much too thick for Susan’s own taste. She dressed in the clothes agent Malone brought her, a perfect copy of Margarita’s white skirt with the flowers embroidered at the base and thick black belt at the waist. The tan blouse was perfect, just like the pictures, and somehow Malone even had a copy made of Margarita’s pin, a gold lizard with emerald eyes perched on a quilt of silver and gold mesh. Susan added a bit of cotton to mimic Margarita’s cleavage. Mike the Moose had to turn away blushing.

“Mom!” Mike complained.

“Almost ready,” said Susan glancing at her watch and splashing on a dash of Revenge of

the Night Lovers, Margarita's favorite perfume. "OK Mikey. What channel do you want?" she said adjusting the TV and setting Mike behind two pillows, nearly covering him with the puffy pillow sheets. "With any luck I'll just be a few hours."

"But mom," Mike protested.

"No butts Mikey," said Susan, working her foot awkwardly into a black stiletto high heel shoe. As she strained and concentrated on her shoe, Mike puffed the pillows so it looked like he was still in the bed. When Susan bent to force the shoe on her slightly swollen foot, Mike slipped into the black knitted purse that completed the clone of Margarita's outfit.

Moments later the brass elevator doors opened at the first floor. Susan hurried out the side door of the hotel, avoiding the main lobby as rehearsed. A black Ford was waiting and the engine was running. In the back seat Susan's hands nervously traced the outline of the lizard pin as the driver headed down one alley and up another. The sun had warmed the air rapidly even in the early hours of the Spanish morning. Susan rolled up her window and asked the driver to turn up the air conditioning.

Mike wasn't at all happy starring at the bottom of the black knit purse. It was really hot there and his antlers kept getting tangled in Susan's hairbrush. But Mike suffered the heat in rare silence, knowing Susan might turn the car around she discovered he was there.

The Ford continued out from the center of Madrid for what seemed a half hour. Susan watched the buildings decrease in size and the dress of the people grew less elegant. Finally the driver swerved onto a dirt road, past several farms, and stopped at a tree-lined circle at the end of the road. They pulled up next to a black, double length, chrome-laden limo. Its trunk had a forest of antennas and two miniature flags of Spain topped the front fenders. In the back of the limo

Susan saw a blindfolded and handcuffed man in a chauffeur uniform. Not a word was spoken when they pulled him out and put him in the Ford Taurus while Susan got out of the Taurus and took a seat in the back of the double-length limo. It occurred to Susan that her own chauffeur's features were almost identical to his handcuffed predecessor. Same height, same build, same curly black hair.

“That Malone doesn't miss a thing,” she thought.

The General's back seat was more like a lobby than a limo. The windows were framed in magnificent Brazilian marbled wood. The seats were silk with rounded arms like a couch and there were red pillows in the corners. Susan noted that the miniature brass chandelier that hung in the center had finally stopped swinging as she settled back in her seat. Her chauffeur nodded and the limo's enormous engine came alive as the full fury of its twelve cylinder supercharged turbos with dual overhead synchronized counter rotating cam shafts thundered to life. Gleaming wire wheels spit dust as they hurried to the main highway.

It seemed like hours to Susan, but exactly twenty-three minutes later the limo stopped before a massive gilded, wrought iron guard house. A soldier stood at attention in front of the guard house and when the limo stooped, he came to the car and looked inside.

It was a wonder, thought Susan, that the little soldier could move at all considering the weight of all the medals on his blue, waist-length jacket.

He smiled at Susan, showing all his teeth, “Senora,” he nodded.

As practiced, Susan gave him a condescending nod and the limo pulled up to the main entrance.

Terrorist or not, Susan had to admire the General's taste. His palace was a splendid,

classic-style structure with palm trees at each level of the grand stone staircase. Atop the entrance flew the flag of Spain and the flag of the Spanish Army. There were pools on both sides with waterfalls splashing over bejeweled mermaids. Susan did her best to look board and to keep her eyes looking forward.

Captain Jorge del Pogo came through the center arch, greeting her with a deep bow, looking into Susan's eyes as he arose.

"The first test," thought Susan.

The decorations on Captain Jorge del Pogo's uniform included the Cross of the Madonna and the Silver Star of the Battle of La Caruna, rare medals reserved only for Spain's most decorated officers. He smiled insincerely giving Susan a cursory two-finger salute.

"Always a pleasure, Margarita," said the Captain. "But this is an unexpected one I believe?" he quizzed.

His dark black eyes penetrated Susan's. The interrogation had begun.

"Unexpected? I think not. Did you not talk with our General?" she asked, meeting Jorge del Pogo's challenge with one of her own.

"I did not," Captain Jorge del Pogo said unflinchingly.

"Had you," said Susan interrupting him "you would know the General asked me to retrieve important papers for his meeting with General du Papin. He expects them immediately and, as you know, his jet awaits. I am to take it to the airport without delay."

"My dear Senora in fact our General did not call," said Captain del Pogo forcing a smile, "but I will call him while I escort you to his study," said del Pogo pulling out his satellite phone.

"No need to escort me Captain del Pogo," Susan said. "It's not like I don't know the



way.”

The Captain dialed the satellite phone and Susan, having memorized the interior layout, headed to the General’s study. As she did, she casually touched a tiny button on her watch, transmitting the signal to Agent Malone’s men, The message would re-route Captain del Pogo’s satellite call to an impersonator who was standing by.

“Speak,” boomed the impersonator perfectly mimicking the voice of Generalissimo Alfonso Ramonito Crakov del Buston.

“Senor Generalissimo. It’s Captain Jorge del Pogo. Forgive my interruption but I am confirming you sent Margarita to retrieve paper’s from your study?”

“Indeed,” said the General. “Is she there now?”

“She is Sir,” said the Captain bowing as if the General could see him.

“Tell her to bring the papers without delay,” said the impersonator hanging up.

“Very good Sir,” said Captain Jorge del Pogo to an empty dial tone.

Susan proceeded to the General’s study. The walls were the finest rosewood the Bolivian rain forests could provide. A massive glass chandelier hung in the center and a near wall-to-wall Persian rug warmed the highly polished marble floors. Susan powered up the computer at the General’s desk, keeping her back to door in case Captain del Pogo should join her in the study. She-slipped the flash drive out of her pocket and as she was placing it in the USB port, she heard Captain del Pogo enter behind her.

“Captain del Pogo, I am so dry. Could you ask Lupe to bring me a glass of water?” said Susan louder than was necessary. Her words were timed perfectly so the Captain didn’t hear the click as she hit the enter key. The drive whirled and its program searched for the General’s data

until it found it and the download began.

“Lupe,” Captain Jorge del Pogo called out the study door.

Susan reached in her black knit purse for the reading glasses Margarita would have worn and started to gather a few random papers from the General’s desk. As she did, Mike the Moose, no longer able to contain himself in the hot, wool purse, popped his antlers up for a look around. Susan’s hand felt the antlers and she knew instantly she wasn’t alone.

“What are YOU doing here?” she said angrily under her breath. “Get back down there NOW.”

Mike was so startled by the urgency in his Mom’s command that he skipped the speech he’d prepared and obediently slid back down in the purse.

“Your water, Senora,” said the Captain taking the glass from the maid. The Captain had a quizzical look as he scanned the room. He could have sworn he heard Margarita whispering to someone. Must have been his imagination, he concluded. But still...

Susan knew the Captain would get suspicious if she stayed longer. Yet she had to distract the Captain long enough to retrieve the flash drive. Meanwhile Mike the Moose had all he could stand of the hot purse and he chose that exact moment to stick his head up again. He found himself on a table behind Captain del Pogo. Susan saw him and shot Mike such a look that he jumped back into the purse. But he jumped back so quickly that he knocked a china ashtray off the table and it shattered on the floor. Captain del Pogo turned to the noise and that gave Susan just time enough to pull out the flash drive and shut down the computer. As mad as she was at Mike the Moose, his distraction had saved the day.

“Thank you Captain,” said Susan gathering the knit purse, the papers and heading for the

door.

Captain del Pogo stopped her.

“I will make note of the papers, that you” said Captain del Pogo, snatching them from Susan’s hand.

“Fine, fine,” said Susan impatiently as was Margarita’s style, “but be quick now or the General will be unhappy.”

The Captain recorded the title of the papers in his note pad. “Seasonal Variations in Poppy Production.” It seemed an odd choice for an urgent request, but he handed the papers back to Susan who swayed her way down the stairs and into the waiting limo. She gave a dismissive wave goodbye in response to Captain del Pogo’s cursory salute.

Settling back in the limo, Susan heard Captain del Pogo’s satellite phone ring again. She quickly hit the button on her watch but knew the impersonator wouldn’t have enough time to intercept the unexpected call.

“GO!” she urged her driver.

Mike popped up just in time to see the Captain del Pogo’s face turn white and then red as he slammed the satellite phone closed.

“Halt driver,” demanded del Pogo as the limo departed.

“Pretend you don’t hear him and get the hell out of here!” Said Susan.

“Floor it buster,” piped in Mike the Moose.

As the limo raced ahead, Captain del Pogo fired a warning shot in the air. He screamed to the startled guard at the entrance to stop them. The descending gate scrapped the top of the limo as it raced past the guard house, shattering the gate bar into a hundred pieces.

Captain del Pogo's jeep, loaded with soldiers, raced up to him. Two other jeeps also filled with soldiers followed, firing everything they had at Susan's bulletproof limo. Shells tore into the limo's side but its fuel tank was impenetrable and the occupants were safe so far.

"Malone," Susan's driver yelled into his cell phone. "Call in air support and get these guys off our backs."

"They're on the way," Agent Malone's voice boomed back.

Mike the Moose was in some state when he realized the bullets ricocheting off the limo's back window were real.

"This was supposed to be a piece of cake," he yelled indignantly at the driver. "Now I've got bullets whizzing by me. I intend to file a formal complaint to Agent Malone's higher ups. Totally unacceptable," said Mike as another round of shells peppered the back window.

"Get down Mikey," said Susan trying unsuccessfully to stuff him back into her purse.

Just ahead and to the right Susan saw a huge oil truck heading for them from a side street. Susan's driver slammed on his brakes as the oil truck stopped sideways behind the limo. The truck blocked the street from del Pogo's men who were following in hot pursuit. The truck driver ran to the limo and they sped off the moment he was inside.

"Now," yelled the chauffeur to the tanker driver who pushed the button on the black box he was holding. Behind them, the oil truck exploded with a blast that blew the Captain's two lead jeeps high in the air. But the Captain's driver, following in the third jeep, yanked the steering wheel hard right, and was able to edge around the burning wrecks and resume their pursuit.

"Still one jeep following us," yelled the tanker driver to the chauffeur.

“It’s the Captain but don’t worry. Air support is moments away,” hollered the chauffeur.

“Let’s hope so,” said Mike popping up again. “That jeep is way too close.”

“Not now Mikey,” said Susan, pushing him down again.

Overhead Susan heard the repetitive rhythm of blades beating through the air. Down from the sky an AH-1G Huey Cobra Copter appeared. Two huge rocket launchers targeted Captain del Pogo’s on-coming jeep. Wooosh. The first launcher fired but the Captain’s driver dodged to the left and the missile skirted right, exploding behind them. Captain del Pogo’s gunner had the copter in his gun sight when the second missile hit the jeep dead on. There was a huge blast and jeep parts rained down everywhere. Then there was only an eerie silence as Susan’s limo sped off into the distance.

“Furthermore,” Mike was up from the purse again, “I am writing my Congressman that Agent Malone put me and Mom in corporal danger. I expect a complete apology from the State Department, The Justice Department and the Bureau of Fisheries and Wildlife.”

Clearly Mike was just warming up so Susan gently shoved him back in her purse.

“Not now Mikey,” she said.

The truck driver gave Susan a curious look wondering why anyone as brave as Susan could be so crazy as to talk to her purse.

In minutes they made the switch once more between the limo and the Ford Taurus. The sleeping pills given to the General’s real chauffeur were beginning to wear off. He looked bewildered and groggy as they returned him to the driver’s seat in the General’s once shinny limo. He wondering what had happened. Why did he feel so groggy? He looked really

bewildered when he noticed that his once gleaming limo was caked with mud and riddled with bullet holes.

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Agent Malone was waiting with Susan's luggage when the Ford pulled in at the Hotel Colon.

"No time," said Malone jumping in. "Straight to the airport," he said to the driver. "You will have to change on route," he told Susan, handing Susan jeans and a blouse.

Susan handed the flash drive to Agent Malone.

"Hope this is everything you need," she said smiling.

Agent Malone carefully slid the disk into a protective metal case.

"Susan, you know we can never acknowledge this, and you may never speak of it. But it's no small service you've done for your country today. That information on that drive is enough to shut down the General's terrorist activities completely, and while I can't publicly acknowledge it, at least I can give you this."

He handed Susan a gleaming jeweled broach. In its gold center was a silver American eagle encircled by brilliant diamonds. "Only a handful of brave Americans have this pin. It's the highest secret honor the military can offer a civilian. And..."

"...and, I have had just about enough," said Mike the Moose popping up and interrupting. "I have been stuffed in a hot purse, told to hush up, shot at, rocketed at and bumped up and down in a speeding limo when after all it was I who distracted Captain del Pogo so Susan could get the flash drive..."

“...And...,” continued Agent Malone, not hearing Mike’s tirade but lifting Mike from Susan’s purse, “...and, we have been talking to your husband Michael who told us all about your sidekick here, which explains why we thought you were always talking to yourself Susan. For him, we have a special honor,” he said, gently lifting Mike the Moose from Susan’s purse. “We call it the US State Department Special Order of Superlative Moose Service,” said Malone gently hanging the tiny medal on Mike’s chest.

“I liked you all along, Malone,” said Mike, “and as I said,” Mike added with uncharacteristic modesty. “It was nothing. Just a little something I did for my country,” he said, grinning and brandishing a full row of teeth as his new metal glistened in the sun.

Mike and Susan waited in the private executive terminal until the State Department’s jet was cleared to go. When the pilot said it was time to board, Susan, with Mike the Moose perched above her handbag, headed down the long corridor to the tarmac. Susan could see a small group of men enter the other end of the corridor. As the group got closer, Susan noticed one of the men was short and she could just make him out through the cloud of his cigar smoke. He wore a military uniform caked with medals and decorations. The short man was surrounded on all sides by tall, muscular aides carrying guns and scanning in all directions. The two groups passed each other as the small man barked orders to this or that aide and into a satellite phone. Susan knew immediately who it was and turned away, pretending to talk to her pilot as she hid her face.

The General and his group walked right past her. Suddenly the General stopped, turned, and looked back at Susan with a puzzled expression. He studied her a moment, scratching his oily hair. He didn’t get much of a look at her, but for a moment the General could have sworn he

saw his Margarita. Of course it wasn't her. He knew she was back in her apartment. He shrugged his shoulder, turned and hurried off in the other direction, his thoughts on things of greater importance.

The State Department Citation streamed off the Spanish runway. Susan was in her seat hurriedly fanning Mike the Moose trying to revive him because Mike passed out when he saw the General. She finally succeeded and Mike lifted his head up slightly.

"You were very brave Mikey," she reminded. "And your Medal is wonderful," she beamed.

Mike looked down at the handsome medal and his smile went antler to antler. He was still smiling hours later when the Citation finally touched down and the doors opened. That was when Mike, beaming with pride, got to show the medal to his Dad.



## Chapter 4

### MIKE MAKES NEW FRIENDS

For weeks after his return from Spain, Mike the Moose was preoccupied. He spent much of the day admiring himself in the mirror, posing with his shiny new medal of honor. Susan heard him making speeches, standing on his hind hoofs and rambling on and on.

“The antler is mightier than the sword,” said Mike and, “speak softly but carry big antlers,” and “Mooseling’s have a dream.”

Mike’s speeches always ended the same way.

“Ask not what you can do for your country until you hear what I did for mine!”

Mike followed his closing line with a dramatic, low bow.

Mike urged Susan to call a press conference just when he saw the President hold his on TV, but Susan reminded him that their mission to Spain was top secret. That quieted Mike for a moment and sent him back admire his medal in the mirror again. But after a month of this, Mike’s attention finally turned back to his animal friends--Humpy the Camel and Boris the Bat. The three spent their afternoons watching TV and life at the Grossman home was returning to normal.

One morning Susan mentioned that she had a meeting at the nearby orphanage. Did Mike want to come?

“You bet,” said Mike. Then he asked, “Mom, what’s an orphanage?”

“It’s a home for children who have no Moms and Dads.” Susan said.

Mike thought a moment.

“Was I in an orphanage before you and dad Dop-ted me?” asked Mike.

“Not really. That was a store, though I suppose it was like an orphanage,” said Susan.

“But if I go with you to the orphanage, I’m coming back home afterwards, right?” Mike looked worried.

“Of course,” said Susan. “You are part of this family and we will never, never leave you. This is your home forever, Mikey.”

Mike felt reassured.

“So this is just a visit? ‘Cause Beavis and Butthead are on at 8:00,” said Mike.

“Yes, Mikey, you’ll be home in time for Beavis and Butthead.” Susan said.

“K Mom,” said Mike, happily reassured.

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The orphanage didn’t look at all like the store that Mike came from. The building’s brick walls were a dark, time-worn and laced with climbing ivy. The inside of the building looked old too but it was thoroughly clean. There were cracks in the newly polished linoleum and chips in the window trim, but all was tidy and the classrooms were cheery and there were lots of pictures done by the children on the walls. Susan entered toting a heavy bag filled with gifts and clothes collected from her church drive. The congregation donated two Game Boy cassettes, several softballs, three pairs of worn but neatly pressed jeans, a pair of Nike sneakers, four T-shirts in different colors, a hockey stick, a scraped up skate board, a Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone book and a pair of plastic binoculars.

The woman at the reception desk with wire glasses that rested on the end of her nose, smiled when she saw Susan.

“Hi Susan,” she said, and then noticing Mike she added, “and may I ask who is this little fellow?” She pinched Mike the Moose’s mouth, squeezing it as tall as it was wide.

“Let-meee-gooo-nowwww,” Mike yelled with his jaw squeezed sideways.

“This is our new family member,” said Susan. “This is Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles.”

“And who is this Gestapo sadist?” screamed Mike pointing to his tormentor. “Let me guess. She’s a terrorist interrogator.”

The woman heard nothing but smiled and, holding Mike upside down, handed him back to Susan.

“Everyone is in the lunchroom Susan. They will be thrilled to see you--and to meet Mike the Moose too,” she smiled showing a mouthful of gum.

“Humph,” muttered Mike the Moose free of her grip. He could feel life returning to his jaw again.

The lady led them down the hall into a big room with a table in the center. Twelve children sat playing with crayons, jacks and balls. Three of the children were working on a big puzzle which wasn’t far enough along enough to make out all the details, but Mike could see an outline forming of an old man in a red suit and there were hints of a long white beard.

At one end of the table a rotund woman with huge cheeks greeted Susan with a big welcoming smile.

“Hi girl,” she said standing up to hug Susan. “Sure glad to see you!”

Susan called the woman Nurse Claire and gave her a great hug that lasted way too long for Mike who was squished unceremoniously between the two of them.

“Well, kids,” said Nurse Claire. “What do we say when Mrs. Grossman visits us?”

“H-e-l-l-o Mrs. Grossman,” came a chorus in near unison.

“Hi right back at you,” said Susan, starting to take out the toys from the big sack.”

The children watched attentively as Susan reached in for each new toy, their heads following her movements as if at a tennis match.

Nurse Claire motioned to the children like an orchestra conductor and on cue they responded.

“Thank you, Mrs. Grossman,” came the chorus again.

“Kids, I want you to meet a very special someone,” said Susan gentling lifting Mike the Moose out of her handbag. “This is Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles.”

Mike took a bow.

“Hi, Mike the Moose,” waved a small boy with oversized eyeglasses.

“Hi, kids,” said Mike. “I came from an orphanage too!”

“You did!” said a little girl with gleaming red hair and many freckles. She sat at the far end of the table but looked puzzled. “Then how come you came with Ms. Susan? How come you aren’t here with us?”

“Wow, Mom,” said Mike, “the children can hear me.”

“Yes,” said Susan. “They sure can! I wonder if all children can, or if it’s an orphan thing.”

“Well,” Mike explained to the red-haired girl, “one day my Mom here and my Dad came

to the store, ah, the orphanage and talked to the lady and they took me home. They said I was Dop-ted."

"A-dopted," corrected Susan.

"Yes, Dop-ted," repeated Mike. "So now I have a real Mom and Dad."

The little girl's eyes dropped.

"Do you think I could ever get Dop-ted?"

"A-dopted," corrected Susan again.

"Me, too," said the little boy with a blue baseball cap worn backwards.

"And me," said a little girl with black braids and a Pokka dot dress.

"Class," interrupted Nurse Claire changing the subject. "May I remind you we have all these lovely new toys."

"But will I ever get Dop-ted?" said the little red haired girl looking anxious. She turned to Susan. "Once a nice couple came and talked to me. They told me all about their pretty white house with flowers. But they never came back," she said sadly looking down at the floor.

"Maybe if I'd worn a prettier dress..."

"Kids, kids," said Nurse Claire, "who wants to play with the new Game Boy?"

"Mom," Mike turned to Susan, "will they get Dop-ted up like I did?"

"I honestly don't know Mikey," Susan said. "I hope so."

"Me, too," said the girl with black braids.

"We all want to get Dop-ted up like Mike," said a little girl with lots of freckles who hadn't yet spoken.

"Mom," said Mike. "Why don't we Dopt them? My room is big and Humpy and Boris

wouldn't mind."

"I wish we could, Mikey, but our family is just the right size now. With Dad and I working, there'd be no one home to take care of them. It is wonderful thought though," said Susan wistfully.

Mike looked dejected, but then he brightened up.

"Mom," he said, "can I play with the kids awhile?"

"Sure," said Susan, setting Mike down on the table.

"You sure it's O.K., Susan?" asked Nurse Claire. "Be very gentle with Mike the Moose children."

The kids sat around Mike in a circle and each took a turn holding and kissing him. Mike was very happy and decided they were his friends for life. He had the best afternoon ever and even forgot about his shiny medal and the trip to Spain.

In the car on the way home Mike asked his Mom again.

"Couldn't we Dopt them up Mom."

"A-dopt." corrected Susan automatically. "We don't have the room," Susan said.

"What if I took up less room mom," Mike offered shrinking himself up into a small ball.

"I'm sorry Mikey," said Susan.

Suddenly Mike the Moose brightened with an idea.

"Mom," he said, "I know who can help us."

"Who?" said Susan.

"Agent Malone!" said Mike. "We could collect what he owes us."

"Collect? What do you mean Mikey?" Susan said.

“When Agent Malone gave me my medal, he said the country owes us a debt of gratitude. So, we make him pay up. Maybe it’s enough money to buy parents for each of the children,” said Mike, pleased with his scheme.

“Ah, honey, I don’t think Agent Malone meant the U.S. actually owes us money,” said Susan. “And what’s more you don’t buy parents. Parents have to want children badly the way your Dad and I wanted you. There are parents who visit the kids at the orphanage every week.

“So why don’t they Dopt them up Mom?” Asked Mike.

“They want to Mikey, but it’s not that simple. The adoption paperwork takes years and the red tape is wearing everyone down.”

“K,” said Mike puzzled. “What did tape have to do with it?” He wondered.

“But I still think Agent Malone would help. He’s a good guy even if he can’t hear me,” said Mike. Then Mike had one more idea.

“Agent Malone told me that he’s a Dad. His little girl is named Wendy. Maybe she can hear me and she’ll convince Agent Malone to help us.”

“It’s an idea Mike. But I wouldn’t have a clue how to get a hold of Agent Malone, let alone his little girl,” said Susan.

“That’s easy Mom,” said Mike. “I memorized the phone sounds when Malone called home. Boop beep boop tink tink bomp blink tank blink tank,” said Mike mimicking the phone button sounds. “The sounds are for 202-334-5653. So will you call him? Will-ya? Will-ya Mom? Tonight?”

“Mikey, I’d want the kids get adopted too, but I don’t think Agent Malone can help much,” Susan said.

“What’s to lose if we try mom? The kids really want Moms and Dads,” said Mike.

“Well, O.K., Mike. I don’t know if we are supposed to contact Agent Malone. But I guess the worse that can happen is that he says he can’t help us,” Susan said.

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After lunch at home, Susan and Mike went to the study to dial the number that Mike repeated.

The phone rang and rang until finally an answering machine picked up. It was Agent Malone’s voice urging callers to leave a message. Mike did.

“Hi Agent Malone. It’s me of course. Mike the Moose and…” Mike halted mid sentence. “Mom, if Agent Malone can’t hear me in real life, I’ll bet he won’t hear my phone message either?”

Suddenly Mike heard a little voice at the other end.

“Hello.” She said.

“Hi,” said Mike. “Who are you?”

“Wendy,” said the little girl. “Dad’s not home. Who are you? You sound like you are little too. Are you a kid?”

“No, and I only sound little. I’m big—especially my antlers--and I’m famous...decorated for bravery. You’ve probably heard of me from your Dad. I’m Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles. A mooseling,” said Mike. “Your dad knows me and we really, really need his help.”

“Please tell me what’s wrong Mike the Moose,” said Wendy concerned.



“It’s the kids at the orphanage. Orphans. They have no Moms and Dads because the paperwork to get ‘Dopted is so hard. Maybe you Dad can help them. Everyone wants a Mom and Dad.”

“That’s awful,” said Wendy. “I’m sure Dad will want to help. Do you have a phone number? I’ll ask dad to call as soon as he gets home.”

An hour later the phone rang. It was Agent Harry Malone.

“Hi Susan,” he said. “If it was anyone but you I’d be amazed you could get my number.

“I had help from someone very small,” Susan winked at Mike.

“I can guess,” said Agent Malone. “What’s this that Wendy tells me about some kids that need my help?”

“Some good kids could sure use a helping hand,” said Susan. “Can we meet with you Harry?”

“Well,” Agent Malone said. “I have a meeting downtown. But if you don’t mind riding with me, we can talk on the way. We’ll have about a half an hour to talk and then my driver could run you home. Would that give you enough time? Can you be ready in a few minutes?”

“That would be great Harry. Thanks so much,” said Susan. “I’ll be in front of my house in five minutes.”

Susan snatched up Mike and slipped him into her handbag.

“Here we go again,” thought Mike.

Minutes later the driver pulled Agents Malone’s black limo into Susan’s driveway.

“Here’s the story Harry,” said Susan as the car speed along the beltway. “The kids at the

WaterTown Orphanage need parents and real homes. What's more, there's a list of couples who want the children, but the adoption process is taking forever and the paperwork is staggering. I promised to help the kids and you are the only important person I know. Do you think you can help us?"

"Me?" said Agent Malone. "I'm State Department not Social Services. What can I do?"

"Nothing if you don't try," mumbled Mike, though Malone heard nothing.

"Mike!" said Susan looking peevish.

Malone recalled how strange it was to see Susan talk to a moose.

A phone in the limo rang and the privacy partition between the back and the front seats lowered.

"It's the White House," said the driver.

Malone nearly knocked Mike out of Susan's handbag in his rush to reach the red phone in the limo.

"Agent Harry Malone here, Mr. President" he replied. His voice was deeper and more serious than usual.

Mike the Moose's eyeballs nearly popped out when he heard Malone say "Mr. President."

"Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles here too," announced Mike yelling in the direction of the red phone. "The highly decorated, winner of the Mooseling Medal of Honor."

Susan slipped her hand over Mike's mouth.

"Hush," she whispered.

"Yes Sir" said Malone. "Yes Sir. We are on the way, Sir."

Agent Malone spoke to the driver who swerved the limo and reversed course, heading off much faster in another direction.

“I’m sorry, Susan,” said Agent Malone. “I got called to the White House. I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me. The President never sees me for more than five minutes. You can wait in the Map Room.”

“No problem Harry,” said Susan.

“Cool,” said Mike. “Summoned to the White House. It’s about time. No doubt the President wants to pin the medal on me himself. There will be a ceremony no doubt,” said Mike waving his shiny medal in the air.

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The White House was even more beautiful than Susan expected and there was a solemn feeling upon entering. The walls were filled with historic documents, portraits of presidents and pictures of great battles. Everywhere there were vases and swords, mementos of America’s rich history.

“Not one portrait of a Moose,” muttered Mike annoyed. “Do these guys have any idea what we moose have contributed? The design of the first television antenna, the invention of the coat rack and the Charleston dance first performed by my uncle Morris whose knees wobbled uncontrollably.”

Malone directed Susan to a comfortable settee as he headed into the Oval Office. Two Marines opened the door for him and moved aside.

Malone’s meeting was as short as promised. Five minutes later the door to the Oval

Office opened and out he walked. For a second only Mike saw into the President's office and he caught a glimpse of the President of the United States seated at his desk. Simultaneously the President looked up and noticed Susan and then Mike. He rose and the two Marines snapped to attention.

xxx "This your wife, Harry? Never met her," said the President coming through the door.

"Oh no, Sir. This is Susan Grossman. She's a friend, and Mr. President Susan is the civilian who helped us shut down Generalissimo Alfanso Ramonito Crakov del Buston in Spain."

The President reached for Susan's hand and shook it vigorously.

"Nice work," he told her. "Brave woman. Would you like to see the Oval Office?"

"Sir, it would be a tremendous honor if it's not an imposition," said Susan smiling nervously and contorting her legs with an awkward half curtsy.

"What about me Sir? I helped get the General. Am I not included in the tour?" said Mike the Moose.

The President stopped dead in his tracks. To Susan's utter surprise he could hear Mike, though many adults could not. He turned, looked at Mike, and then smiled at Agent Malone

"By golly Malone," said the President, "So you weren't kidding. There really was a moose with her in Spain?"

Malone nodded, surprised the President could hear Mike when he himself could not.

"Of course you are invited also," the President said reaching for Mike. Susan carefully lifted Mike from her handbag and let the President hold him.

"You can hear him?" said Susan. "Most kids can but many adults can't."

“Can you really hear IT Sir?” asked Agent Malone.

“He can hear ME,” said Mike the Moose finding Malone’s use of “IT” unacceptable.

Mike turned and gave the President a full teeth smile.

“Of course I can hear him. Being President doesn’t make you deaf,” said the Commander in Chief.

“I wonder why some people can and others can’t?” Susan wondered aloud.

But the President was much too busy with Mike to respond.

“Look my little friend,” he said, “Would you like me to show you something no visitors to the White House ever get to see?”

“That’d be cool your Presidency,” said Mike the Moose.

The President strode into the Oval office and set Mike on the massive mahogany desk with the Presidential seal on the front. He opened the bottom left drawer and to Mike’s amazement, the President of the United States took out a white yoyo. It too bore the Presidential seal--on both sides.

“Watch this Mike,” said the President of the United States. The yoyo spun fast in mid air, hung suspended a great long time, then made a complete swinging circle and returned to the President’s hand.

“Wow,” said Mike, “you Circled the World. Awesome Mr. President.”

“Think so Mike, well watch this.” The President rolled up his jacket sleeves and pulled something else out of the drawer. This time he flung both hands open, releasing a second yoyo and doing the trick with two hands at once.

“Go Pres,” screamed Mike and then catching himself after a stern look from Susan. “I

mean quite wonderfully done your Presidency,” said Mike, his eyes still wide as could be.

The President laughed and, holding Mike in his arms, sat down on one of the couches in the Oval office, motioning for Susan and Malone to join him.

The President’s secretary stuck her head into the Oval Office.

“Begging your pardon Mr. President, but you have the Secretary of the Treasury waiting in the Green Room.”

“Won’t be long,” said the President. “So Mike and Susan,” he asked. “What are you doing here today with my top State Department agent?”

“Well Mr. President,” Susan explained, “we promised a group of orphans at the WaterTown Home for orphans that we’d try them some help. There are good people waiting to adopt them but the red tape is overwhelmingly slow and we hoped Harry could help. If only we can expedite the adoption process.”

“It’s a wonderful cause, Mr. President,” said Agent Malone “but I don’t know why Susan asked me. I have no Social Services contacts.”

“I might have a few,” said the President. “Susan, would you mind if I stuck my two cents in?”

“Oh, Mr. President would you! They are great kids and they badly need help,” said Susan.

The President strode to his big wood desk and had his secretary make a call. Mike heard him talking to someone about the orphans.

“That may help,” said the President putting down the phone and standing before Susan and Mike. xxx

Malone rose and thanked the President for his time and his help. Susan did another awkward curtsy. But the President didn't notice her. He was busy slipping something into Mike's hand and as he did, he put a finger to his lips –a signal to Mike the Moose that it was to be their secret.

Susan was in shock all the way home. She had meet, talked to and even spent time with the President of the United States...in the Oval Office! Even Mike the Moose was quiet. He was holding tight to a new gift, a handsome white yoyo that bore the seal of the President of the United States of America.

Next morning after breakfast, the phone rang. It was Nurse Claire from the orphanage.

“Hurry Susan,” she urged. “Come over quickly. You've got to see this.”

Minutes later Susan screeched her car to a stop at the WaterTown Orphanage. She grabbed Mike and hurried in, dashing past the receptionist. Down the hall Nurse Claire stood waiting, eager to usher Susan into the big room. All the kids were waiting for them.

Each child sat between a new mom and a new dad and everyone glowed from head to feet. Moms were brushing kids' hair, tucking in their shirts, hugging kids, and cleaning kid's eyeglasses. Everyone had his arms around a new family member and every child had a Mom and Dad.

“Parents,” announced Nurse Claire. “I want you to know who's responsible for cutting the red tape on your adoptions.”

Mike popped up from Susan's purse and started bowing.

“The word is “Dopt,” he corrected Nurse Claire.

“Kids and new Moms and Dads,” continued Nurse Claire turning to Susan, “meet the woman who made this all possible.”

“The woman!” said Mike exasperated. “Do I look like a woman?”

The kids laughed though Nurse Claire couldn’t hear a word Mike said.

“Hi, Kids,” waved Susan.

“Yo,” said Mike the Moose giving a hoof up sign.

Each child had an ear-to-ear smile.

Each Dad had an ear-to-ear smile.

Each Mom had and ear-to-ear smile.

Susan had an ear-to-ear smile.

Even Nurse Claire had an ear-to-ear smile.

But the happiest person in the room was Mike the Moose. Because nobody knew better than Mike how happy the children were.



## Chapter 5

### MIKE GOES GALACTIC

Saturday was without doubt Mike's favorite day of the week because Susan stayed home from work and played with him. Weekdays were boring because there wasn't much to do except watch the dogs scratch themselves or listen to them slurp noisily from the big water bowl in the bathroom.

"What do you expect from animals," muttered Mike, eyeing the trail of water the dogs left from their bowl.

On this particular Saturday, Susan enjoyed a few extra minutes in bed before starting breakfast and beginning the laundry. She held Mike and the two of them bathed in the streaming sunlight that come through the window and warmed Mike's antlers.

"This is really nice," thought Mike, "but I'm kind of eager to get rolling."

Eddy the big black lab came over and started to tug on the sheet, also eager for the day to begin.

Susan finally stirred just as Mike's patience ran out.

"So mom, what are we doing for fun today," he said putting his snout right up to Susan's nose.

"Gee Mikey, I'm not sure. What would you like to do?" Susan said.

"Well, we could go to the mall for more marbles, or watch the National Geographic Moose video again. Or go Ice Skating. Or play Game Boy."

"Wow," said Susan. "That's a lot of good ideas."

The phone rang.

“Yes, this is Susan Grossman. Yes, 43 Bell Air Street. Yes I do remember Mr. Harry Malone. Yes, of course I will take his call.”

“It’s Harry Malone,” she whispered to Mike who didn’t remember anyone named Harry.

“We’re fine Harry and you,” said Susan.

Then it struck Mike.

“Mom, Mom,” Mike was now jumping on four hooves as if the bed was a trampoline. “Is that OUR Mr. Malone? Agent Malone from Spain and from the White House?” Asked Mike excitedly.

Susan nodded yes to Mike.

“Air tickets. A free hotel. It won’t cost a thing! You must be kidding Harry. Of course I can be ready,” said Susan. She stared at Mike as a grin formed on her face. “Mike the Moose? Oh Harry...I doubt if he’d want to go to Florida.”

“Florida!” Cried Mike doing somersaults on the bed. “Mom I do want to go. I do, I do. This snow is for penguins. I want sun and coconut juice and to wear my shades and listen to my iPod and wear my orange shirt with the palm trees and red fishes and...”

“Mikey, Shhh,” said Susan trying to continue her phone conversation.

But Mike was just getting warmed up. “We’re going to Florida. We’re going to Florida.”

“Gee Harry, I don’t know. My schedule is clear but I’m not sure Mike the Moose would want to travel TO VISIT NASA AND SEE THE FIRST MARS ROCKET LAUNCHED. He’d be too bored Harry,” Susan said with mock certainty.

Mike fell on the bed face up in frustration with his hooves waving above his belly. His

efforts to get up on his knees while excitedly gesturing with his hooves simply was not working.

Unable to perform that feat, Mike fell over twice trying hi-five his Mom.

“NASA. The mars launch. Tell Malone I’m coming, and you can come too Mom!” said Mike magnanimously.

“Well, Harry,” said Susan in mock seriousness, “it seems Mike has had a change of heart and his schedule may be free after all. He might just be willing to see the mars launch and meet your astronaut friend.”

Susan jotted down the flight numbers, thanked Agent Malone for the wonderful opportunity, and set the phone back on the cradle. Mike was skidding back and forth on the bed as if he were on ice.

Susan took mercy on Mike and lifted him up to her chest.

“Mom, this is incredible. We are going to visit NASA and see astronauts and the mars launch. I can’t believe it.”

Suddenly Mike’s face grew serious. He put on hoof over his heart.

“This is historic mom. A mooseling will witness America triumphing, carrying men towards the stars...”

“Yes, Mike,” said Susan hurrying to distract Mike before he got going with another full-blown speech. “I didn’t know you were so poetic.”

“Oh yeah, Mom, I have dozens of brilliant poems.” said Mike with his usual modestly. “You gotta hear *In praise of Antlers*; or my *Haiku to A Moose’s Mane*. Of course, *Ode to A Marble* is my best work.” Mike stood upright on his back legs, his front ones waving dramatically, his chest puffing up. “I think that I shall never see, a thing so round as my new

clearly.”

“Yes, yes.” said Susan rolling her eyes and cutting Mike short. “Maybe later we’ll hear the rest of it but right now we have to pack.”

“Pack my blue sweater with the gold M on it please mom...” Susan could see an idea forming in Mike’s mind. “...and Mom do you think you could cover part of the “M” so it would look like an N for NASA? I’ll get my medal from Spain and...”

Susan gently lifted Mike, cutting him short with a kiss on his snout. Mike smiled and watched her pack the black suitcase full until it seemed so full it would pop.

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It was a routine flight until Mike went into a pout when the stewardess told Susan they didn’t serve Frosty Whip Cones. Susan smiled politely but Mike decided the service was inferior. When the plane landed near Cape Canaveral, the passenger door swung open and a blast of hot air entered the cabin. Mike nearly swooned. It was 103 degrees in the shade and one of the hottest days in Cape Canaveral history. Mike wouldn’t budge from his seat.

“Time to debark, Mikey,” said Susan.

“No way, mom. It’s way too hot. Tell the pilot to drive us to Mission Control and to keep the air-conditioning on high.” Mike said.

“Mike, you can’t drive a 747 up route I-95,” Susan said.

“A NASA pilot can,” said Mike who figured if NASA could reverse the laws of gravity, they could get a 747 down an expressway.

Mike remained supine in his seat, fanning himself with an in-flight magazine, looking like a wilted daisy.

“Why can’t NASA do the launch here and I could watch from the window,” Mike whined—his antlers drooping further.

“Then you’d complain the plane window was too small, Mikey. Come on. The cab to the Space Center is air conditioned,” said Susan clapping her hands impatiently.

Mike reluctantly arose muttering something about heat prostration, but he let Susan set him in her purse. Passing through the airport security barrier, he demanded that the guard bring him cold lemonade and salt pills. Fortunately, the guard heard nothing.

Susan hailed a cab, “Kennedy Space Center,” she said on entering.

As she and Mike got in one side of the cab, a tall man entered from the other.

He was about to slide back into the seat when he noticed Susan setting in as well.

“Oh, sorry ma’am.” he said in a deep Texas accent. “Didn’t see you getting in.”

The man wore gleaming cowboy boots of tan and blue leather with silver points at the toes. Mike decided the silver toes were fake hooves.

“Why in the world would a grown man like pretend to have moose hooves?” demanded Mike. “You aren’t fooling anyone, certainly not me. Are you allergic to shoelaces or something? You don’t see me walking around in Nikes—trying to mimic you.”

The man heard nothing.

“Mike,” whispered Susan, “those are cowboy boots. About the handsomest I’ve ever seen.”

The man smiled at the compliment but he wondered why Susan called him Mike.

“Yup, little lady. You’re looking at pure West African aborigine tanned ostrich leather over native Blue Mountain Coral snake from Australia. Mayor of Sidney gave ‘em to me. But

ma'am look here. You take this cab. I'll get the one just behind," he said starting out the door.

-“Gee, Captain Armstrong, aren't you going to the Center, too?” asked the cab driver who seemed to know the tall man.

“Yes Buzz,” replied the tall stranger, momentarily staying his retreat.

“Kennedy Space Center?” Susan asked.

“Yes ma'am,” said the man.

“Well we are too, sir.” Susan said. “You are more than welcome to share our cab.”

“Right kind of you,” said the man, “wondering why Susan said “WE” and “OUR” when she was the only other passenger. But he settled back into the seat next to Susan and held out his hand. “Captain Kyle Armstrong,” he introduced himself.

“Susan Grossman,” Susan said smiling back. “You're not THE Captain Armstrong?”

Mike was still upset about the Captain's boots.

“If he's a Captain I'm a peacock. He's not fooling me with those phony hooves.”

Susan slid her hand over Mike's mouth though it didn't matter. The Captain couldn't hear him.

“That's THE Captain Kyle Armstrong alright,” Buzz the cabby turned back to Susan, simultaneously sliding the transmission into drive. “Head of the first Moon Expedition and Commander of all the NASA astronauts,” Buzz explained proudly as if he were Armstrong's personal driver.

“Gee,” said Susan. “This is great. We're on our way to see the Mars launch ourselves.”

There's that “WE” again puzzled Armstrong.

“Should be a thriller,” he said. Then Captain Armstrong lowered his voice to share a

secret. “First time we’re deploying the new Trident Polarizing Rockets. They use magnetic thrusters powered by hydrothermal ionized polycarbonates,” he said, assuming Susan had read all about NASA’s newest fuel. The Captain saw the blank look on Susan’s face.

“It’s a fuel based on the principle of chemo-hydro-thermatics. You get a chemical reaction when water and sub nuclear protein molecules collide. Forty percent more power from half the fuel weight.”

“Cool,” said Mike who’d seen the news about it on the Discovery channel.

“Do they pump it into a gas tank?” asked Susan trying to be with it.

The Captain smiled.

“No little lady,” he said as if helping a child tie her shoelace, “they use fuel cells that ya stack up like honey in a comb. Lighter than any liquid fuel.”

“Ah huh,” said Susan but it was clear she hadn’t a clue.

“Look Ms. Susan, a picture is better than words. Take my card,” he said. “If you’d like, come over a bit before launch, say four this afternoon and show this card at the gate. I’ll introduce you to the crew after they suit up and show you the inside of the capsule. You’ll understand better when you see it close up.”

On his card the Captain wrote: 'Susan Grossman, my guest' and he signed it with an initial “A”.

Mike the Moose instantly changed his mind about the hoof imposter. Suddenly Captain Armstrong was his new best friend. He pushed his head higher up from Susan’s purse.

“Mom, this is just too cool,” he said.

Mike faced the Captain and saluted with his hoof.

“Mike the Moose reporting, Captain Armstrong, Sir. Ready for blast off. Induce trajectory, make for the stars, Yo.”

Susan slid her hand gently over Mike’s mouth though the Captain hadn’t heard Mike anyway.

“What a wonderful thing, sir,” said Susan beaming with pleasure while Mike struggled unsuccessfully to talk through her fingers.

Buzz the cabby zipped past the guardhouse and past the alert young lieutenant who saluted Captain Armstrong. He screeched the cab to a halt before a large, white building that looked like a cross between a Solar Observatory and the Lincoln Memorial. The Captain thanked Buzz, waved Susan a half-salute goodbye and was gone.

Buzz turned to Susan.

“Captain’s the second highest ranking man in NASA,” he said reverently. “Second only to Director Jones. Captain’s really great too. President Edwards awarded him the Medal of Honor for saving three men from sure death on Moon Mission. He’s a true American hero.”

“And a gentleman,” agreed Susan.

“Cool boots too,” added Mike, completing his change of heart.

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It was just before four o’clock when Susan arrived at the gate and presented the Captain’s card.

“We are expecting you Ms. Grossman ” said the guard saluting stiffly. He led Susan to the control room and where she was seated in a row of chairs for guest observers. The control room was filled with monitors and blinking colored lights. Men and women in headsets with clipboards



moved quickly among the consoles. Mike, perched on the rim of Susan's handbag, pointed to one of the nearby monitors.

"What time does Bevus and Butthead come on?" Asked Mike.

"It's not that kind of screen Mikey," Susan said.

"Oh, you mean only dull stuff like CNN or Meet the Press. BOAR-ING," said Mike.

"Since kids and mooselings pay taxes and with the money NASA gets, you'd think they could at least afford cable--like MTV or HBO."

"It's a mission monitor Mikey, not a TV. It's a monitor that shows the inside of the space capsule," Susan explained. "It shows the astronauts even when they're thousands of miles away."

"Well, don't the astronauts want to watch Bevus and Butthead?" Mike asked.

"No, Mike, but the monitors show the astronauts even when they walk weightless in space or make repairs and do experiments. Space has no gravity so they float like in a swimming pool," Susan explained.

"Cool, but don't they get to watch any good stuff. I read in National Tabloid Weekly that the human mind can only go four hours without a TV show." Mike said with considerable authority.

Out of the corner of her eye Susan noticed the two security guards who were staring at her. They whispered to each other and looked back repeatedly at Susan.

"You're right," said the first guard to the other. "She definitely is talking to herself. Nut case?"

"Maybe. But what's she doing in a top security control room?" said the other guard.

"She's a reporter?"

“Or a spy with a wire,” hypothesized the first guard, and what’s that thing at the top of her handbag?”

They were about to have a talk with Susan, but were prevented from doing so because Captain Armstrong approached her first.

Seeing their Commander, the guards stopped in their tracks, turned and withdrew.

“Hello Susan,” said Commander Armstrong. “Glad you could make it. We’re just about to board. Come have a look with us.”

“She must be OK if he knows her,” said one guard to the other.

“Yeah, but I swear she was talking to herself, and answering too! Said the other guard.

Susan found herself walking next to the Captain and behind three fully suited astronauts dressed like Michelin men. They walked slowly as if their boots weighed a ton. Each step took them further down a heavy steel gangplank and ever closer to a gleaming, silver cone that lay ahead.- There was a long hiss as the air lock released and the main door on the cone swiveled open. Mike had to rub his moose eyes to be sure this was real. The capsule walls were lined with dials and gages and tubes and panels. There were joysticks, keyboards and glowing lights.

“Better than my Game Boy. This is the real thing. Space. WOW, Mom,” he said.

“Wow Mike,” Susan agreed.

“Ah, actually it’s Kyle ma’am. My name is Kyle not Mike. Kyle Armstrong,” said the Captain noting Susan had once called him Mike. “And it sure is a WOW. I never get over it myself, after all these years,” said the Captain reverently. “Take this porthole. It’s the centrifugal regression chamber where the astronauts decompress and shed their suits before they enter their sleeping quarters. This one here.” he said pointing to a bigger porthole, “is where they debark to

walk in space to make repairs. Their suits are themselves a marvel. They carry a two hour oxygen supply and protect the astronauts against outside temperatures as cold as 100 degrees below zero.”

Mike, wide eyed, was in so much awe that for once he was quiet.

“And this is the communications control center,” said Captain Armstrong pointing to an array of speakers, throttles, buttons and monitors. “Completely digital with co-axial transmission arrays. They talk to Mission Control thousands of miles away and yet it sounds like next door.”

“I can hear dad complaining about the long distance bill now.” Mike whispered to Susan.

“Don’t be silly,” said Susan.

“No, I’m serious,” replied Captain Armstrong thinking Susan had spoken to him. “Clear as if you were talking from the next room. We did it with noise cancellation and frequency modulation enhancement. The software determines which sounds fall in the range of intentional human speech. They get magnified while frequencies outside the human range are suppressed.”

“Ah huh,” said Susan without a clue what the Captain was talking about. “Ah, what do they eat in space?” asked Susan, switching to a familiar subject.

“Flavor cubes with nutritional supplements. Here, try the lobster,” said the Captain tearing the foil off a small red packet and handing the cube to Susan.

Susan had to admit it really did taste like lobster.

Captain Armstrong opened a brown foil, placing a meal the size of a sugar cube in Susan’s hand. She tasted it.

“Wow. Sirloin. And medium rare the way I like it,” she replied.

“Impressive, huh?” said the Captain.

“Boring!” said Mike. “How about a McDouble Burger with Big Fries, a super sized shake...and, ah, a pepperoni pizza for desert”

“Where are you going to get pizza in outer space,” muttered Susan.

“Ah, sorry, Susan but we don’t have pizza cubes.-But we do have a Neapolitan ice cream,” Captain Armstrong pointed to a pink, brown and white tri-colored foil.

“Ugh. Retch. What a dopey desert,” said Mike poking his antlers up over Susan’s purse just enough so the Captain noticed Mike for the first time.

“What’s that,” the Captain pointed to Mike.

“How dare you call me a THAT,” huffed Mike the Moose.

Susan struggled to push Mike back down her purse while Mike pushed-back up. But she was too late. She had to say something to the Captain.

“Ah... Ah... I have a little, ah...mooseling,” said Susan.

“Gift for someone?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” said Susan.

“Cute,” said Captain Armstrong reaching over to tweak Mike’s nose.

“Cute!” said Mike the Moose. “Cute! You overstuffed astro-buzzard. You, sir, are talking to the most highly decorated moose ever. I can pick up that phone,” said Mike gesturing to a handset on the console, “and call the President of the United States. He said I could call anytime I want. Who can you call, Mr. Phony Hoofs.” Mike was back on that again.

“Mikey, hush.” said Susan.

At that moment it dawned on Captain Armstrong that Susan was talking to her toy and it gave him serious second thoughts. He’d made a mistake to invite her aboard a top security

capsule without first checking her out.

Desperate to change the subject Susan asked, “Ah how do they keep air in the capsule?”

“Well, Susan,” Captain Armstrong said ignoring her question and gently taking her by the arm, “I think it’s about time we debark. Only twenty minutes to lift off. Follow me please,” he said rushing her out fast but as he politely could.

Susan turned to follow Captain Armstrong at just the wrong time, and she bumped head on into the First Officer astronaut as he came through the air lock. The gleaming silver face guard on his helmet lifted electrically.

“So sorry ma’am,” he said, “are you OK?”

“Totally my fault,” Susan apologized.

Armstrong hurried Susan down the gangplank as the last astronaut entered the capsule and the massive door rotated shut with a loud hiss.

“Let’s rush along now Susan,” Captain Armstrong prodded.

Susan noticed that Captain Armstrong now spoke to her very slowly as if to a child.

“Come now Susan and I’ll show you a nice view of lift off,” offered the Captain with a forced smile.

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Lift off was fascinating seen close up through mission control’s foot thick windows. Susan couldn’t take her eyes off the thundering tunnels of fire that streamed from the capsule’s tail. It wasn’t at all like watching a launch on TV. It was much better. She could feel the power as the building shook and marvel as the vessel, as big as a cruise ship, inched off the pad. It lifted slowly at first, then faster, faster, until the point came when it jumped like a stone from a sling shot.

“Wow. Unbelievable huh Mikey,” Susan said finally.

No comment from Mike.

“First time I’ve ever known you to be speechless, Mikey,” said Susan.

It was so rare if fact that Susan opened her purse to see Mike’s expression. There was no Mike. Susan groped frantically. No Mike.

“Oh my god,” she said. “What if I dropped Mike on the launch pad?” A vision of 1000-degree flames engulfing her little mooseling turned Susan’s face ash white. “The little guy would burn to ashes in a second,” she muttered aloud.

She turned to retrace her steps walking down the hallway looking everywhere for Mike. The two security guards followed her.

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Back on the capsule, Mike woke feeling exceptionally groggy. He rubbed his head searching for a bump. There was none but he still felt dizzy. Then it all came back to him. Susan had collided with the First Officer which sent Mike crashing, antlers first, from Susan’s purse, spiraling down to the floor, fully unconscious. Mike recalled it all now, rising up on his still wobbly front hooves to shake himself off.

Vim-BAM-bam-bam-bam. Mike heard a loud sound. It was the capsule jettisoning its auxiliary fuel tank, and through the porthole Mike watched it fall back to earth. The capsule continued streaming ahead into dark, endless space. At the forward command console, Mike saw the three astronauts remove their safety harnesses and slowly arise from their seats. That’s when the First Officer noticed Mike on the floor.

“What the universe is this?” said the First Officer, lifting Mike from the floor and

squeezing him like he was a fish.

“OWW. Unhand me you oaf,” hollered Mike at the top of his lungs. “I am not a tube of toothpaste!”

The First Officer’s mouth fell open. He rubbed his ears as if trying to fix them.

“What in the world?” He said.

“Actually, you oaf, we’re not in the world. In case you hadn’t noticed this is an outer space capsule,” Mike spoke to the First Officer like a professor correcting a dull student. Mike was surprised, though, when he realized that the First Office heard him. By now the two other astronauts gathered around Mike.

Must be the weightlessness or something, Mike thought to himself, because these guys are hearing me clear as a bell.

“It talks,” said the First Officer still holding Mike up to the others.

Mike pointed to the First Officer.

“It talks,” said Mike, perfectly mimicking the First Officer’s southern accent.

Captain Scott Bradford and his navigator Judy Barnes looked at each other. Captain Bradford started laughing and Judy followed suit.

“You are right little moose. The First Officer does speak, doesn’t he? For a long time we weren’t sure if that southern drawl qualified as speech.”

The Captain held his side laughing. The First Officer looked annoyed.

“May I see him please,” said Captain Bradford reaching for Mike.

Still in shock the First Officer handed Mike to Captain Bradford.

“Hi Sir,” said Mike smiling. “Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles at your service,” he said

doing a full hoof salute.

“So you talk do you?” marveled the Captain. “Must be Robotic,” he muttered.

The Captain leaned into his console microphone.

“This your little surprise for us Director Jones?”

The console speaker was silent.

“OK Mission control,” said Captain Bradford, “You really put one over on us this time.”

Captain Bradford stared at the monitors, expecting to hear the team back at mission control burst into laughter. The monitor remained still.

Meanwhile Mike puffed himself up, ballooning with annoyance.

“You sub atomic puff ball. Did I hear you call me a robot? Of course I talk. Don’t you?”

The Captain did a mock, apologetic bow to Mike.

“So sorry Your Antlerness,” he said.

He looked again to the monitor and saw the mission control team. They were wide-eyed and dead silent.

Captain Bradford was getting impatient but decided to play along with their joke a little longer.

“So Mike, may I ask how you got on board a top security space capsule?”

Mike shrugged his shoulders.

Captain Bradford turned to his First Officer and whispered, “You don’t think Mission Control is springing another psyche evaluation on us? Usually I get a hint when one is coming.”

The First Officer looked bewildered.



Captain Bradford pushed a button on the console.

“Ok Mission, what’s the story. Hello Mission Control.”

Captain Bradford at last got a response as a voice from Mission Control boomed through the console speaker.

“We hear you Bradford.” It was Director Jones and he appeared on the monitor holding a microphone.

“Ah ya want to tell me about your little moose joke now,” said Captain Bradford smiling.

There wasn’t even a crackle from the speaker. After a long pause, Director Jones came back but his voiced lacked its usual confidence.

“Say again Bradford?”

“The moose. The little moose, What’s with the moose?” said the Captain Bradford impatiently.

“What’s loose?” Director Jones asked. “Something break loose up there? All systems monitor normal. It’s not the darn carbonic deposit regenerator again is it Bradford?”

“Not loose. Moose. M-O-O-S-E,” said Captain Bradford, shoving Mike straight into the video camera.

Back on earth Mike the Moose’s nose appeared on twenty monitors at once revealing his snout, his eyes, his antlers and finally all of Mike the Moose as the Captain held him a little further back.

“Holly telemetry,” said Director Jones.

“It’s my Mikey. Oh thank God,” said Susan jumping from her chair and pointing to the monitor. “He’s safe.” Susan’s voice was full of relief.

“Good lord it’s her stuffed toy,” Captain Armstrong said to Director Jones. Director Jones eyed Susan suspiciously. The two security guards edged closer and flanked Susan on both sides. Mission control buzzed as everyone tried to figure out what was going on.

“How in the world did that toy get aboard?” Director Jones demanded.

Staff whispers turned to gasps when, from thousands of miles out in space Mike’s voice boomed back

“A toy!” Huffed Mike the Moose. “And you are supposed to be a rocket scientist? Who forgot to wind you up? Who forget your Coppertone batteries buster? I’ve never seen a dumber wiz kid ever. Open your note pads and take this down, dudes. I’m the intelligence you’ve been hunting in outer space. It’s me. Mike the Moose Master of Marbles.”

There was a stunned pause again. Finally Director Jones broke the silence.

He quizzed the capsule’s crew, “Captain Bradford, if you know anything about this, now’s the time to end this foolishness.”

“You mean this isn’t YOUR idea?” Captain Bradford came back. “Any of you guys know anything?” Said Bradford turning to his crew.

Their blank looks were reply enough.

“O.K. Everyone in Control and on the capsule, I want you all to get this NOW. I don’t know what the hell is going on. But effective immediately, O-1100 hours,” Director Jones eyed the digital clock on his monitor, “a complete priority-one mission-silence is in imposed. NOW. Break it and you are out. I mean no press, no calls home, no calls to associates, no calls to vendors. I want dead and I mean DEAD silence until we know what’s going on here.”

Everyone nodded like kids in a classroom.

“Security,” continued the Director, “find out and find out fast what the galaxy that thing is, how it got there. Access its threat level to the mission and NOW!”

“Yo. Mr. Director,” came Mike’s voice through the console speaker. “I usually eat at eleven, ah I mean 0-Eleven hundred hours. You guys got any pizza up here? Or maybe a burger, medium rare with all the trimmings ‘cept for pickles, ugh I hate pickles, and a chocolate shake?”

The Director’s mouth could have caught flies. Captain Armstrong was at the Director’s side, whispering something in his ear. They both turned to look at Susan as the security guards moved in closer to her. Captain Armstrong and the Director came over to Susan’s chair and started peppering her with questions.

“What is that thing and how’d you manage to plant it in the capsule? Who are you working for?”

Director Jones nodded to one of his staff and computers began spinning through a database of the usual suspects to find Susan’s true identity.

“Whoa, whoa,” Susan said. “One question at a time. I think Mikey must have fallen from my purse when I bumped the astronaut in the capsule,” Susan explained.

“He’s just a little Mooseling and no threat to anyone. He even helped the State Department once.”

Armstrong and Director Jones looked at her suspiciously.

“I can prove it,” she said. “Just call this man at State Department headquarters.” She reached into her purse and pulled out Agent Harry Malone’s card. “What’s the big deal? It’s not like Mike’s a weapon. He’s just a little mooseling.”

“Yeah, sure lady,” said one of the security guards. “Nothing unusual about a stowaway

talking moose on a space ship.”

“My husband and I can always hear him,” Susan explained. “But most people can’t except a few and we never know why they can. The President of the United States hears him,” Susan said matter-of-factly.

Captain Armstrong rolled his eyes, embarrassed he ever invited this wacko woman.

“There must be something about deep space or zero gravity conditions that explains why you and the crew can hear him,” Susan continued ignoring Captain Armstrong’s look.

Director Jones was the first to recover from the shock. He started barking order

“Captain Bradford,” he bellowed into his console microphone, “take that toy...”

Mike appeared in his monitor looking very upset. He was a moment away from another tirade.

“I mean take the nice moose,” said Director Jones in a placating voice.

Mike smiled a big toothy smile into the camera.

“Ah take ah MIKE to the sterile room and check it, ah check HIM out for contaminates. If he’s clean, get back to schedule, but watch him like a hawk. We’re losing valuable time and the mission’s an hour behind. The CIA’s here and the press are sequestered. Were checking things out and will report back shortly. This is NOT a planed protocol. I repeat. It is not a test. Frankly Bradford, we don’t know what the world it is. But you get this mission back on track until we find out. And make 100 percent sure he’s clean.”

“Clean? You old space buzzard. What do you think I am, a street urchin? I bush my teeth three times daily, always moving the toothbrush both up and down and sideways,” said Mike.

A set of gleaming moose teeth appeared in Director Jones’s monitor.

“Plus I wash before lunch and dinner. And, by the way, where is my dinner? I wash my hoofs and my face before I say my prayers at bedtime. Ask my Mom. Mom, you tell them how clean I am,” said Mike as Captain Bradford pulled him away from the camera.

“Ah, sorry about that Director Jones,” said Captain Bradford.

“Plus I have on a fresh, brand new T-shirt. Mom put it on me before we left for Florida...” said Mike protesting in the background.

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Back on earth the guards took Susan to an interrogation room. Director Jones and Captain Armstrong followed them.

“Guys, I’m just a mother. He’s my little mooseling.” Susan insisted.

“Is the CIA file back on her back yet?” demanded the Director.

The first security guard shook his head no and left saying he’d check on it right away. The second security guard motioned Susan into a stiff wooden chair. The hanging bright light hurt Susan’s eyes.

Back on the capsule, Mike was entertaining the fascinated crew.

“So you see guys,” Mike was explaining, “with my knowledge of moon craters, we can find out once and for all about the cheese rumor. I’ll lead the landing party.”

“We’re off to Mars not to the moon and there’s no cheese on the red planet my little friend,” said an amused Captain Bradford. “But, thanks Mike. Besides I don’t think we have a space suit quite your size.”

“But that’s the beauty of it,” said Mike excitedly. “I don’t need a space suit. I don’t need oxygen like you guys and I can look in small crevices where you can’t. We’ll make history,” said

Mike clearly warmed up now.

“One small step for man, one hoof print for us mooses,” said Mike, his chest puffing up.

The crew was amused and they were clearly warming to Mike.

Mike-launched into his theory about why Mars was red.

“I think that under the lava is the Sea of Red Jaw Breakers,” said Mike.

That’s when it happened.

There was a huge blam followed by the sound of metal ripping and scraping. The space capsule lurched sideways and started to roll. Red warning lights flashed, the main console buzzed, and a mechanistic computer voice kept repeating over and over, “Threat level 4. Threat level 4.”

Captain Bradford rushed to the console to scan the gauges.

“We’ve been hit. Space debris or a small meteor. Looks like it tore the cone off and a quarter inch of the exterior shield,” said the Captain to his First Officer, pointing in the monitor to the crushed hull.

No one was joking in the capsule now and even Mike stood quietly.

Director Jones' voice boomed through the speakers.

“Oh man, Bradford, is it as bad as it reads?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Captain Bradford. “Whatever it was, it perforated the right tile protractors. We’re retaining air pressure now, but I don’t think we can for long.”

“Looks like only a thin shell is still in place,” said Director Jones from earth. “The reentry pressure will crack it. Consult your team but I say we bag the mission, burn the reverse thrusters and get you headed back.”

“Roger,” said Captain Bradford.

“This is not cool,” muttered Mike. “How’d I get on this mission anyway? I want to go home to Mom now.”

The tiny wounded craft bore the astronauts and Mike deeper into space for another half hour until finally the voice of Director Jones boomed once more through the speaker.

“O.K. Bradford. Take your seats and standby. At 0-200 we’re initiating a power up of both dorsal thrusters. We’re bringing you home.”

“Roger,” said Captain Bradford.

“Make it so,” said Mike the Moose imitating Star Trek’s Captain Picard and giving the closest thing to a thumbs up a moose with hooves could give. “Tell mom I’m coming home, please.”

Mike floated up to Captain Bradford’s lap and the Captain buckled Mike in with him, smiling and stroking Mike’s antler.

“Don’t you worry little guy,” he said. “We’ll get you back.”

Mike felt calmed by his words. He liked Captain Bradford.

Mission control started the blast countdown.

“10-9-8-7...”

Mike shivered a little with each number.

“It’s O.K. Mike,” reassured Captain Bradford.

“...6-5-4-3-2-” Mission Control continued. “1.”

A huge blast roared from the rear of the capsule. Mike felt the capsule roll and he was pushed back as if someone put a huge weight on his chest. The ship began accelerating into a course reversal, shuddering under the power of the blasting thrusters.

“I I I I waaa nnaaa ggooo hoomme,” Mike said, having a hard time speaking with all the G-force.

Captain Bradford stroked Mike reassuringly and moments later the G-force lifted. All was quiet as the tiny capsule hurtled towards earth at thousands of miles an hour. The peaceful silence of deep space gave way all too quickly to Mike who again stood up.

“So,” continued Mike as if he’d never left off speaking. “I got this whole thing down pat. Don’t worry. I’ll navigate us back. I saw Homer Simpson do it once and it’s not that hard.”

From the next seat, Navigator Judy Barnes burst out laughing. The comic relief was just what the crew needed. Even the Mission Control crew monitoring the imperiled craft was chuckling. Both the capsule in space and the control center on earth filled with laughter.

“Well, I can so,” said Mike not sure if he should enjoy the laughter or feel miffed.

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Hours later, the tension in the capsule returned as the ship started reentry into Earth’s atmosphere. There was a sudden shudder and then the dreaded scream of tearing metal. Everyone in the fragile capsule froze as if someone hit pause on the TV remote. On the screen a long fracture appeared in the metal surface of the capsule’s front cone. It looked like a paper tear but it sounded awful. Mike covered his ears. Then came the hiss the crew had feared all along, as the capsule’s precious oxygen began to leak into space.

“Center,” Captain Bradford’s voice was higher than normal. “That’s it. We lost the seal.”

The Captain looked at his watch. “We’ve got an hour of flight but only a half hour of air in the tanks. Crew, set compressors to sleep mode immediately,” ordered the Captain.

The astronauts quickly slipped into their space suits and set the flow gage on the oxygen



tanks to sleep mode for minimal air consumption.

“We’re on our tanks Mission, but,” said Bradford lowering his voice, “but we don’t enough to last.”

Security allowed Susan back in the control center after the CIA report on her came back. Agent Harry Malone called to vouch for Susan and he even talked glowingly of Mike the Moose. The security guard cut Agent Malone short when he started vouching for Mike the Moose, and the guard made a note on his clipboard to request a copy of Agent Malone’s psychiatric workup when the crisis was over. Susan anxiously gripped and released the arms on her chair as she awaited some word about Mike the Moose from the capsule.

“A water dump will be better than a landing at the flats,” said Director Jones. “At least when the crew goes unconscious, we can deploy the parachute and the floats by remote.”

The two engineers next to Jones nodded in agreement.

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In the capsule, the air tank gauges dropped. Precious little oxygen remained as the craft passed through the first reentry layer. The craft’s tiny exterior, a mere eggshell in vast space, glowed orange from the intense heat.

Mike was still carrying on about his ability to navigate when he noticed both Captain Bradford and the First Officer starting to nod off. Their oxygen-starved eyes looked bloodshot.

“Geez I wasn’t that boring,” Mike said. “Atten-hup,” he yelled, hoping to rouse them.

The Captain’s eyes blinked open and he stared at Mike, but the look in his eye was dull.

Mike spurred them on, “Are you guys going to get me home or not!”

Captain Bradford seemed to comprehend and responded groggily.

“Verrrry little air.”

As if in slow motion he forced his arm out towards the console and tapped the glass on the oxygen gage hoping to make it jump. It stayed lifeless and in the red danger zone.

“Bradford. Bradford,” boomed the console speaker. “Can you still hear us? Oxygen in the critical zone. Can you hang on another ten minutes to do the throttle up? Bradford? Do you copy Center? Bradfrord?”

“Cssenterr,” muttered the Captain.

The word came out slowly like water gurgling over rocks, trailing off as Captain Bradford’s head snapped down and his eyelids closed. Mike watched as the Captain tried with all his might to lift his head without success. Captain Bradford was the last to blank out, joining the rest of his crew in a dangerous, oxygen-deprived, unconscious sleep.

“Good lord they are all out,” said Director Jones.

Mike heard the panic in Director Jones’ voice.

“We can position the capsule,” Director Jones said to his staff, “but only the crew can throttle the retro rockets. We can start the sequence to countdown from here, but we can’t do the throttling. We’ll never slow the capsule enough for reentry with no one to throttle the retros.”

Mike the Moose hopped up on the console, putting his snout as close as he could to the speaker.

“I can do it.”

“Thank God one of the crew is still conscious,” Director Jones’ excited voice shot back.

Mike had his antlers so close to the speaker that Jones’ booming voice nearly blew him of his hoofs.

“Dude, easy on the decibels,” Mike complained rubbing his antlers.

Mike came back into camera position, appearing on Director Jones’ monitor.

“Great goodness, it’s the toy moose,” said Director Jones.

Susan rolled her eyes knowing what was coming.

“TOY! Noooooooooooooo wayyyyyyyyyy am I a toy Director Nincompoop," Mike’s voice boomed across all the Center’s speakers at once. “I am also not deaf so lower your volume and I am totally done with your insults. I want a full apology on NASA letterhead. FedEx it to me and say you are sorry. I want it official and I want it pronto,” said Mike folding his moose arms.

Susan rose out of her seat, walked to Director Jones and took the microphone from his hand.

“Mike, listen up now. This is no time for attitude.”

There was a pause and a crackle and then Mike replied.

“Mom. Mom. Wow, am I glad to hear you. These guys are all asleep up here. Mom...,” Mike’s voice lowered and his chest grew a size smaller, “and I don’t think they are supposed to be.”

“It’s O.K. Mike. The crew is in trouble and you’re the only one awake. You’re heading towards earth. So could you just please do everything the nice mission control Director says,” said Susan handing the microphone back to the grateful Director.

Mike saw Director Jones’ face grow in the monitor.

“Mike, this is the Director. You may be our last hope. Can you hear me all right?”

“Dude,” said Mike again backing away from the microphone. “Easy on my ear

drums."

Then after a pause his Mom's words sunk in.

"Last hope huh," thought Mike. "I like that." He felt proud drawing himself up to his tallest height. His antlers rose fully erect.

"I hear you loud and clear, Sir. This is Mike the Moose, Master of Marbles, the much-decorated mooseling at your service. On this historic flight I stand ready..." Mike put his hoof over his heart, "...to come to the aid of my country..."

Susan's voice interrupted just as Mike was warming up.

"NOT NOW Mike. You are hurling a thousand miles an hour towards earth. Last hope. Remember Mike. DANGER. Got it Mike?" Boomed Susan, who was more than a little annoyed.

"Gee wiz Mom," muttered Mike.

Captain Bradford opened one eye trying his best to say something but he couldn't get the words out and he fell unconscious again.

Xxx "Mike," boomed the voice of Director Jones. "Do you think you could throw one of the throttles on the console all the way forward, then pull it back again when I tell you to? Do you have the strength?"

"Surely you jest," Mike flexed his right front leg, revealing the tiniest hint of a muscle. "I was asked to be Schwarzenegger's personal trainer. I taught Popeye about spinach. It was I who..."

"MIKE!" Susan's voice cut him off again.

"Jeezzz, Mom," said Mike relaxing his arm.

“Great then Mike,” said the Director. “Do you see three throttles to your left on the console?”

Mike looked around.

“One, two ah, three...yes sir, Director Jones,” reported Mike.

“And do you see the middle one has a black handle?” Asked Jones.

“I see it, I see it,” said Mike getting excited about his role.

“Then when I tell you, can you push it all the way forward?”

“Dude,” said Mike, “no problem-O.”

“Good. Wait until I tell you. Then you push it forward. Then I will count to 12. When I reach 12, you quickly push it back to where it is now. Can you do that Mike?”

There worry in the Director’s voice was obvious.

“Piece of cake, easy breezy” said Mike followed after a moment’s pause and then, “Mom, I can can’t I?” Said Mike trying to sound confident.

Susan’s voice came back.

“You absolutely can Mike. You can do it. Listen carefully and do whatever the nice NASA Director says.”

“K Mom,” said Mike, confident again.

“Good, Mike,” said Director Jones reviewing. “In 36 seconds I am going to tell you to push the black throttle forward. When you do that, I will count down from 12. When I reach 1, you push the throttle back as hard as you can.”

“Mission Objective understood. Aye-aye Director Jones. Loud and Clear. Over

and out ...Roger, dodger..."

"MIKE!" boomed Susan's voice.

"Gee Mom," said Mike.

"Ten seconds to go Mike," said Director Jones. "Position yourself in front of the throttle Mike. Get a good footing with your little hooves."

"K Mr. Director," said Mike nervously.

Mike floated over to the throttle, dug in his hooves and leaned against the black throttle, ready for Director Jones' command.

NOW!" Said Director Jones.

Mike pushed with every bit of strength in his little mooseling body. At first nothing happened. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, the throttle eased forward. Then more and more until finally Mike pushed it all the way forward into full thrust position.

Tremendous applause and cheering from Mission Control burst through the console speaker.

"Go, Mike, Bravo Mike. Mike, Mike, Mike," the Mission Control staff cheered at their monitors.

Mike, forgetting there was more to do, started moon-walking on the console to the applause. His chest puffed and he strode like a peacock, doing Michael Jackson hip flips every third step.

"MIKE," screamed Susan. "Get to the other side of the black handle and NOW pal. Be ready to push when you are told."

"9-8-7-6-," said Director Jones, in the middle of the second countdown.

Mike stopped mid moon-walk and rushed back to the black throttle. He was ready to push in the opposite direction.

Director Jones' voice continued the count.

"4-3...Get ready Mike."

"Be ready, Mikey," encouraged Susan.

"2-1. NOW PUSH MIKE," shouted Director Jones.

Again Mike pushed with all his strength. Again the throttle barely moved at first but finally it angled back, back, back.

"Just a little more Mike," said Director Jones.

In the background Mike heard the Mission staff urging.

"You can do it, Mike."

Mike mustered his last ounce of strength to shove as hard as he could. His legs slid to his side and he made a motion as if to wipe a bead of sweat from his antler. Miraculously, the throttle came to rest in the proper position.

"YES Mike! Excellent," exclaimed Director Jones.

Mission Control erupted and the staff jumped to their feet clapping and hooting.

Mike dropped at the base of the throttle to rest a moment, too exhausted to talk, surely one of the rare times in the mooseling's young history that that ever happened. His speechlessness lasted almost two full seconds before he lifted himself up and started to victory dance like a football player's end zone shuffle.

"Mike, Mike," said Director Jones. "Just one more thing." xxx

Mike could barely hear Director Jones with the cheering in the background at Mission

Control.

“Can you hit the green button to the left of the air gauge?” Asked the Director.

Mike pointed to a green button.

“Yes, that’s it, Mike,” said Director Jones. “That will release the pressure lock and since we are now back in atmosphere, the crew will get air faster.”

“No problem Mr. Director,” said Mike hitting the green button. A huge hiss sounded as the air lock released and earth’s oxygen flowed into the room. The tiny capsule floated gently through the atmosphere with its parachutes and floats fully deployed.

“Well done, Mike the Moose,” said Director Jones.

The cheering from the Center was feverish. Mike took a bow and, figuring this was as good a time as any, he began the speech he had secretly practiced back home in the mirror.

“My fellow Americans,” he started, bringing his face to the microphone. “In this historic moment of Moose greatness...”

Mercifully, no one at Mission Center had to listen to him. They saw Mike mouthing words but no sounds came through. A lady scientist who read lips burst out laughing as Mike’s speech droned on. But the capsule had re-entered the atmosphere and gravity had taken hold again. Whatever condition had allowed to them hear Mike in space was over now as the craft drifted slowly back to earth.

Susan, who could always hear Mike, interrupted his speech.

“Good going honey,” she said proudly giving Mike a thumbs up through the monitor.

In the tiny capsule, Captain Bradford, the First Officer and Judy the Navigator stirred as if from a long winter nap. Captain Bradford shook his head trying to clear his mind.



“What happened?” he said to Judy. “How’d we manage a safe reentry? Did you throttle down?”

“No,” Judy shrugged.

“Didn’t you?” she said, obviously as much in the dark about it as Captain Bradford.

“Good job Bradford,” boomed the voice of Director Jones through the console. “Splash down in three minutes, 22 seconds. We have three ships heading your way for an 034 intercept. On a personal note, your families are all here and waiting to welcome their heroes home.”

Captain Bradford looked pleased though befuddled. He saw Mike the Moose near him on the console and smiled, remembering his little friend.

“Hi little guy. Nice to see you’re O.K. Let me strap you in with me for the splash down.”

Mike the Moose smiled at the Captain. Nice guy, he thought. “He can come on my next mission,” thought Mike happily.

It had been a good day. But enough was enough.

“I just want to be back with my Mom now,” he thought as Captain Bradford secured him gently into his shoulder harness. “Space is cool but we mooselings prefer terra firma.”

Back at Mission Control, Mike and the crew were debriefed. Susan was asked to be the voice for her mooseling. When the briefing was finished, everyone left the room except Susan, Director Jones and Captain Bradford. The Captain, now fully informed of Mike’s bravery, took the little mooseling aside.

“If the public knew it took you to save our mission Mike, congress would cut our funding like that,” Captain Bradford snapped his fingers. Director Jones’ head was nodding like a bobbing toy on a car dash.

“Mikey, for security reasons, and because it might embarrass NASA, none of us can leak a word of what happened,” Susan explained.

“But,” Susan continued, “NASA wants you to know how special you are and that privately, they will forever hold you in their highest esteem.”

Mike rolled his eyes.

“Bummer Mom. I save their whole mission and they want to keep it a secret? I could have made the Letterman show.” Mike paused a moment, deep in thought. “Can’t I at least tell Agent Malone and Oggie the Giraffe?”

Susan nodded no.

“Geezzzzz, Mom,” said Mike.

“I know, Mike, but country first remember?” reminded Susan.

“Ya, mom,” said Mike disappointed.

“But Mike,” said Susan, “Director Jones has something very special for you.”

Mike’s antlers perked up and his brown eyes widened. “What is it mom, what!”

“Why don’t we let the Director give it to you,” Susan said.

“Well Mike,” said Director Jones. He turned to Susan. “Can he hear me?”

“Yes sir,” said Susan winking at Mike who rolled his eyes.

“Well,” continued the Director, “on Mars Launch 2, the robotic trip before this one, the ship returned with many samples of Martian soil and stone.”

Mike’s antler started to droop.

“Mom,” he complained, “tell me this Yank-a-lovich isn’t going to give me a pile of dirt?”

“Just wait Mike and be gracious,” Susan said, glad the Director could no longer hear

Mike.

“Amazingly,” the Director continued, “one of the pieces is perfectly globe-shaped and it shines brilliantly with a gold and blue hue.”

The Director pulled a tiny, gleaming, blue ball out of the brown leather pouch in his hand. It gleamed brighter than a light bulb. Mike’s eyes got bigger and bigger.

“In fact Mr. Mike the Moose,” Director Jones said, “some of us thought it looked just like a...”

“...marble!” Mike interrupted excitedly.

“Yes, a marble,” said Director Jones handing the glowing blue and gold orb to Mike. “Not only is it priceless Mike, but I guarantee you there is nothing on earth like it. Perhaps in the whole solar system.”

“Wow, Wow WOW,” said Mike the Moose Master of Marbles holding his most prized marble up. “It is magnificent. Mom, tell ‘em I really like it and thanks.”

The marble blazed a brilliant light and Mike held it proudly.

Susan repeated Mike’s words and the Director smiled at Mike.

“Oh and tell Director Jones one other thing Mom,” said Mike. “Tell him if he needs me for the next launch, he can count me in. But they have to lose the food cubes and get a real pizza!”

Susan repeated this to the Director who winked at Mike and then left for a meeting.

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On the plane ride home Mike stared and stared at his new marble. “Beautiful isn’t it Mom. It’s my favorite of all.”

“Gee Ma’am. Never seen a marble like that before. Pretty nice!” Said the stewardess as she placed the food tray before Susan. On it was a full sized sizzling pizza with pepperoni and mushrooms, Mike’s favorite toppings. Mike looked up from his marble. On the tray was a note:

“Mike, I hope our hospitality is a little better on this leg of your trip. Thanks again my brave friend.”

It was signed, Director Jones.

Mike’s smile beamed as bright as his marble.