

Magic Elizabeth

written by Norma Kassirer

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Chapter Two: A Strange Lady

a breakfast serials story

THE STORY SO FAR : With her parents away on a business trip and her caretaker, Mrs. Chipley, called away on a family emergency, Sally arrives at a spooky old house to stay with her great Aunt Sarah, whom she has never met before.

Sally held her breath as Mrs. Chipley pulled the old-fashioned bell beside the door. Oh, how she wished that she could turn right now and run down the steps, along the path, out of that shadowy garden, and somehow, back to her own safe, familiar home.

But of course, there would be no one there. There was nothing she could do but wait here on the porch.

Something moved inside the house. Footsteps were approaching the door. A light suddenly went on inside. The big door slowly creaked open. Inside, standing in the harsh orange light from an overhead bulb, stood a very old lady. Her hair, pulled back from her wrinkled face, was gray, and she was dressed entirely in black. She stood in a bent-over position, holding one hand pressed against her back. Sally stared up at her.

"How do you do," the lady said. Her voice sounded every bit as rusty as the voice of the iron gate.

"How d'do," answered Mrs. Chipley politely.

"Hello," whispered Sally.

"You must be Mrs. Chipley," said the lady, "and Sally," she added, looking down at her.

Sally nodded.

The thin, long-nosed face of the strange lady seemed to have settled ages ago into a permanent frown. When her mouth moved briefly in perhaps a try at a smile, Sally felt it was not the gate but the odd smile that creaked.

"Well, Sally, I'm your Aunt Sarah. You'd both better step in out of the rain. "

"No, no, I'll be on my way," said Mrs. Chipley. "I've got a train to make tonight."



"Very well," said Aunt Sarah. "Thank you for bringing Sally, Mrs. Chipley."

"Good-bye then, honey," said Mrs. Chipley, moving impulsively back toward the door and enfolding Sally in her comfortable clasp. Sally flung her arms around the plump neck. "Oh, take me with you," she yearned to cry. But again she did not say it. Mrs. Chipley kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear, "Don't you worry, honey, everything'll be all right." Then, pressing Sally's hand, she turned and hurried off into the rain and darkness.

Aunt Sarah hadn't mentioned tea at all. "Poor Mrs.

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Chipley,” thought Sally, “at least she’d like to be offered some.”

“Sally, take your suitcase and step inside, please. There is a draft from the door, and I’m afraid Shadow will catch cold,” said Aunt Sarah sharply.

Shadow? wondered Sally. Who was Shadow? But she did not dare to ask.

Sally stepped hesitantly into the hallway of the strange house. The door swung closed behind her. From somewhere in the darkness, which seemed to fill all the house beyond the orange light, there came a most curious sound, a sort of bad-tempered yowl, which caused Sally to start in surprise and fright. This was followed by a petulant cough.

“There now, you see,” said Aunt Sarah, “poor Shadow’s coughing! Come here, Shadow.”

Out of the darkness, into the pool of light, there stepped a very large, very black cat. It narrowed its eyes at Sally, flattened its ears, and hissed.

“Is that Shadow?” asked Sally.

“Yes,” said Aunt Sarah.

The cat, golden eyes gleaming up at Sally in an unfriendly way, rubbed up against Aunt Sarah, who reached down to touch the top of its black head with her long, skinny fingers. With her stooped figure and her gray hair pulled tightly back, she looked just like a witch. One thin strand, perhaps loosened by the wind Sally had brought in with her, straggled over her hollow cheek.

Sally felt sure that she’d never be staying here if her mother knew what it was really like.

Suddenly very tired, she moved uncertainly into the hall and, not knowing what else to do, set down her suitcase.

“Sally!” cried her aunt, so sharply that Sally jumped. “I should think at your age you would know better. Look,” said Aunt Sarah, pointing to a spot on the rug near Sally’s feet.

Sally, bewildered and unhappy, did so, but it was very difficult to see anything in the dim hallway. “Dirt!” said Aunt Sarah impatiently. “On my rug! We’re going to have to make

some rules, and the first one is,”—she spoke very sharply and distinctly—“Wipe your feet on the mat before coming in!”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Sally, but her aunt brushed past her, opened the door of a narrow closet, and brought out a broom. She began to sweep the rug angrily, as if she wanted to sweep Sally out too. Sally half expected her to leap onto the broom, with the black cat behind, and soar away into the night. Her eyes misted with tears as she wiped her feet on the mat near the door.

“She doesn’t want me here,” thought Sally in despair. She stood on the mat, feeling awkward and very lonely. She felt a lump beginning in her throat, and her feet were wet and uncomfortable. She sneezed.

At last her aunt looked up from her sweeping. “You have slippers in there?” She indicated the suitcase. Sally nodded.

“Take them out.” Sally opened the suitcase with nervous fingers, found her fuzzy pink slippers, removed her shoes, and put the slippers on. It did feel better.

“Leave the shoes on the mat,” ordered her aunt.

They made their way down a long shadowy passageway. Aunt Sarah pushed open a door at the end of the hall and Sally followed her into the kitchen.

Tall cupboards of dark wood loomed over them. There was an enormous stone fireplace, quite empty. On the mantel stood a friendly looking little clock shaped like a church. A small gold bell in the steeple moved quickly back and forth. You almost could not look at it without smiling. Sally began to feel just the tiniest bit better.

to be continued ...

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