

# ★ Chapter 1 ★



Lexi Torres raced on her bike through the town square. She didn't want to miss out on any fun. She slowed when she saw the dark storefront. Her heart dropped. Lexi was too far away to read the sign in the window, but she had a bad feeling. Had her brother been telling the truth?

Lexi hopped off her bike and walked it across the square. Her friends from the neighborhood were already there.

“What happened to Ms. Kidd?” Sadie

wondered. She tugged on her braid as she peered into the dark store.

“What happened to the toys?” added Max. The shelves were empty.

“Reed told me that there was a FOR RENT sign on the window,” Lexi said, shaking her head. “I thought he was kidding.”

“Kidding about the toy store being closed?” Henry asked. “That would be mean, even for your brother.”

Lexi had to agree. She liked to look at things in terms of what was true and what was not true. It was easy to do with her brother. It was true that her brother liked a good joke. It was not true that he was mean.

Lexi sighed. Just that morning, Reed had put a plastic cockroach in her cereal. She would have preferred it the other way around: REAL cockroach, FAKE store closing.

“I guess we have to face it — Toys, Toys, Toys is really closed, closed, closed.” Max kicked the toe of his sneaker against the front of the store. “I’m going to go to the park. Anyone else want to come with me?”

Lexi squinted at Max. How could he just go to the park? The four friends always spent Thursday afternoons with Ms. Kidd, the owner of Toys, Toys, Toys. Ms. Kidd sometimes set up archery tournaments for them, or she asked them to unpack boxes of the hottest new toys. She let them play with anything they wanted.

“I wonder if someone will open another toy store,” Henry said.

“It can take a while to open something new,” Sadie replied.

Nothing could compare to the toy store, but Lexi still hoped something else would open soon. The store was in the center of town. Four streets came together here, and

there was a square in the middle with tall trees, a gazebo, and benches. The elementary school was on the other side of the square, and there was an ice cream store a few doors down.

“I have a football in my backpack. Let’s just go to the park,” Max said again. “Come on, Lexi. I’ll bet Simon is there. He has soccer practice, right?”

“Max,” Sadie said sharply. “Didn’t you hear?”

Lexi bit her lip. She knew what Sadie was going to say. Lexi had been in a crummy mood before, but now she was all-out sad.

“What?” Max asked, looking from Sadie to Lexi and back to Sadie again.

“Simon is moving,” Sadie explained. She had her left braid twisted into a tight knot now. “Like, next week.”

“Oh. Sorry, Lexi,” Max said.

“Yeah, sorry, Lexi,” Henry added.

It was nice of them to apologize. It wasn't their fault that Lexi's best friend was moving away. Simon's dad just needed to live closer to his job.

Lexi had known Simon since they were, well, zero. They both loved scary books, bad jokes, and pumpkin ice cream. Simon and Lexi had done almost everything together. Everything except soccer. When Simon had soccer on Thursdays, Lexi had come to Toys, Toys, Toys with Henry, Sadie, and Max.

Now Simon was leaving the day before Lexi's birthday, two days before school started. They wouldn't do their homework together anymore. They wouldn't write spooky stories together. Simon wasn't even sticking around for Lexi's birthday party.

"It's okay," Lexi said. She turned to the store window again. She didn't want her friends to see the look on her face, but she could see herself in the window. Her whole

face seemed to droop. Even her thick brown hair was limp today.

She was upset that Simon was moving, but Simon didn't seem sad at all. He had sounded excited when he told her, talking about the town's cool soccer field and the outdoor pool with a twisty slide. Lexi hadn't wanted Simon to see how sad she was, so she'd just made a joke.

Lexi reached up to trace her finger over the FOR RENT sign on the window. That's when she saw the light go on inside.

"Hey, guys," Lexi said. "I think someone's in there."

"Maybe it's Ms. Kidd," Henry said.

Lexi held her breath, but not a single person appeared. Instead a sturdy black cat strutted up the store's narrow aisle. A shaggy, caramel-colored dog plodded along behind her.

Lexi's heart began to pound when she saw the cat, and it melted when she saw

the dog. She loved all animals, but dogs were her favorite.

“Oh, my gosh!” Sadie exclaimed. “They are so cute.”

The cat walked straight up the aisle and leaped onto the desk where the cash register used to be. Her long, white whiskers twitched as she stared at the dog.

At once, the dog walked up to the window. Very carefully, he wedged his teeth between the glass and the FOR RENT sign.



He bit down and ripped the sign off the window. Then he ate it in five gigantic bites.

The cat blinked twice and jumped down. The two animals marched to the back of the store together. They were both wagging their tails.