

RICA BAPTISTA



THE BOX OF POSSIBILITIES



ILLUSTRATED BY

Janet Costa Bates Gladys Jose

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To LeAnna, Cameron, and Xander.
Wishing you a world filled with
wonderful possibilities.

JCB

To Miranda.
May you always see the magic
in what's possible.

GJ

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ONE

Possibilities



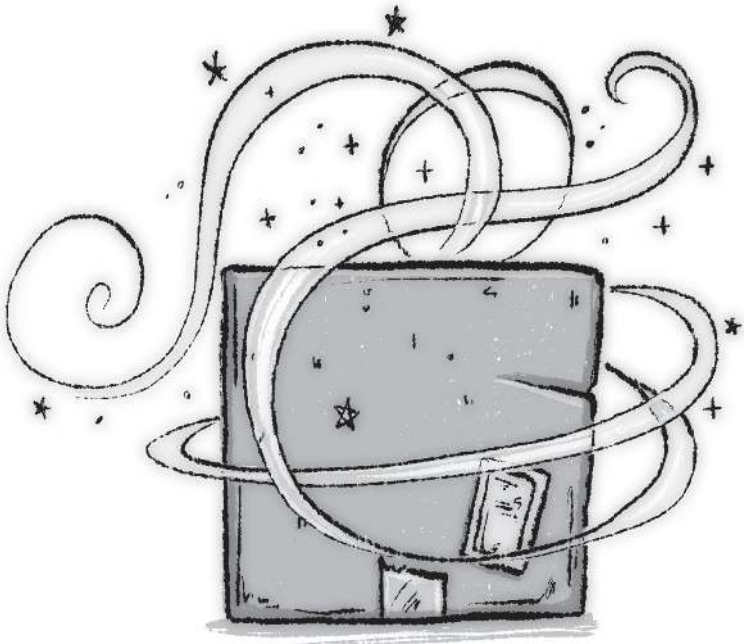
All morning, I watched Serenity walk by the box. She didn't look at it. She didn't pick it up. I don't even think she noticed it was there which, *in my opinion*, made my cousin the weirdest person in the whole entire world.

It was a mysterious . . . sealed-up . . . box. It could contain anything. A magic wand. Radioactive material. Love letters from an alien world. *Anything!*

Yet Serenity completely ignored the box. She paid a lot of attention to other things: she stared

at her phone constantly, she obsessed over her fingernail polish, and it seemed like every day she came up with a different idea about what she was going to be when she grew up. But the box? I don't think she even knew it existed.

To be fair, Momma and Dad hadn't paid much attention to the box, either. This morning Momma used the box to put her feet on when she tied her shoes. Dad tripped over it on his way to work and then just kicked it over to the wall. Didn't they know the secrets to the universe could be in that box?



"It's just a box from your uncle Moose," Momma told me. "He'll be back from his trip later this week, and he'll stay here for a few days before he heads home. I'm sure he'll tell us then what's in the box."

There are normal people, and then there's Uncle Moose. How my mother could stay so calm about a mystery box from Uncle Moose, I'll never know.

"Can we open it?" I asked.

"No," Momma answered. "It's addressed to Uncle Moose."

"So . . . he sent the box to himself?"

"Evidently so," answered Momma.

"And . . . he sent it here?"

Momma nodded.

"Why wouldn't he send it to *his* house?" I asked.

"We're talking about Uncle Moose, remember?" said Momma. "Some things just can't be explained."

A box sent *from* Uncle Moose *to* Uncle Moose and not even sent to his own house sounded kind of strange to me, but it also sounded very Uncle Moose-like.



I went back over to the box and sat next to it. I tried to convince myself that it was just a regular box. It was brown, cardboard, and square. It was the length of three of my feet on one side and three of my feet on the other. It looked like a normal box.

I laid my hands on the box and put my face close to it. I could sense it. It was clearly *not* a normal box.

When Serenity walked by, I asked her, "So, what do you think is in the box?"

"Something for Uncle Moose, obviously."

"I think it's a horse," I told her.

"Sure," she said. (Even though she said "sure," it was clear she didn't mean it.) "Because that's what people do—they put horses into boxes a hundred times smaller than an actual horse. And then mail them across the ocean."

"A miniature horse."

Serenity rolled her eyes and then walked out to the front porch with her nail polish kit.

I should have done myself a favor and not followed her onto the porch, but I had so many ideas about what was in the box that I just had to

share them. "It's a stuffed giraffe, but when you open the box, it turns into a real giraffe."

Serenity sat down on the steps and opened her bottle of sky-blue nail polish.

I sat next to her. "It's about the size of a rolled-up magic carpet, you know."

She admired the fingernail she had just painted and didn't even turn her head toward me.

"It's a car from the future," I said. "It folds up really small so you can carry it with you when you want to walk instead."

Serenity shook her head and then painted clear glitter polish over her blue fingernail.

"You look annoyed," I told her.

"Probably because I am," she answered.

"Is my imagination annoying you?" I asked.

"What do you think?" The look on her face clearly told me that it was.

"Aren't you even a little curious about what's in that box?" I asked her. "That box from *Uncle Moose*?"

"No," she said, finally turning to look at me. "There are a number of logical reasons that Uncle Moose might have sent that box. Maybe he has too

much to bring back. Or maybe it's something fragile and he felt better about shipping it. Or maybe he just doesn't want to carry it through the airport."

Serenity pointed her glittery sky-blue fingernail in the air and kept on talking. "The reason you think there's something unusual in that box is because you have an unusual imagination."

Inside my head, I said, *If it's up to you and your no-imagination self, the world will never have a fold-up car.* Out loud I just said, "I like my imagination."

"Well, imagine all you want," said Serenity, "but it's likely that Uncle Moose sent something very ordinary."

"Ordinary?" I looked at Serenity as if she had lost her mind. "Have you ever even *met* Uncle Moose?"

Serenity ignored me and went back to painting her nails.

The word *ordinary* doesn't belong in the same sentence with Uncle Moose. This was just further proof that Serenity is weird. Very weird.

And not only did I have to share the planet with someone as weird as Serenity, but for one whole week, I was going to have to share my room with her, too.

TWO

Even More Possibilities



Why does Serenity have to stay in my room?" I asked Momma. "What about the spare bedroom?"

"Dad's theater things are in there," answered Momma. "He'll have to get them over to the theater by the time Uncle Moose arrives on Thursday, but having Serenity stay in your room gives him a few more days. Besides, it will help you to make good use of the bunk beds that you begged for."

"That was so *Laini* would have a bed for our sleepovers," I said. "Not Serenity."

"Serenity is your cousin," said Momma with a look that told me I should stop fussing about her staying in my room.

Oh, *garbanzo beans* is what I said in my head. "I'm going to go check on the box" is what I said out loud.

Charley had decided to curl up on top of the box.

"Good guard-kitty," I told him. I'm pretty sure he was just pretending to sleep so no one would know he was actually guarding it. I gave him a scratch behind his ears and then sat by the box and waited for my best friend, Laini, to come over.



When Laini arrived, she gave Charley another scratch behind his ears and sat on the other side of the box. Together, we tried to figure out what was inside.

“Serenity looked annoyed when I told her a car from the future that folds up really small could be in there. And she didn’t believe me about a horse being in there, either,” I said.

“I guess it would have to be a magical horse to fit,” said Laini.

“Like a polka-dotted rainbow unicorn?”

“Exactly,” said Laini. “Or there could be magic ice cream cones in there. Permanently frozen so you can have a cone anywhere, anytime.”

“Rocky road or cookie dough?” I asked her.

Laini thought for a few seconds and then answered, “Both.”

“Good answer,” I said. It was funny how someone who loved vegetables so much could still have a bit of a sweet tooth.

“I wouldn’t mind a magic fork,” I said. “One that could make vegetables disappear just as you put the fork in your mouth.”

"How about a lifetime supply of basketball sneakers?" said Laini.

"I don't think a lifetime supply would fit in the box."

"Umm, magic? Remember?" said Laini. "If a rainbow polka-dotted unicorn could be in there, then *anything* could be in there."

"So many possibilities!" I said. "Maybe there's an intergalactic space alien inside!"

"Whoaaaa," said Laini.

"Though it would probably have air holes if there were really a space alien in there."

"Do space aliens breathe air?" Laini asked.

"I have no idea," I answered.

"Hmmm," we said together.

Laini picked up the box. "It's not too heavy." She started to shake it, but I stopped her.

"Could be something fragile," I told her.

"You're right," she said. "Or if it really is a rainbow polka-dotted unicorn, shaking the box might make it throw up."

"It would probably throw up rainbows, so that's okay."

"True," said Laini. "Hey, maybe there's a million dollars in there."

"Or a million wishes," I said.

"That would be even better than a million dollars," said Laini. She leaned over to smell the box.

"I don't think wishes smell," I said.

"Then how do we figure out what's in here?" asked Laini.

"Or maybe you could just ignore the box," Serenity called out from the front porch. She must have gotten tired of listening to us.

"Isn't it weird that she doesn't want to know what's inside?" whispered Laini.

"That's what *I* said."

"Can we just open the box now?" asked Laini. "I don't think I can wait until Uncle Moose comes back." Uncle Moose isn't really Laini's uncle, but since Laini is my very best friend and we're kind of like family, she calls him Uncle Moose anyway.

"I'm pretty sure it's a federal offense to open mail addressed to someone else." Serenity walked into the house looking at her phone. "Says so right here. It's called mail theft."

No one in the world was faster at looking things up on their phone than Serenity.

"Where is Uncle Moose, anyway?" asked Laini.

"He's visiting Cape Verde," answered Serenity.

"Is he making a movie there?" asked Laini.

Uncle Moose writes movie scripts, and a few of his movies have actually made it onto TV. His last one was about superpowers, and Laini couldn't get enough of it.

"He's just on vacation," said Serenity. "And besides, Uncle Moose works on animated films. You know, cartoons. You don't need to be on location for those."

If there's ever anything that anyone wants to know, all they have to do is ask my fourteen-year-old know-it-all cousin.

"He was going to spend time on the island of Fogo," continued Serenity. "Have you ever heard about the volcano on Fogo? It's called Pico do Fogo."

I knew about Pico do Fogo, but apparently Laini did not.

"A volcano? Did it erupt?" asked Laini, opening her eyes wide.

I gave Laini a “stop talking” look. Asking questions would only encourage Serenity to keep going.

“It last erupted in 2014.” Serenity turned her phone toward us and showed us a video of the Pico do Fogo eruption. It looked both magical and scary. Kind of like fireworks, but with real fire.

“Did you know that the Cape Verde Islands formed millions of years ago from volcanic matter rising up through the ocean?” Serenity was on a roll, but luckily my mother called her into the kitchen.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about the volcano erupting?” asked Laini.

“It happened before we were born,” I reminded her.

Laini took another sniff of the box. “What if there’s lava in here?”

“The volcano eruption looked pretty powerful.” I put my face close to the box. “What if lava spews out superpowers?”

“What if Uncle Moose found some actual superpowers left over from the volcano eruption?” said Laini in an excited whisper.



I jumped up. “What if *that’s* what he sent in the box!”

Laini jumped up, and we both stared at the box of possibilities.

Which now had even *more* possibilities.

THREE

Opposite Day



We were so excited that we ran to the kitchen to tell Momma about our latest idea of what was in the box.

“Guess what’s in the box!” I said.

“The box from Uncle Moose,” Laini said.

My mother put her finger to her lips and pointed to Serenity, who was on Momma’s laptop for a video call with her father.

“But there’s lava,” I told Momma. “With superpowers!”

If someone told me about a box with superpower lava in it, I would be jumping up and down, but Momma just said, “Say hi to Uncle Will.”

I popped my head onto Serenity's shoulder. "Hi, Uncle Will." Inside my head, I shouted, *We've got a box full of superpower lava!* but out loud I said, "Are you guys having fun?"

"We're having a ball," said Uncle Will.

Then he laughed and said, "Serenity, remember when we brought you camping when you were five? We ended up going to the store to buy a blow-up mattress because you refused to sleep on just a sleeping bag. The twins are the total opposite. They want to move here. They said they don't care if they have to sleep on sleeping bags forever."

Jonah and Noah poked their heads into the picture.

"Camping is the best!" said Noah.

"We're going to go fishing!" said Jonah.

"Yup," said Noah. "We're getting ready to buy worms for all the fishies to eat!"

"Maybe I can get them to put the bait on the hook," said Uncle Will. He laughed again and said, "Serenity, you wanted nothing to do with those worms!"

I waited for Serenity to look up fish bait on her phone so she could tell them the best kind of bait