

CHAPTER 1

The racing tractor's name—Calamity—arched over its body in perfect yellow letters. Sally Slick stepped back to get the full effect, a dripping paintbrush clutched in one hand. She frowned and tilted her head this way and that, trying furiously to figure out what was missing. After all the time she'd put in building the tractor, everything needed to be perfect for Calamity's maiden voyage. Too bad the paint job wouldn't cooperate. The whole thing was so frustrating that Sally kicked over the metal bucket holding her precious tools. They spread across the dirt floor of her workshop with a clatter.

“You okay?”

A timid voice came from the back of the old crib barn Sally had taken over after Pa moved all the livestock over near the east field. Someone must have entered the rarely used door tucked behind towers of wooden crates. She whirled around, brushing at her eye. A dust mote must have gotten into it, because it was all watery. If one of her brothers found her weeping like a mush, they'd never let her live it down. Thankfully, it was just Jet.

Her neighbor and oldest friend stepped into the light, showing his teeth in an uncertain grin. His hair stuck out in about twenty-seven different directions simultaneously, and his wrists extended a few inches too far from the sleeves of his hand-me-down shirt. But he was still a couple of inches shorter than Sally, gangly in a way that suggested his arms and legs might be growing faster than the rest of him and he hadn't quite figured out how to handle that.

"Hey, Jet." Sally turned back to the tractor and sighed.

He edged a little farther into the room, eyeing the corners with the kind of reflexive caution developed by the kids at the bottom of the food chain. "Is it safe?" he asked.

She huffed despite herself. Did he think she was going to leap up and bite his head off?

"Are you afraid of random cutthroats or me?" she asked archly. "Of course it's safe, silly. Come over here. I need your opinion; I'm thinking this doesn't look scary enough."

He stepped up beside her, took one look at the inscription, and whooped. "Wait a minute. Her name's Calamity?! That is the coolest thing. Remember that time we played that adventure where Jet Blackwood and Calamity Sue got captured by the natives on an Egyptian dig, and Blackwood had to pick the locks of their shackles with the bones of pharaohs, and—"

"Of course I remember, goof. I was there. That was a good one."

Not that she'd admit it to anyone but Jet. It was one thing to read adventure tales. A lot of people did, and some of the kids at school swore the stories were true. She wasn't so sure herself, but she knew that the Adventures of Jet Blackwood and Calamity Sue was a kids' game. They'd started playing the made-up adventures when they were eight, and it had been okay back then. But now they were fourteen. That was too old to be climbing up trees and pretending they were rope ladders into an ancient civilization, solving mind-bending puzzles left by the ancients, and beating imaginary bad guys into desperate submission.

They were misfits, all right. He thought he was an action hero, and she didn't fit in with any of the other girls at school—they were all into talking about boys and staring at boys and—if they were particularly daring—kissing boys. Sally had six—no, seven, if you counted the baby—brothers. She'd had enough of boys, thank you very much.

In short, she didn't fit in very well with the girls, and she was careful to keep her head down. Naming the tractor after her character was okay, especially since no one knew about the connection. But Jet took things much further than that, and he got picked on for it. He couldn't stop pretending to be an adventure hero, even going so far as to insist that everyone call him by his "hero" name. Although Sally had to admit that if she had a bum first name like Jackson, she might stick with an alias too. She'd been lucky name-wise—her great-grandparents changed their last name to Slick because no one could pronounce Slusarczyk. So she could understand the reasoning. She just didn't have to like it.

Jet responded the same way he always did when she gave him a hard time, shaking it off and continuing on like nothing had happened. "Yeah, it is missing something, isn't it? You should add a man with a whip jumping over the words, and you on the racing tractor in hot pursuit, and me swooping in on a vine."

"A vine? Okay, *Tarzan*." She poked him playfully, nearly knocking him over.

"And maybe some flames! Flames are dangerous!"

His voice cracked in excitement. They both ignored it.

"I could do flames..." she trailed off thoughtfully. Fire had the intimidation factor she was looking for, and she'd seen enough wildfires to know how fast they could move. That was exactly the kind of thing she needed for Calamity: something that suggested speed and danger. "Fire it is. Thanks, Jet."

He nodded happily. “Don’t mention it.” Then he hunkered down in the dust to watch her as she painted. It had always been that way—Sally in the lead and Jet following dutifully along behind. Although Sally wouldn’t have admitted it in public, she wouldn’t have changed it for the world.



By the time the paint dried, they were late for the race, and Sally didn’t want to give the gang any excuse to start without her. The neighborhood boys hadn’t wanted to let her race in the first place until her brothers made them. Then she started winning, and everyone wanted her out. Even her brothers. But they couldn’t oust her without losing face; it would mean they knew they could never beat her. And with Calamity on the track, they never would.

“We’re late!” she shouted to Jet, leaping onto the seat. The well oiled springs jounced her gently to a stop, and she paused to inhale the familiar scent of kerosene and metal and paint. Not for the first time, she wished she could mechanize herself, become a metal girl full of gears and motors of infinite variation. But that was silly talk. She shook herself back to the present. There was a race to win. “Hop on!”

He leapt to the running board she’d installed on the side, clutching onto the back of her shoulder. “Calamity and Jet ride again!”

“Don’t call me that,” she said, turning the motor on with a satisfying hiss and rumble. “I’m Sally Slick, and someday everyone will know my name. I’m going to invent machines, and I’m going to be famous. Famoser than Calamity Sue ever was, even if she was a real person. Which she isn’t.”

“Whatever you say, Sal.”

CHAPTER 2

Sally threw the racing tractor into gear. It accelerated smoothly due to her new piston design, with no lurch or bounce that might lose valuable seconds in a race. The engine purred. By this point, Sally was so excited that she couldn't help purring a little herself. No more fighting with her brothers for Pa's old tractor. It was about time; she'd been working on Calamity for almost a year-and-a-half. All that scrounging for parts, all the chores she'd traded for bits of metal, all the time spent repurposing parts meant for motorcars and railway trains—it was all finally going to pay off. She couldn't decide whether she wanted to shout or quake in her boots. She settled for driving like a maniac.

The dirt track where the kids of Nebraska Township, Illinois, gathered to race their tractors was only a mile away. Calamity kicked up a cloud of dust as they passed the mail carrier and his old horse-drawn buggy.

"Darned kids!" he yelled. Then he started coughing his lungs out.

"Hey, mister! Don't you know it's 1914? Get a motorcar, or get off the road!" Sally retorted, riding high on a wave of preemptive triumph.

“Sally,” Jet hissed. “Be nice.”

“I don’t want to be nice.” The words came out fierce as she hunched over the steering wheel. “And I don’t want to be a proper young lady either. I’m tired of being told what I can and cannot do!”

“I wasn’t telling you anything like that.”

“Yeah, well...” Sally trailed off. Her palms were wet, and once she stopped to think about it, she realized she was scared. What if this didn’t work—if Calamity didn’t fly off the starting line like she was supposed to? It meant she was nothing special. She’d never go anywhere other than Nebraska Township; her dreams of adventure would amount to nothing. Her whole world hinged on the outcome of this race, and the pressure was getting to her. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

“Don’t mention it,” he replied cheerily. “You’re gonna knock ’em dead, kid.”

“*Don’t* call me ‘kid.’”

When she turned down the lane and crested the hill that bordered the track, her heart sank. Everyone else was already there—about twenty boys ranging from age ten to eighteen—clustered around four racing tractors. As she roared up, the boys tilted their hats back, chewed blades of grass, and threw looks of skepticism her way, but she was used to that. She figured it was only to be expected when you were the only girl in a group of boys, and you had a tendency to beat them.

She pulled to a stop beside the twins, Isaiah and Henry. Henry stuck his tongue out and crossed his eyes. He was barely a year older than her, but he made a show of it whenever possible. Probably because he was the youngest of her brothers—other than the new baby—and she was the only person he could pick on without getting pummeled. It was kind of funny sometimes. The rest of the time, she wanted to knock his block off. But today, she had bigger things to think about.

“I’m not too late to get into the race, am I?” asked Sally.

Isaiah checked his notepad. Regardless of the number of racers, he carefully scheduled and organized each tractor race, compiling statistics and calculating odds. No project could go wrong with Isaiah's planning at the helm. Pa had even begun to use his new crop rotation plan, making him the only farmer in their township who took orders from a fifteen-year-old. It would have made him a laughingstock if yields hadn't gone up 25%. As it stood, the rest of the town wanted on board with the new system.

"No," he said slowly. "I don't suppose you are."

"She's late! She can't get in!"

Eugene Falks stomped over with his thumbs in the pockets of his overalls and a scowl on his lean, horsey face. He was taller than most men, even though he was the same age as the twins, and infamous for making his classmates eat dirt when the teachers weren't looking. He picked on Jet a lot, because no matter how many times Sally told Jet to avoid the Falks Gang like the plague, he refused to listen. Eugene would start picking on some younger kid, and before she knew it, Jet was there trying to stop him. It was brave, sure, but what kind of loony keeps picking fights he can never win?

So Eugene would pound Jet into pulp, and then he'd pound the little kid too, and nothing would be gained. She hated it, but what could she do? Falks and his gang already had it in for her for some unknown reason. The best thing to do was stay under the radar, even if she hated herself for it.

But now that she was behind the wheel of Calamity? For the first time, she found herself telling Eugene Falks exactly what was on her mind.

"You're just worried you'll eat my dust again, Falks," she said. "And with Calamity up and running, you just might."

He gaped. So did the rest of the boys, even the ones too old to be pushed around by the Falks Gang. They probably would have been less surprised if she'd grown a second head. No one talked to Eugene Falks like that, and especially not some scrawny, pigtailed girl in her brother's hand-me-down overalls.

She took advantage of the shock to press on. "Come on; sign me up."

"She missed the sign in," Eugene said to Isaiah, turning his back on her. "You know the rules."

"Well..." Isaiah said, drawing out the word uncertainly.

The argument was drawing attention, or maybe everyone just wanted a good look at Calamity. Sally hadn't let anyone other than Jet see the tractor before she was done, although she was pretty sure her brothers had snuck into the workshop for a peek at some point. Her sixteen-year-old brother, Wil, had a knack with simple mechanics. There wasn't a lock he couldn't pick if you gave him enough time. Regardless, the rest of the boys kept drifting closer and closer like they were in the grips of an out-of-control Hoover vacuum.

"It's too late," Eugene persisted. "Disqualified."

Henry stuck his tongue out at Eugene too. If he wasn't her brother, Sally would have hugged him.

"There's a rule..." Isaiah trailed off again, looking between Eugene's ruddy face and Sally's blotchy one.

"You haven't even lined up yet!" she exclaimed. "This is stupid! If you'd already started, fine, but all you were doing was sitting around and scratching your bottoms like Neanderthals!"

"Hey!" Wil stepped up and smacked her on the back of the head. "Button your lip, missy."

"Who are you calling 'missy'?" demanded Sally.

"The rules state..." Isaiah tried to break in.

"If she's in, I'm not racing. Who's with me?" Eugene exclaimed.

Everyone fell silent just in time to hear Jet murmur under his breath, “His own mom’s not with him.” After a moment of shocked silence, snickers began to spread through the crowd. Henry laughed so hard that something came out his nose, and that only made them laugh harder.

Even Sally began to giggle until Eugene took one step forward, cocked an arm, and punched Jet right in the mouth. It wasn’t a weak love tap, either. This was a full-on, cock-the-arm, strike-hard-enough-to-knock-the-head-back punch. The back of Jet’s skull banged into the flames on Calamity’s side. There was a loud clang as his head struck the iron casing, and then he crumpled to the ground, blood spurting from his nose.

“You...you dirty rotten louse!” Sally shrieked, her fists clenched. She’d never been so angry before. Sure, she knew confronting Eugene was one of the stupidest things she’d ever done, but she couldn’t help herself. Her arms felt like lead, and once again she wished for hands of metal just so she could bash his teeth in. The whole world narrowed until it was just her and her target, and she shook with adrenaline. “I’m gonna teach you a lesson.”

“You and what army, you pantywaist?” Eugene leered down at her. And yes, he was twice her size, and no, she’d never been in a real fight before, but she’d had it. Someone had to stand up to him, and if no one else was going to do it, it would just have to be her.

“Stop,” Jet mumbled, pushing up weakly from the ground. It sounded like he was talking through a mouthful of jam, and gore streaked his face. His split lip had already begun to puff up like a balloon. Tears streaked down his face; lines of blood segmented his shirt. It was not a pretty picture.

“I’m tired of him picking on people. I’m tired of running scared.” The words tumbled out of Sally’s mouth, furious and unstoppable. “I’m tired of waiting for somebody else to do something. Because none

of you will.” She glared at the boys assembled in a semi-circle, jostling for the best view of the fight to come. The Falks Gang—all three of them—just grinned at her, but some of the other boys had the decency to look ashamed. Her brothers shuffled their feet and looked sheepish until her brother John finally stepped forward. With James in the city looking for work, he was the eldest. He rarely exercised the power that came with that, but when he did, his word was law.

“That’s enough, Sally,” he said. The words came out gentle, but with finality. “Jet needs patching up. Go and take care of him.”

“Why? Because I’m a *girl*? I’m so sick of—”

He broke in before she could wind herself up into a frenzy again. “No, because you’re his *friend*. Isn’t that more important than vengeance?”

“But...” She trailed off weakly. She hated that Eugene was getting away with the same old garbage again, but John had a point. This wasn’t about what she wanted. It was about the kid at her feet with a probably-broken nose, and he needed help, and that’s what heroes did, wasn’t it? They did what needed doing. So although it stung her pride, she backed off, dropping down to a crouch beside Jet and helping him up. Blood still streamed out of his nose, so she pulled a spare handkerchief from her pocket. It was streaked with black smudges of oil, but it was better than nothing. She handed it to him.

“Yeah, tough girl,” said Eugene. “Go put on your apron and take care of the baby. We don’t want you here anyway.”

“I forgot my apron,” she shot back. “Can I borrow yours, pansy?”

“I’m gonna...” He thrust forward, fists cocked for another go, but this time her brothers got in the way. John grabbed one of his arms and Carl the other. The twins stepped into the space between Eugene and Sally, and Wil shoved her toward Calamity’s driver’s seat.

“I think now would be a good time to get out of here,” he said. “Jet, can you hold on right here so you don’t get thrown off?” He guided Jet’s hand to the shiny steel bar that ran across the back of the seat.

Jet blinked his watery eyes, which were already beginning to swell along with his mouth, and nodded. He said something that sounded like: "Sure. Thanks."

"Good. Now skedaddle," Wil said. "We'll make sure Eugene knows he won't get away with that again."

Sally shook her head, but she started the engine. Her brothers meant well, but they just didn't understand. Their display of power here meant that she and Jet would have to watch their backs even more now. Her brothers couldn't protect them every second, and even if they could, she wouldn't have asked them to. That wasn't life. And Eugene wasn't going to stop until Sally and Jet stood up to him for real. She realized that now. He was the kind of boy who fed on fear, and she was tired of being scared.

But that would have to wait for the moment. She buried the pedal, and Calamity surged forward. The boys scattered out of the way, while Eugene and his buddies jeered and laughed.

"Coward! Sissy!" they called.

"Don't listen to them," Jet said, his consonants turning into mush in his damaged mouth.

It took her a moment to figure out what he'd said, and then she shrugged. "Course I won't." But she was lying. Deep down, she wondered if maybe she *was* a coward. Because she'd talked the talk, but did that really count if you didn't walk the walk along with it?