



Girl walks through a "mirror", finds herself in a new world, and a tiny dragon stuck in a hole. The rescue begins an adventure that includes dragon flight, evil dragons, and thieves.

Alicia's Dragon

By R.L. Pool

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A detailed illustration of a small, blue and green dragon with spiky scales and large orange eyes, perched on a human hand. The dragon's body is primarily blue with green-tinted scales, especially on its wings and tail. It has a small, curled tail and sharp claws. The human hand is shown from the palm side, with fingers slightly curled. The background is a dark, textured blue. The title 'ALICIA'S DRAGON' is written in a large, white, serif font across the middle of the image, with the dragon's body partially obscuring the text. Below the title, the author's name 'R.L. POOL' is written in a smaller, white, serif font.

ALICIA'S DRAGON

R.L. POOL

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Print ISBN: 978-1-961266-50-6

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-313-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Cover art by Bauxxi - www.bauxxi.com

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Pool, R.L.

Alicia's Dragon by R.L. Pool

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025926813

Chapter 1

“When a dream isn’t...”

He’p me!

First off, I hate getting slapped out of a perfectly peaceful dream with a little girl’s voice screaming in my ears. That’s rude!

Second off, where did that voice come from anyway? It’s warm and cuddly here in this big bed at my memaw’s house and I really don’t wanna get up.

I listened for a bit, figured it was probably the ancient wood groaning, and figured I’d try to get back to the dream I was having. Me and my BFF were swimming with dolphins and they were showing us where they live. I need to get back there and...

He’p me, please!

Okay, I didn’t hear that. I mean, with my ears. That was inside my head and it sounded... well... scared!

I am skeered! I’m stucked!

Where?

Okay, I’m thinking at a voice in my head. Maybe mom was right and I need a shrink!

I don’t know. Where are you?

Good question.

I only came to memaw’s when mom and dad wanted to meet at the Grand Canyon... or Yellowstone... or something. Dad lives in Sacramento and we live in Springfield. They get together every year even though they got divorced over ten years ago. It’s a weird relationship. Don’t ask.

Anyway, when I told them I wanted to come here for Spring Break, my mom went off on me!

“I’ve told you a thousand times to leave that crazy old woman to her delusions! There is a reason I haven’t gone back there since I was a little girl! She’s a witch!”

“You shouldn’t talk like that about family.” I’d retorted. “She may be hard to get along with...”

“No, Alicia.” she jumped in. “She’s a witch! I think she put a hex on me when I was little and had me hearing voices in my head! Do you know how many hours of therapy I had to go through to get rid of those?”

“No.” I said, my phone now not close to my ear because of the yelling. “You never talk about her.”

“She had me thinking I could talk to the *cat*, Alicia!” she’d screamed. “The damned *cat*! Just promise you’ll never go there.”

Of course, that just made me wanna go all the more.

“*Promise me!*”

Geez, mom! Thank God I’m not standing close to you! I’d be deaf! “*Alicia!*”

“I promise that, if I do manage to find my way up into the Ozarks, I won’t even look for that old house.” I lied softly.

Actually, it wasn’t much of a lie. I already knew exactly where it was. I did a map search of the area, found it, and set up the trip. So, promising not to even look for her house wasn’t a lie. I already did.

“Good!” she’d responded, and I felt the relief over the phone.

I can do that, ya know? Feel things? Like May was just sitting there in the cafeteria at the College, talking about her boyfriend and how they were gonna graduate, get a job with this big company, and make a zillion dollars before they were thirty!

When I asked her how she was gonna do that with a kid, she said they had decided not to have any. I, of course, told her she was too late. Three weeks later she was banging on my dorm room and accusing *me* of getting her pregnant!

Then, there was Avery. He was looking at a football scholarship at one of those really prestigious universities, right. I told him he needed to get a checkup first. Didn't tell him about the heart valve I felt was trying to kill him. When he found out, I brushed it off as "women's intuition".

He got it fixed, by the way. Managed to get a scholarship for academics instead of football and hasn't looked back.

How did I know? Haven't got the faintest. And that's why I wanted to make the trip to memaw's.

All my life mom told me horror stories about her mother, and ended her tirade with the "no visitation clause". She made my grandmother sound like it was Snow White who concocted the poison apple! Animals all flocked to her house, according to mom, and her mother would sit on the porch talking to them... and *listening* to them too!

When I was little, birds would land on my window sill first thing in the morning and peck on the glass to wake me up. Okay, maybe they just saw themselves and were trying to make friends. I don't know. But it was annoying.

Are you there?

Okay. I'm still dreaming, I'll wake up, go downstairs and memaw and I will have a good laugh at the silliness of it all.

I'm ain't laughin'! I'm skeered! He'p me!

Look, I thought sternly, you need to get outta my head so I can get some sleep. When I wake up, I'll think about it. Okay?

It might be too late! I might starve to death waitin'!

So dramatic.

Not dum-attic! For real!

Okay, whoever was screaming in my head is getting on my nerves. Trapped? How? Why?

Well, I was cold an' hungry, right?

Go on.

I finded this hole and smelled the bugs, rats and some nother thangs down there and figgered I'd just squeeze inside and... you know... have a snack.

You eat bugs and rats. Riiiiight.

Whadda you eat?

Eggs, bacon, biscuits, potatoes... You know. Real food?

I don't know any a that stuff.

You've never been to a hamburger joint?

No. What's that?

It's where you get a burger, fries and a soda, nitwit! Okay I have to stop talking to this imaginary friend and get some sleep.

What's a booger? And a soda nitwit? What's that?

Okay. I need to wake up now. It'll still be night and, with the heavy curtains over the windows, it'll be *dark-dark* in here. Memaw doesn't use electricity, and the candle burned down a lot when I came in here to go to bed. I may have left it lit.

I could maybe feel my way to the window and open it up, but it's cold! I might be able to light a fire in the small fireplace if I can find the matches or even strike them with frozen fingers.

You gots fangers?

Now that's weird. *Yeah, I gots fingers! What are you? Stupid?*

I ain't stupid! I'm jist stucked!

This little girl is getting irate! I opened my eyes and, yeah, *dark-dark*! All I need is to be stumbling around in an unfamiliar bedroom looking for the matches. *Just leave me alone, all right?*

But I'm stucked!

Eat a bug!

I did! I eated 'em all! And all the rats too! I hadda eat 'em raw too 'cause I couldn't cook 'em! I'm gonna starve!

Eeeew! I'm gonna throw up!

Why?

You eat bugs and rats! Nobody eats bugs and rats!

I do.

Okay. That sounded so sad. I think I might have hurt her feelings.

No. That's okay. If you ain't gonna he'p me, I'll just stay here in the dark and die.

I thought I heard a soft sob in my head. She sounds so pitiful.

Okay. Just hold on a minute and I'll see what I can do.

You sure?

No. I may wake up in a minute and all this will be gone. Just let me see if I can get a fire going before I do anything else.

Okay.

Pitiful!

I probably should have had one going last night when I went to bed. But with all the wood in this house, I might have done it wrong and burned it all down! I'm afraid of fire and what it does to people like me who don't know what to do.

You skeered a fire?

Yeah. It hurts when it gets on you.

Okay. You don't gots ta worry 'bout me then. My clicker don't work.

Clicker?

It's in my mouf. I tried it a coupla times yesterday, but couldn't make it work.

Clicker. In your mouth.

Yeah. I think it's broked.

How old are you? And where are your parents?

Don't know what that is, but I 'member breaking outta the shell yesterday. I got hungry, and...

You ate bugs, right?

Yeah.

Shell, hunh?

Yeah. They was some oozy stuff in there with me and that's what brunged the bugs. Some of 'em tasted bad, but they was others what was tasty. I let them nasty ones have the left-over ooze and eated the tasty ones.

Left over?

I was hungry. It was there a'ready, and it tasted kinda good. So...

Now I'm really gonna throw up!

Why?

Never mind. Gimme a minute.

I drove up here yesterday and it was still snowing. Memaw met me standing on the porch like she knew I was coming. That in itself was weird since I'd never met her in all of my twenty-two years.

And, there is no cell tower close enough to even call her to tell her I was coming even if I had her number. Besides, she doesn't *have* a phone. Never did.

She was standing on the porch drying her hands on a dishtowel and looking like she'd just finished the dishes after serving up a great country meal.

Thing is, it was waiting on me when I got inside! Hot, ready, and oh so good! She just sat there with a cup of coffee and smiled at me while I gorged myself.

"You must be tired after your long trip, sweetheart." she said finally... after my second slice of pecan pie.

Pee-can? Or Pu-khan? Not sure. She said pu-khan, so...

She showed me pictures of mom, the place complete with all the trees, animals and... well... everything else. Then she sent me to bed.

"Rest easy, child." she said as she stood in the doorway. "You're safe here."

Safe? From what?

I'd looked at the small fireplace with the stack of wood on the side, and figured I'd try that tomorrow. I did notice the thing in the corner

covered with a black sheet, but figured it was some painting memaw was working on and left it alone. No sense invading her privacy more than just showing up, right?

Anyway, I pulled the heavy drapes and got undressed. My snowsuit is sitting somewhere out there in the dark on a chair, and my boots are next to the door downstairs.

Snowsuit in late March? Yeah. I guess Missouri didn't get the memo.

Now all I have to do is convince myself to get out from under the three quilts, feel my way to my clothes, and dress in the dark. I can pick up my boots on the way out.

That and figure out where I'm supposed to be going.

Ain't the moons where you is?

"I don't know." I whispered.

I figured I should use my mouth a little so this felt a bit more real.

"Besides," I went on, "there's only one moon."

I seen two when I was hidin' in the forest. And they's a lotta light coming in the hole way up there too!

"Are you sure you aren't cross-eyed?"

What's that?

"It's where your eyes aren't looking at the same thing the same way and you see two of everything."

Maybe so, but there's the litta one and the big one I seen out there. Does my eyes do that too?

She wasn't being snarky. It sounded like she really wanted to know and was worried about her eyes.

"Two moons?" I asked in that whisper as I lay there with the covers up to my chin.

Uh-hunh. I seen two.

Okay. I have to get up now. If I pull those drapes and see two moons, I'm gonna go back to bed and wait for morning. This dream is getting a bit much!

The problem isn't that it's cold in here. Well, that *is* the biggest problem, but another big problem is how I dress for bed. I sleep in my panties and a tee. That's all.

Snuggled under these quilts, I'm warm as toast. Once I get out from under, the cold will set in quickly and I'll freeze my butt off!

Your butt's gonna fall off? Don't do it! It's okay. I'll just...

"Just wait a minute... and stop listening in on my thoughts! I was just joking!"

What's that?

"Never mind." I said as I gathered my courage. "I'll explain later. And my butt is firmly attached, so it can't really fall off, okay?"

Okay.

It's now or never. I pushed out from under the quilts, sat up, and let my feet to the floor. When I felt the rag rug memaw had probably made by hand, I was oh so grateful. It's the rest of my body that needed a rug around it. It felt like a snowman was giving me a tight hug and I was instantly all but frozen!

Can't waste time. If I sit here for very long, the warm quilts will drag me back.

I stood up and tried to remember where everything was last night when I came in here with the candle. I know there's a bureau just across from where I am, and just past it to the left is the window with those heavy drapes.

Now, if the little girl is right, there's a full moon... or two. I'll need that light to get the fireplace going and get dressed. Here goes nothing.

I took a half-step forward while reaching out low with the back of my hand. I didn't touch anything, so I took another half-step. I felt the

bureau, moved my hand up to the top, and brought my feet together while I got my bearings.

I turned slowly left and, with my hand moving along the top of the bureau, took slow little steps until I felt the end of the wooden dresser. I stopped and pictured the room again.

A few feet away is the window. As far as I could remember, there was nothing under it. Just the long, heavy drapes. I took a deep breath, took two slow steps away from the bureau, and turned my whole body to the right.

So far, I hadn't stubbed a toe or tripped over anything. If I was right, all I had to do was step forward, grab the drapes, and pull them open. I was shivering by this time and my teeth wanted very much to chatter. I kept my mouth closed, my teeth tight, and, with my hand out, took a step.

I was never so happy to feel cloth in my life! I grabbed a handful and pulled to the side. The drape slid open just a little and...

The light came in, but it was grey. A darkish grey and not really all that bright. Not what I expected, but it might be enough.

I looked out at the snow drifting down, and my car. It was covered and the snow had drifted up to the center of my wheels. If I was gonna have to use that to find the little girl, I'd need a shovel... or a bulldozer!

First things first. Fire, Alicia. Fire, before you freeze your... before you get any colder.

I could barely see the stone fireplace from here in the dim light, the apron in front of it raised about two inches. I'll have to be careful not to stub my toes on that when I go, but the wood stacked neatly to the right side promised warmth. I also saw the big box of kitchen matches on the mantle and smiled through my shivers.

I made a note of the chair in front of the fireplace and...

What's that?

What's what?

What did I tell you about being inside my head?

Sorry. I cain't he'p it. I think I got inside there and cain't get out.

It's okay. Just don't talk to me for a while, okay? I need to get a fire going or I'm gonna be too cold to help you.

Okay. I think I'm growin' though.

Growing?

Yeah. I cain't move my arms no more and I think my horns is stucked in the top a this hole. All I can move is my tail.

Wait! What? Horns? And you have a tail?

Yeah. Is that bad?

No, kiddo. It's fine. I guess a lot of people have tails, right?

I'm a people?

Loaded question.

Loaded...

I need to concentrate on what I'm doing, kiddo.

Oh! Sorry.

Okay. There's a sliver of white over there in the corner. It's not a reflection either. It's too bright. Maybe it's just my imagination, but...

Fire, Alicia. You need a fire.

But my clicker's... Oh. Sorry.

I dodged the chair, picked up the newspaper off of the stack on top of the wood, and squatted down in front of the cold hearth. I crumpled up two of the big sheets, thought about it, and crumpled up another. I put them on the andirons, grabbed the bucket with the twigs in it and piled a few of those on the newspaper.

I got the box of matches off of the mantle and pulled one of the matches out. I was gonna strike it, but figured it would be better to have at least a couple of the bigger sticks on top of the twigs... just in case I got a fire going.

I was in the Girl Scouts for two years before I got up the courage to tell my mom I hated it. Two summer camps and feeding millions of mosquitoes later, she let me quit.

However, I did learn how to build a fire thanks to Molly Carson. Of course, that was because she almost burned down our cabin.

I put a couple of those bigger sticks on top, struck the match on the stone apron, and held it under the andiron. I was afraid that my shaking from the cold was gonna put the match out, my hand almost numb by now.

However, the newspapers caught, the twigs caught, and before long the bigger sticks were smoking like they might catch too! Just before the smoke started filling my room, I remembered the flap.

There was a chain to the right inside the hearth and I grabbed at it twice before I could close my cold hand on it. I pulled, and soot fell in and almost put out my danged fire!

Luckily it didn't, so I put a couple more sticks on top of the ones now smoking up the chimney. I stood up, turned around, and put my hands behind me.

Not sure why people do that. I mean, you hold your hands toward the fire, turn around, and still have your hands there to stay warm. Maybe it's a survival instinct or something. I know that when it gets hot, running cold water over your hands helps to cool you off. Maybe it's the same thing with getting warm. I don't know.

But now I have a bigger war going on. Here I am looking at my snowsuit, and the thing in the corner wants to draw my eyes to it. When I look over at it, I can still see the tiny sliver of white light there.

Does memaw use luminous paint? Only one way to find out, right? But the thick, padded, puffy material over there on the chair looks so warm! It's starting to be a little less chilly in here, so maybe I don't really need the snowsuit right now. Just this minute. Just...

Okay. I gotta know.

Walking away from that nice fire took courage. Trust me on this! The snowsuit is right there on the chair right in front of the fire, and that sliver was calling me over there in the corner. The cold corner.

Then, I remember feeling that the little girl's voice seemed to be coming from around there too! Okay, that's nuts, right? I mean, the voice was in my head! How could I...

But it... *felt* like it did. I have to see what's under that black sheet. I have to!

I turned back around to get a little heat back to my front side, glanced over at the thing in the corner, and took a deep breath. I don't know what scared me most. Finding something scary under that black sheet, or not finding some way to rescue that little girl I *knew* was under there. I know that sounds weird, but that's the way I feel.

I stiffened my spine, walked over quickly, and lifted the corner to the sheet.

Chapter 2

“Hi...”

Can ya hurry? I’m gettin’ squished!

I’m just standing here all but paralyzed in shock. This can’t be real... can it? When her tiny voice hit my brain, I shook my head and looked again.

I slowly pulled the sheet off of... a picture of a ravine in a forest. Yeah! But it was one of those...

You know those posts you sometime see on the internet of a 3D picture? You know, the ones where the person takes a picture of themselves, but when you move the mouse, the background moves?

Yeah. That’s what I’m seeing right now, but so much clearer!

Just hold on, little girl. I’m trying to figure out how to come in there and get you.

Okay.

I need to hurry, but take my time too. I can’t just run in there... out there... *whatever...* in my panties, right? And I need my boots too!

Just try to relax.

Okay. It’s real tight and I cain’t hardly breathe.

I know, baby. I’m coming. It just might take a minute or two.

Okay.

I sat down on my snowsuit and quickly got my feet into the heavy socks. I stood up and reached for the suit, but stopped.

I need my boots. I know the dark-blue nylon snowsuit has this definite rustle when I walk, and that might wake memaw up.

I went over to the door, glanced at the oval showing the snow and ravine through it, and opened the door as quietly as I could. It was warmer out here than in my room and I looked over the atrium railing to see why.

There were glowing coals down there in the main room coming from the big fireplace. Of course, there was. Memaw knows how to fix it so it won't burn the house down!

It's dark out here, but the glow gives me a little bit of light to see where I'm going. I tiptoed past memaw's door and down the stairs to the first floor. I moved carefully not to hit my shin, stub a toe, or step on anything out of place.

That couldn't happen here anyway. Memaw's even more OCD than I am!

"A place for everything, and everything in its place." she'd said as she told me to take off my wet boots and put them right next to the door against the wall.

I remembered where they were, snatched them up, and started back up the stairs. Just as I got close to memaw's door...

I cain't breave, Alicia!

Hold on. I'm coming.

I thought I heard something in there, and tiptoed down the atrium to my door. Once inside, I carefully closed the door, set the boots next to the chair, and pulled the snowsuit on.

I sat down, slipped into the boots as fast as I could and pulled the laces tight. I had to hurry, but make sure I had everything I might need. I felt around in my pockets and felt the little flashlight and the pocket-knife. When I started for the parka hanging next to the door, I again glanced at the oval over there in the corner.

To get in there, I was gonna have to break whatever was covering that pneumonia hole. It was gonna get cold in here and I was gonna have to explain myself to memaw.

Not only that, but the noise will probably have her running to see what happened.

Alicia?

She sounds desperate. I need to go.

I grabbed the poker, got in front of the big oval thing, and gritted my teeth. I have to do this. I *have* to. I brought the poker up in both hands, pointed the heavy hooked end at the oval, and lunged.

And fell on my face in the snow with my legs half-in and half-out of my room! There was nothing there! Then how did the cold... that I was feeling on my nose and ears by the way... not get into my room?

Too many questions, and no time for answers. I pushed back into the room through the oval, grabbed the parka, and stepped back through. I pulled the parka on while I looked down into the narrow ravine and saw the kinda pathway I needed to take.

I'm coming, baby girl.

Hurry?

I walked, slid, and jogged to the bottom of the ravine. Then, I stopped for a minute just looking.

Say something.

What?

Okay that sounded like...

I turned slightly toward the other side of the ravine at an angle to the left and started walking as fast as I could through the thin layer of snow.

Talk to me.

'Bout what?

Anything. What's your name?

I ain't gots a name.

Didn't your...

I had to stop there. She didn't know her mom, or even if she still had one. Never met her.

I need to call you something, baby girl. You can choose your own name.

I can?

Yeah.

I shifted a bit more once at the top of the ravine and started jogging through the woods on the other side. I know that might not be the best idea. If I started sweating, I would need to shed at least the parka.

You can pick one, ya know?

But I don't know what names is! Can I use yers?

Nope. If somebody calls that name, we'd both have to answer. You need your own name, and something people will know that it's you.

Like what?

Good question. It needs to be a cute name. Yeah, I haven't seen her yet, and she might have horns and a little tail, but she *sounds* cute.

Thanks!

And some old name would just weigh her down. I mean, "Agnes"? "Bertha"? "Emogine"? Names like that just don't... sing!

Like my little friend Amy Lee. She's the tiny little girl who lives down the street from me and always has a smile and wave when I drive in from school. A name like that would...

Amilee? That's a purdy name! Can I have that one?

Amilee? Sure!

Okay.

I was getting close... I think. It sounded stronger at least.

Can you hear anything?

Like what?

Like boots crunching through the snow.

Nope. Please hurry!

I'm trying, but it's like looking for a needle...

I stopped.

Okay, I need you to listen.

To what?

I'm gonna whistle and you tell me if you hear it.

What's a...

You'll know when you hear it.

I have a nice, loud whistle I use to get attention from across a parking lot, call a cab, or signal a friend from a long way away. That won't do here.

If I send it out there and some lion, tiger or bear hears it, I'm gonna be in big trouble. But...

I started whistling a tune I liked from the album I bought last week and walked in the direction I thought she... Amilee might be.

What's that?

You hear this?

That's purdy. That you?

Probably. Is it getting closer?

Yeah!

I kept walking and whistling until...

I seen a shadow go past the hole!

I stopped, backed up one step at a time, and...

The light go 'ed away again!

I'm here, Amilee. Now I just need to find the hole you're stuck in.

Okay.

I pulled out the little flashlight, twisted the base, and the LED came on. I moved it along the ground just looking for...

What's that?

What?

I seen a light.

That's my flashlight.

It is? I seen it!

Okay, I'm going to move it back and forth along the ground. When you see it...

Stop!

I did. Then, I moved it up just a little to a small hole that couldn't be more than two inches across.

That's it, Alicia! Ya finded me!

I got on my knees and shined the light inside the hole. It looked like it went in at an angle, but I didn't know how deep. I got lower and lower, shining the light in a little at a time, until...

A lizard! And not just any lizard. Amilee!

I'm a lizard?

A very pretty one, baby.

And she really is! I mean, she has the cutest little face with her little short snout, big dark eyes, and the little horns stuck in the top of the little hole she was stuck in. Her tiny scales were... like... blue-green. Turquoise! Beautiful!

How the heck did you even get in there?

I were a bunch lit'ler when I come in.

Ah! You grew, right?

Yeah. Can ya get me out?

I think so. I'm going to have to dig you out and you might get some dirt in your face, but...

That don't matter. If'n ya can get me outta here, I can get rid a the dirt somehow later, right?

Right. Okay, just close your eyes and let me start digging.

Okay.

I tried to remove the dirt around the hole with my fingers, but it was that sticky, clay stuff I always hated. Mom likes it for gardening, but it makes it tough to dig a hole. You have to bang the shovel on the ground and scrape it off with your fingers.

I pulled out the pocket knife, opened it, and began cutting slabs out below where Amilee was trapped. I figured if I could carve a bigger tunnel...

You ain't gonna hurt me, are ya?

Not if I can help it. Just be as still as you can and I'll try to be gentle.

Okay.

Now, you have to imagine me on my knees with that thin flashlight in my mouth, digging in the dirt at night, and talking to a tiny, beautiful lizard all at the same time. Nobody would believe it!

You think I'm boo-ful?

I think you are the most beautiful little lizard in the whole wide world, Amilee!

Thanks.

I chuckled around the flashlight and kept digging. I got down close to where she was looking up at me with her tiny claws trapped under her head.

I'm gonna try and cut the clay out from under you now, baby. Just be still as you can, okay?

Okay.

Amilee was wedged in there tight. To get her out, I'm gonna have to slice a slab of this sticky clay out from under her without sticking her tiny body. If I get this done, I'm gonna sign up for brain surgery next semester!

First, I need to widen the hole I'd already dug so I can use two hands. I knew I had to hurry because of the little grunts and pants I was hearing from the tiny lizard, the walls literally closing in on her.

The hole I dug was now around ten inches across and I took as much of the top out as I could in the limited time I had. I thought about trying to come at it from the top, but there were roots that I would have had to contend with. It would be better to dig out under her, let her get some breathing space, and pull her out that way.

With that in mind, I carefully inserted my rather sharp knife blade into the clay just under her little left arm, and pushed down. It was like cutting thick wax with a butter knife.

I persisted and the knife finally cut down to where I had the bottom of the hole. I turned the blade sideways and started in again but to the right and along the bottom of the hole. If I did this right, I could maybe

pull a slice of the clay out at a time and Amilee would be able to help me free her.

I saw the little lizard following my work with her eye, and grinned. It must be frightening to be in this predicament.

It am. But yer here now and I ain't got no more worries.

I slipped the knife blade into the clay close to her little body and, at a diagonal, pushed it across to the point where I stopped.

Let me know if I get too close, baby. I don't want to accidentally cut you.

You ain't.

She has confidence in my abilities. That's good!

I carved out a piece of clay at the corner, wedged the knife into the cut I'd made from her tiny body down, and carefully using the knife as a crowbar, wiggled the slab of clay.

The idea was to break it free under her, pull it out, and then work on the next slab. I heard Amilee grunt again, and got an idea.

Can you blow all the air out for me, Amilee? If you can, it might give me a little more room to get this out.

Yeah. But I gots lots a stuff in my fire-bag too. Want me ta blow it out?

Fire bag? Yeah. If you can blow all of it out, it'll give me more room.

Okay.

I got set, a finger in the wedge I'd cut out, and my other hand manipulating the knife. Of course, I couldn't see what I was doing, my head back and the flashlight shining around at the brush.

Then, I heard the belch. It sounded so cute and I felt the pressure on the slab of clay loosen. I wiggled it and pulled until I felt it give. I pulled the sticky slab a bit more, and then it hit me.

It smelled like a sewage treatment plant! Like somebody farted into a bag, let it sit in the sun for a week, and then released it into an elevator! My eyes were watering!

What the Hell was that?

I dumped the fire-bag like ya told me. I do somp'thin' wrong?

No baby. It's okay.

I managed to pull the slab out, set it to the side of the hole, and shined the light back inside. She looked so pitiful! Her little leg now hung into the place where the slab was, and her eyes were closed. I also saw a little tear forming in the one on the right.

I stinked, di'nt I.

Listen to me, baby girl. I can't lie. Your breath smells bad, but only to me... humans. Do you smell it?

No.

So, it's natural to you, right?

Yeah.

Well, maybe I have a smell that you don't like and I can't help it either. Are you gonna hate me for smelling bad?

No! Yer my friend!

And you're mine. So, if I smell that, I'm gonna just say, 'Hey! I know Amilee's close by! I'm gonna run over and hug her!'

Hug!

I'll show you when you get bigger.

Okay.

The slab I removed had her little leg free and some of her chest too. If I can get a larger piece to move, I might be able to pull her out.

I got the knife and began to slowly insert it just beyond her other tiny claw. Then, I again pushed it across until it met the bottom of the hole I'd already enlarged. I turned the blade to the side and sliced through the clay until it came out where the other slab had been.

I stuck the blade back into the clay where I started and, with my other hand, held the other side of what I hoped would be the last slab of clay I had to remove, and wedged the blade a little. It moved some, but...

Okay, Amilee. I need you to blow it all out again.

But it gonna stink!

That's okay, baby. It's your stink and I love it!

Ya do?

Well, maybe not love, but it's you, right?

Yeah.

So, blow it all out and let's get you outta there.

Okay.

Heard the little burp, prayed for a cold, and shifted the block of clay soil back and forth while pulling gently. It gave and...

I can breave!

Good!

I looked in, blinked at the smell, and saw the little lizard with her claws hanging down, half of her little body out of the clay, and a smile you cannot mistake on her tiny lizard face.

You ready to get out of there?

Yeah!

I reached in, cupped her little body between two fingers just behind her tiny shoulders, and started tugging gently.

Let me know if this hurts, Amilee.

Okay.

She didn't make a peep while I tugged gently to the left and right until...

It lettin' me...

She slipped out of the clay and I brought her out between those fingers.

“Hi.” I whispered as the pretty but dirty little lizard smiled up at me from my palm.

Then, she fluttered tiny wings and snuggled into my hand like she belonged there.

Chapter 3

“Pursuit, monsters, and questions...”

I pulled the little body up and into my chest while I covered her with my other hand. I didn’t know lizards had wings, but I don’t know a lot of things.

You feel cold.

I is!

I felt the shiver from her little body and unzipped my parka. While unzipping the snowsuit beneath it...

I’m gonna take you home and get you all warmed up, okay?

Okay.

Lizards are cold-blooded. I’ve known that since grade school. But something in the back of my mind told me this little girl lizard was not a *normal* lizard. I mean, wings? This tiny lizard should be warm and I needed to keep her warm until I knew why she wasn’t. Confusing? You bet!

I got her settled inside my snowsuit just above the belt around my waist, zipped it and the parka, and took the flashlight out of my mouth. I twisted it to shut it off and dropped it into my pocket.

I’d just picked up my knife to try to clean at least a little of the sticky clay off, when I heard the sound of horses.

They were coming this way, and...

I’m skeered.

Don’t be, baby. I’ve got you.

Okay.

Should I just step out, flag them down, and ask them for help with my tiny girl? Something inside told me no. That something also said, “Hide!”

So, I did. I crawled into the brush and as far into the forest as I could. There were a few brambles, but the parka and snowsuit kept

most of the damage to the material instead of my delicate skin. I got low and looked out toward the snow-covered area where the noise was still coming from.

Through the undergrowth, I saw movement, and that the horses I heard had stopped. Then, voices.

“Are you certain, Percy?”

“Yes, my lord.” came a second voice, seemingly a little younger than the deep baritone of the first. “There was a light. I swear it.”

“Like that of a fire?”

“No, my lord. More as if one were to capture the moon. It was moving about as if alive! I swear to you, my lord. It must be witchcraft!”

“Or a source we are not aware of.” the deep voice replied calmly. Then, in a stern lecturing tone, “One should not throw witchcraft about as if it answers all questions, Percy. There may be a reason for the light of which we are not aware.” He paused, and then, “I thought I heard talking, Percy.”

“I didn’t hear anything, my lord.”

It was quiet for a moment, and then...

“I want you to come back here in the morning with two others and track this light to its source.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Let’s get back. The moons are fading and there are monsters lurking.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

I heard the horses trotting away and took a peek. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, and then remembered.

Monsters?

Is they mon’ters here, Alicia?

I don’t know, baby. Maybe we oughta get back to my room before we find out, right?

Yeah.

I have two problems now. Okay, three.

If I try to get my little butt out of these brambles, it's gonna make noise. With the possibility of unknown monsters running around, that may not be the best thing. Besides, it's wrecking the nylon in my parka and there are puffs of stuffing already coming out.

Then, there's the problem with the men who'll be coming this way in the morning... however long away morning is. They're gonna find the tracks I left and follow them all the way to the oval door in the trunk of that tree I came out of.

Third? Memaw. How am I gonna explain any of this to her? I mean, it's like, "Hey, memaw. I was just wandering around in the middle of the night in my snowsuit and just happened to step through that oval doorway you left in my room. Oh! And I have a baby lizard too! And she has wings! Isn't she cute?"

Yeah. That'll go over well.

Actually, there's a fourth problem. The moon... *moons* are sinking in the... east?

No! The sun sets in the west. If the sun is over your left shoulder in the afternoon, you're facing north, right? And the moon, or moons, set there too! So...

Anyway, it's gonna get dark and I have to find that tree on top of the ravine I came out of... and without leaving even more tracks... and without making too much noise... and without using my magical flashlight! Geez!

Hang on, Amilee.

Okay.

I slowly untangled myself from the brambles using my arms to push them out of the way. My gloves were still in my pocket and I know those thorns just begged to stick my tender skin!

I looked out at where I came into the forest as I stepped out of the brush near the hole where I found Amilee.

Yep. Even in the faint light of the final moon, I could see where I tramped through the snow to get here. I might as well leave a note! “Hey! Over here!”

Okay, the next problem needs to be looked at now. Those tracks need to go and I can’t risk leaving any more. How I’m to do that is so far out of my wheelhouse, the boat’s sinking!

Indians do it though. They just step in their own tracks and drag a branch after them. Uh... don’t they? They do that in movies, right?

Maybe not. Now, if I can find my way back to the side of the ravine where I came up here, I could maybe use the branch trick there. I started back while trying to step on something other than the patches of snow.

I followed my own tracks, too clear even in the pale light that was slowly dying, until...

“If you move, I will shoot.”

I froze. The voice was a woman’s, but neither old nor young. Kinda felt like she must be about my age. I raised both hands slowly to about shoulder height and took a deep breath.

“I’m unarmed and I don’t have any money on me.”

“I don’t want your gold.” she replied harshly. “I want to know why you’re sculking about in my forest.”

“*Your* forest?” I responded, maybe a bit too sarcastically. “I didn’t know I was trespassing.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked, again kinda harshly. “Poaching?”

“What? No!” Okay, this is getting out of hand. “I said I don’t have any weapons, so how could I be hunting anything? Who are you anyway?”

“I will ask the questions!”

Okay, Officer Karen!

“Where are you going?”

“Home!” I replied angrily. “I’m just going home!”

“Where?”

“Why should I tell you?” I responded, still angrily. “You might run back to those guys tracking me and tell them where I am! No thanks!”

“Who?”

“How do I know!” I replied. “They saw my light and came to investigate. They said they’d be coming back in the morning to follow my tracks! I was just now trying to figure out how to keep them away when you show up and threaten to shoot me in the back! Now, can I go home?”

I waited, but got no answer.

“You there?”

Nothing.

I turned my head in the direction I thought she’d be, and nobody was there. I didn’t even hear her leave! Worse, I didn’t *feel* her there either. Usually I can tell, but not this time.

I lowered my hands slowly while I looked around. I didn’t see anybody so I tried to find my tracks again.

It was getting darker and that would really put a crimp in finding that doorway back to my room. I had to hurry.

I thought about my flashlight, but couldn’t risk it. I walked a bit farther and saw the footprint in the snow that matched my boots. Good. I can still...

Then again, that footprint will...

Just get back to the door, Alicia. Then we can figure out what to do after.

Yeah.

You still listening in?

Yeah. Sorry.

No problem, kiddo. You can't help it, right?

Yeah.

Just hang in there with me.

Okay.

We plodded on, my little hitchhiker and me. If I hadn't taken a break, I would have missed the turn. I leaned against a tree looking up at the clouds gathering and making it even darker, and looked around for anybody ready to ambush me again. That's when I saw my footprint a few feet away in the patch of snow to the right.

I followed, found a couple more, and then the ravine.

There was the way I came up, and the footprints just glaring back at me! Then, the tracks across the narrow ravine to the angled path on the other side. I followed it up with my eyes and saw...

That's not good. There it is in the trunk of that incredibly tall tree. The flicker of the fire I left there was showing the whole world where I live!

Okay, I gotta go! It's one thing to leave tracks. It's another to leave the light on for anybody to visit!

I made my way down to the bottom of the little ravine, all but ran to the other side, and climbed up. I got to the base of that tree, looked in at the flicker, and then back out to see if anybody was following.

I didn't see any movement, but that didn't mean they weren't out there watching! I stepped through the oval...

Okay, I *tried* to step into my room, but something was holding me back. It came from... Amilee?

I cupped both hands around the parka where my little lizard was staying warm, and tried again. It was tough, but finally I pushed through, grabbed the black sheet, and draped it over the frame. When I turned around...

"Hang the parka, Alicia. And take off those muddy boots."

Remember what I said about problem number three? Well, here we are. Memaw sat on that chair in front of the fire I'd left, and she was glaring at me.

Alicia? Are we safe now?

Not sure, sweetie. Gimme a minute.

Okay.



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