

Chapter One

“Hurry *up*, Ortega,” called Dr. Susan. “We’re going to be late for school!”

“I can’t find my knapsack,” Ortega replied in a muffled voice. He lay on his back with his head under the bed, being as perfectly still as he could be and not looking for his knapsack at all.

“Ortega?” Dr. Susan peered under the bed.

He closed his eyes.

“We talked about this,” she reminded him gently. “You said you’d try.”

He began to snore.

Dr. Susan regarded him thoughtfully for a long minute before reaching down to give his big bare feet a vigorous tickle. When his snores turned into reluctant chuckles, she stood up, walked over to his desk and began making notes.

Ortega ignored the sound of her scribbling for as long as he could, which wasn’t long. Scrambling out from under the bed, he loped over to where she sat. “What are you writing about me now?” he asked, poking his head under her arm.

“Who says I’m writing about you?” she replied with a smile, closing the notebook. She gave him a poke in the ribs that made him jump, and then a kiss. “Your knapsack is right there beside Mr. Doodles,” she said, pointing to a ratty stuffed bear slumped forlornly at the edge of the messy bed.

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“I guess Mr. Doodles wants to come with me,” said Ortega, taking a flying leap onto the bed that nearly bounced Mr. Doodles onto his head.

“I don’t think so,” said Dr. Susan, chasing after him.

“He does, otherwise why would he be trying to steal my knapsack?” said Ortega, jumping up and down so hard that the reinforced-steel bed frame squeaked in protest.

“He doesn’t, otherwise why would he be doing things to make us late?” said Dr. Susan, giving Ortega’s leg a sudden tug.

With a tremendous crash, Ortega flopped into the sitting position; Dr. Susan expertly wrestled the knapsack onto his back.

“He does. He’s afraid of being lonely,” said Ortega, giving Mr. Doodles a ferocious squeeze.

“He’ll be fine,” said Dr. Susan. She pried the stuffed bear out of Ortega’s arms. “Why don’t you show him how to be brave?” she suggested.

“I’d rather show him how to eat ice cream,” said Ortega.

“Maybe later,” said Dr. Susan, taking him by the hand.

“And chocolate cake,” he added.

“Don’t push your luck,” said Dr. Susan.

Don’t push yours, said Ortega, in his mind.

He burst out of the clean, cool, quiet marble foyer of the lab building into a messy, misty morning drizzle. He didn’t often get out at this time of day, and certainly not in this kind of weather. He grinned at the low gray sky, and at the squelching feel of the wet ground beneath his bare feet. His nostrils twitched, savoring the moist, wormy smell. He smacked an open hand against the front of his rain poncho once, softly.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” came Dr. Susan’s exasperated voice behind him. “Get out of the flower garden!”

“I can’t help it if I’m a nature lover,” he replied, blowing her a noisy kiss.

Holding a dripping clipboard over her head to keep off the rain, Dr. Susan chased Ortega out of the garden and across the lawn to the parking lot, all the while complaining about how irritated fussy old Dr. Whitmore was going to be when he discovered that Ortega had trampled through his favorite tulip patch. Again.

“Look on the bright side,” Ortega suggested as he climbed into the backseat of her rusted Chevette Scooter and buckled himself up. “At least I didn’t get my ugly, uncomfortable new pants dirty.”

Dr. Susan stared pointedly at the muddy stains on both cuffs.

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” he sniffed, closing the door.

It was a long drive to school — past the gates of the laboratory complex, past the ice-cream and pizza parlors, past the road that led to Grandma’s house, deep into the noisy heart of the city and beyond. Dr. Susan tried to talk to Ortega about how he was feeling, but he pretended to be deaf.

“You’re not deaf, Ortega,” she said, smiling at him over her shoulder.

“WHAT?” he asked loudly, cupping a hand to his small ear.

“I SAID YOU’RE NOT DEAF.”

“It comes and goes,” he shrugged, tuning her out again.

They drove in silence through the pelting rain. Traffic thinned and the city fell away. Just past an isolated truck stop, Dr. Susan spun left onto a bumpy gravel road flanked by brimming drainage ditches. A soggy prairie landscape unfolded before them — plowed fields and muddy pastures, log fences and lonely farmhouses. The occasional clump of spindly poplar trees dripped and drooped.

Ortega flopped back in his seat. “This is ridiculous,” he complained. “I could have flown to the moon and back in

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the time it's taking to get to this place! You really should have tried to find me a school in the city, Dr. Susan," he admonished.

"We did try."

"You should have tried harder. You should have made sure people understood how good-looking I was."

"I told them you were gorgeous," she smiled.

"So what was the problem?"

Dr. Susan's smile faded, and she stared straight ahead without saying anything for so long that Ortega wondered if *she'd* gone temporarily deaf. "Oh ... you know," she finally said with a lame little shrug.

Ortega sucked his lips in annoyance. "No, I *don't* know. If I knew, I wouldn't be asking."

"Well ... they were afraid."

"Afraid?" he snorted. "Why? What did they think I was going to do? Rip off the gym teacher's arms? Eat my locker partner? Master the nine-times table and take over the world?"

"No, no, nothing like that," assured Dr. Susan as she motored through a series of watery potholes that sent the small car flying. "They were afraid of getting involved in something controversial. A lot of people have strong feelings about you."

"A lot of people don't even know me!"

"I don't mean they have strong feelings about you *personally*," corrected Dr. Susan hastily. "I mean they have strong feelings about Project Ortega."

"And that makes it okay for them to be mean to me."

"No, of course not," she said, flushing slightly. "It's just that —"

"So how come the people at this school decided to accept me?" Ortega interrupted. "Did they realize how stupid it was to tell someone he couldn't go somewhere just because he happened to be the star of the world's most boring experiment?"

“Not exactly,” said Dr. Susan hesitantly. “The school is located in a small town whose biggest factory shut down a while back. When that happened, a lot of people were forced to move to the city to look for work. With so many taxpayers gone, the town was slowly going broke, so when we, uh, offered to pay them to participate in the study, I guess they felt they had no choice but to accept.”

“YOU OFFERED THEM MONEY TO TAKE ME?” screeched Ortega, feeling more than a little insulted by the idea. “How much did you offer?”

“It doesn’t matter how much we offered,” said Dr. Susan, as the car bounced off the gravel road and onto the paved street of the town. “What matters is that we found you a school, and now it’s up to you to do your best — to fit in, to learn, to make friends.” She reached back and squeezed his knee. “Your best is all Dr. Whitmore and I have ever asked of you, Ortega.”

“What if my best is being a dummy with no friends?” he asked.

“It won’t be, unless you don’t try,” she said.

“But what if it is?” he insisted, as they pulled up to the only stoplight in sight.

“Then we’ll be proud of you.”

Ortega snorted derisively at the thought of Dr. Whitmore proudly introducing him as the dummy with no friends who had ruined his life’s work and made him the laughingstock of the scientific community. Then he noticed the woman in the car beside them staring, so he squashed his face up against the streaming window and mouthed swear words at her. He laughed out loud when she gave him a shocked look and abruptly turned right.

“Knock it off,” said Dr. Susan.

Ortega hooted at her as loudly as he could.

“Use your words,” she reminded.

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“Okay,” he said, and then he mouthed swear words at the back of her head until he noticed her staring at him in the rearview mirror.

“Other words,” she suggested sternly.

“Fine,” he snapped, as an overpowering odor filled the car. Like the eye-watering reek of a hundred unwashed armpits, it was the smell of gorilla fear. “How about these words: my stomach hurts and I want to go home.”

“You’re going to be okay,” soothed Dr. Susan, resisting the urge to crack open the window and let in some fresh air.

“That’s your opinion,” he whispered.

“What was that?” she asked, giving him another look in the rearview mirror.

“NOTHING!” he hollered.

Dr. Susan was so startled that she swerved into oncoming traffic and nearly sideswiped a pickup truck carrying several bales of hay and a fat, mottled pig in a crate. Ortega saw the bushy red eyebrows of the grizzled old driver bunch up in a scowl for only an instant before flying upward in surprise at the sight of Ortega sitting in the backseat of the offending vehicle, grinning and waving merrily as the truck trundled by.

Ortega felt better. He leaned forward and tickled the back of Dr. Susan’s neck. Without turning around, she reached up and patted the callused knuckles of his hand. “It’s going to be all right, Ortega.”

“That’s your opinion,” he mouthed, sitting back again.

They drove past an old-fashioned movie theater, several crumbling brick buildings and a lunch counter with faded posters of meat sandwiches in the window. On the corner, a woman in a plastic shower cap swept the sheltered cement stoop of a fussy-looking beauty parlor; across the street, a man in a soiled apron arranged open crates of fruit on a table under a red-striped awning. Dr. Susan hung a right at

Harding's Fine Leather Goods, and two blocks later, the car screeched to a halt.

They had arrived.

The school was a cement box tinged green, like the face of somebody about to throw up. Several of the windowpanes were cracked; one was boarded up completely. There were no flowers in the flower bed, no flag on the flagpole. The open field behind the school was nothing but flat, empty space. In the distance, half hidden by trees, a dilapidated factory loomed.

"It looks like a prison for the criminally insane," announced Ortega.

"It does *not*," chuckled Dr. Susan, stepping out of the car.

"It does. The only thing missing is the bars on the windows," he said.

Dr. Susan opened the backdoor of the car and tugged on his hairy bicep. "Don't be ridiculous, Ortega. We don't have you scheduled for a stint at a prison for the criminally insane until next weekend."

"I can't believe you're making jokes like that at a time like this!" he screeched as he climbed slowly out of the car, dragging his knapsack behind him. It landed in the puddle beside him with a wet plop. "Is this what Dr. Whitmore meant when he said that he hoped your nurturing presence would help ease me into my first day of school?"

With a long-suffering sigh, Dr. Susan apologized for her insensitive joke, picked up Ortega's dirty knapsack and helped him slip the straps over his long arms. "Now, don't forget — as much as possible, Dr. Whitmore wants you to walk upright when you're at school."

"It's unnatural *and* uncomfortable," he complained, pushing her hands away. "Why should I?"

"Because you've practiced it, because it'll leave your hands free to do other things and because it'll mean one less difference between you and the other children," she said,

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leaning into the car for her purse. “Also because I don’t know if the seams of those new pants can take the strain of you bent over on all fours all day long. Dr. Whitmore had them designed for a biped — you know, for someone who walks on two legs.”

“I *know* what a biped is,” crabbed Ortega. He thought it was pretty typical of Dr. Smarty Pants to do something like designing biped pants without even consulting him, but before he could mention this to Dr. Susan, she’d started up the cracked cement walk to the front doors of the school. Ortega hurried after her, knuckling defiantly through the puddles she so carefully stepped over. He wondered what she’d do if he bolted. In his much younger days, he’d been a runner — darting through open doors when people’s backs were turned, solemnly agreeing to walk nicely beside Dr. Susan and then galloping away the minute the leash came off. Many times he’d been apprehended wreaking havoc in his little kitchenette or inciting mayhem in the animal-testing laboratory downstairs. Once, Dr. Whitmore forgot to lock his office door, and Ortega spent an unforgettably joyful half-hour overturning filing cabinets, upending plastic potted plants and sampling the tasty pages of Dr. Whitmore’s more expensive scientific texts. He’d been harshly punished for his behavior — no tapioca pudding and sliced strawberries for a whole week — but it had been well worth it.

“Don’t even think about it,” Dr. Susan warned, holding the door open for him.

Ortega sighed heavily. He wasn’t really going to bolt. Even he knew he was getting too old for that kind of behavior. Besides, where would he bolt *to*?

Inside the empty entrance hall they paused — Dr. Susan to wipe her sneakers on the mat, Ortega to contemplate the enormous, gilt-framed picture that dominated the stark and silent space. It was a portrait of a withered old crone in a hanging black dress. She looked as though she’d been surprised in the act of sucking lemons.

“Please tell me she’s not in charge of this place,” said Ortega, his voice echoing pleasantly in the high-ceilinged, white-walled emptiness. “I’ve never felt comfortable in the care of the undead.”

There was a snicker from the stairwell at the far end of the hall.

“Who’s there?” boomed Ortega, enjoying the sound of the echo.

A shriek, and the sound of small feet pounding up the stairs.

“Lower your voice, Ortega,” shushed Dr. Susan, heading for the stairs. “I purposely arrived late — and a day early — so we’d be able to get you settled with a minimum of fuss. If you start shouting in that big voice of yours, everyone is going to come rushing out to get a look at you. It’ll turn into a complete mob scene.”

“I love mob scenes,” lied Ortega in a loud whisper. “They make me feel like a rock star.”

With a smile that said she knew he was lying — and scared — Dr. Susan drew him close and pressed her lips against his leathery forehead for a long, quiet moment. Then she briskly turned and started up the stairs. Reluctantly, Ortega followed. The stairwell smelled like old gym clothes, fresh photocopies and forgotten lunches. He could hear the sound of murmuring voices and the distant hum of office equipment. Somewhere, someone with very long fingernails was pecking at a keyboard. He eyed the dusty photographs that lined the walls. He supposed that to each other the students in the pictures all looked pretty different, but to him they all looked pretty much the same. And in spite of his talking, walking upright — even wearing ugly, uncomfortable new pants — there was no mistaking how different he looked from them.

Halfway up the stairs, he seized a handful of Dr. Susan’s sweatshirt, dragging her to such a sudden stop that she nearly lost her balance.

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“They won’t like me,” he said.

“They will.”

“They won’t, they’ll think I’m a freak.”

“You’re not a freak, Ortega.”

“Gee, thanks,” he said sarcastically. “I feel much better now.”

“What I *mean* is that being different from others doesn’t make you a freak,” she soothed as she peeled his fingers off her sweatshirt. “Being unique doesn’t make you a freak. In our own ways, we’re all different and unique. That’s what makes each of us special and interesting.”

Ortega yawned loudly in order to show Dr. Susan what he thought of her little inspirational speech. Then he said, “These pants itch.”

“They’ll be fine,” she said, resuming her climb. When she reached the second-story landing, she turned right down a corridor lined with battered blue lockers. Ortega followed.

“They itch. They’re uncomfortable. I don’t like them,” he insisted.

“There’s a dress code at this school — no sweats allowed. Everyone else will be wearing regular pants,” said Dr. Susan, stopping in front of the last door on the left. “Don’t you want to be like everyone else?”

“Regular pants are not going to make me like everyone else,” he muttered, looking around. A door opened halfway down the hall, and a small boy with glasses popped his head out. He stared at Ortega, who stared back — ambivalently at first, but with growing defiance. Ortega didn’t like being stared at — but more than that, he didn’t like being stared *down*. He folded his arms across his massive chest and lowered his head, settling in. He wouldn’t be the first to break eye contact. Oh, no. He’d stand there all day if he had to.

“Okay, here we go,” breathed Dr. Susan, leaning over to fuss with his shirt collar one last time.

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He swatted her hands aside and craned to see around her, but the boy had disappeared. Ortega hoped the boy realized that Dr. Susan's interference meant the contest had ended in a tie. He hoped the boy didn't think he'd won.

But there was no way to find out what the boy thought — at least not at that particular moment there wasn't — because with a sense of timing that made Ortega want to give her a pinch, Dr. Susan chose that particular moment to step forward and rap sharply on the classroom door.

Almost immediately, Ortega heard the sound of sensible shoes padding across the floor of the classroom. Then the door swung open and his new teacher stood silhouetted in the doorway. She looked like an ancient tortoise might if it had crawled off and left its shell behind somewhere — scrawny, wrinkled and slightly put off. Her mouth was tight but not unkind; she wore what hair she had in a bun fixed firmly to the top of her head.

Ortega had met Miss Rutherford before — several times, in fact. On her first visit, she'd given him three caramels. On her second visit, she'd reprimanded him for not telling her that Dr. Susan didn't allow him to eat caramels. After her last visit, Ortega had overheard her promise Dr. Whitmore that she'd treat him just like any other student. Since then, he'd often wondered whether that would be a good thing or a bad thing. He hoped it would be a good thing.

Carefully closing the door behind her, Miss Rutherford peered through her wire spectacles — first at Dr. Susan, then at Ortega.

“Good morning,” she said in a faintly accented voice.

Dr. Susan said good-morning; Ortega said nothing. Up until this moment he'd been rather distracted — by the picture of the lemon-sucking witch, by his itchy pants, by the boy with the glasses. Now, the enormity of what he was

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about to confront struck him full force. In a minute, Dr. Susan would turn around and leave him here to face a roomful of strangers. He'd faced strangers before, of course — many times, at Dr. Whitmore's boring scientific conferences — but he'd never had to do it alone. And the strangers had never been eleven-year-olds. And he'd never had to worry about trying to befriend them, because their interest in him had never been personal. He'd never enjoyed being observed, monitored, tested and debated over, but at least he'd always known where he stood. He had no idea where he was going to stand with the strangers he was about to meet — assuming they were going to let him stand with them at all.

After a moment of silence, Dr. Susan gave him a little nudge and said, "Miss Rutherford said good-morning, Ortega."

His muscles bunched beneath him as he was gripped by an almost overwhelming urge to flee. "I don't think I can do this," he croaked.

"You most certainly can," said Miss Rutherford.

Dr. Susan — who'd seen him tense up — didn't look so sure.

"Really, I can't," he insisted, with a pleading look at Dr. Susan. Not for the first time, he wished that gorillas could cry. If there were big, salty tears coursing down his leathery face, there would be no mistaking how upset he really was. Of course, if he suddenly started charging up and down the hall, slapping at the decrepit blue lockers and pounding on his chest, there would also be no mistaking how upset he really was. However, that sort of behavior was unlikely to elicit a lot of sympathy from Dr. Susan, and her sympathy was the only thing that was going to get him out of here.

He leaned his head up against her arm and sniffled.

"You can do this, Ortega," repeated Miss Rutherford, without giving the least indication that she'd noticed his pitiful state. "I would not have accepted you as a pupil if I

thought you couldn't. That you are nervous is entirely understandable, and yet where would the world be if we turned back at the first flutter in our bellies? Courage is the cornerstone of progress, Ortega, and I know you know this because I know your remarkable history — the skills you have mastered, the expectations you have defied, all that you have endured. Time and again you have made great personal strides in difficult, demanding circumstances.”

“Like I had a choice,” he said, sniffing more adamantly.

“Choice or not,” continued Miss Rutherford, holding a quivering index finger high in the air, “we must face the challenges that life lays down before us, else we will never know how high we might have climbed.” She paused, savoring her words like a choice broth. “Besides, I have found that the anticipation of a thing is often worse than the fact of it, and I believe you're going to be surprised by how smoothly your introduction to the class unfolds.”

Ortega snorted. It was a rude thing to do and he knew it, but who did she think she was kidding? Those kids were going to stare and whisper; the girls were going to scream and faint. And who knew what the boys would do? Dr. Whitmore's nephew, Rupert, liked to jump out at Ortega unexpectedly and fling rubber snakes in his direction even though he knew perfectly well that Ortega had a pathological fear of snakes. And Rupert was only seven! Ortega could just imagine how much worse an eleven-year-old could be.

“No, I don't think so,” he said. He shook his head regretfully. “I've changed my mind about attending school. These things happen.”

Dr. Susan started to speak. Miss Rutherford cut her off.

“As I understand it, Ortega, this is one of those situations where you have no choice,” she said crisply. “Arrangements have been made. Commitments have been given. And I would remind you that you felt ready two weeks ago. You told me that you were sick of being treated like a baby. That

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you were tired of being spied on all day long. That you wanted to get out from under Dr. Whitmore's pasty white thumb."

Dr. Susan gave him a look at this last one, but he ignored it.

"Well, I've changed my mind, and I don't feel ready now, and Dr. Susan won't make me go if I don't feel ready, will you, Dr. Susan?" he asked. Reaching for her hand, he made a noise that sounded something like a purr.

It was a nasty shock when she untangled her hand from his and gave him a gentle shove in Miss Rutherford's direction. "Miss Rutherford is right, Ortega," she said with an encouraging smile. "You *can* do this."

Ortega glared — first at Dr. Susan, then at Miss Rutherford. Dr. Susan frowned. Miss Rutherford neither frowned nor smiled. She simply looked at him as if to say that she'd stand there all day if she had to. It was too much.

"Well, maybe I can do it," he growled, dumping his knapsack and dropping to his knuckles. "But you can't make me!"

With that, he darted in the direction of the stairwell.

And very nearly barreled into the boy with the glasses.

They both screamed at the top of their lungs; the boy tripped on his own untied shoelaces and fell backward. There was a pattering of feet from the classroom, but Miss Rutherford held the door firmly shut and called to the excited students on the other side that everything was fine.

Easing his hulking body forward, Ortega glowered down at the boy who had given him such a fright. He looked no older than nine, with an awkward, skinny body and hair like a helmet. The gray eyes behind the glasses were probably overly large at the best of times; as the boy lay sprawled and quaking beneath Ortega, whose knuckles were planted firmly on either side of his head, they were positively enormous.

"Please don't eat me!" he blurted.

In his mind, Ortega barked that even if he *were* in the habit of chasing down his protein and eating it raw, making a meal out of such a pipsqueak would hardly be worth the effort.

Out loud, he said, “I can’t make any promises. Do you taste like chicken?”

The boy squawked in terror.

Dr. Susan marched over and hauled Ortega up by the back of his shirt collar. “Stop it!” she ordered. “Stop it this instant! Honestly, Ortega, why go out of your way to scare the first child you meet? Are you *trying* to ruin your chances here? Do you *want* to fail? Is that it?”

He huffed and shrugged her hand off his collar. “Cut it out,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. “You’re embarrassing me.”

Dr. Susan threw her hands in the air.

“I wasn’t scared,” panted the boy, skittering out of Ortega’s reach.

“I wasn’t scared, either,” said Ortega, pushing himself up into a standing position.

The boy hesitated. He didn’t seem to know what to say to this — evidently, it hadn’t occurred to him that a two-hundred-pound talking gorilla *could* be scared. Tentatively, he ventured, “Well, if I were as big as you, I wouldn’t be scared of anything.”

“I’m not. I sure am big, though, aren’t I?” said Ortega, throwing out his barrel chest. “And you know what? I’m going to get even bigger. I’m going to get huge!”

“Not in the next few months you aren’t!” said Dr. Susan with a strained chuckle.

Both youngsters ignored her. Appearing suitably impressed by Ortega’s prediction of his future hugeness, the boy adjusted his thick glasses with one hand and looked quizzically at him. “So, if you’re not afraid of anything, why were you running away just now?”

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“I wasn’t!” said Ortega indignantly. “Why were you sneaking up on me?”

“I wasn’t,” said the boy. “I was coming back from the bathroom. Why did you avert your eyes when you first saw me looking at you?”

Ortega bristled. “I didn’t! She stepped in front of me,” he cried, poking Dr. Susan in the belly.

“Oh,” said the boy in a disappointed voice. “I thought maybe you were acknowledging my dominance. My name is Peter, by the way, and you should know that when I found out you were coming, I read everything I could on the subject of gorillas.”

Ortega sucked his lips in annoyance.

“Don’t worry, though. I didn’t mind the extra work a bit because science is my second favorite subject,” continued Peter. “That’s why I think it’s so great that you’re here. I mean, how many kids get a chance to participate in a groundbreaking scientific experiment?”

Before Ortega could stuff his fingers into his ears to spare himself the torture of having to continue to listen to this future Dr. Smarty Pants, Miss Rutherford intervened.

“All right, Peter,” she said with a sharp clap of her hands. “That’s enough — back to class, please.”

“Yes, Miss Rutherford,” nodded Peter. He stepped past her and opened the classroom door, but before he went inside, he turned back to Ortega. “By the way,” he said. “I know from my studies that gorillas are mostly herbivores. I know you were never really going to eat me.”

In his mind, Ortega screeched, *Don’t be so sure of that!*
Out loud, he said nothing.

“Well, Ortega, I am pleased to learn that you are not afraid of anything and that you were not running away,” said Miss Rutherford, the minute the door closed behind Peter. “I confess I had a moment of doubt there, but you have

proven me wrong in the most unequivocal terms, and I shan't underestimate you again. Now, why don't you pick up your knapsack and say good-bye to your Dr. Susan? You may have a moment alone with her while I do one final check to ensure that the class is prepared for your introduction. Excuse me," she said, slipping into the classroom.

Feeling distinctly outmaneuvered — by the teacher, who was treating him just like any other student, and by the boy, who would think he'd won if Ortega ran away now — Ortega slowly picked up his knapsack.

"I like her," whispered Dr. Susan, smoothing back the hair on his brow. "She's going to take good care of you, Ortega."

Ortega didn't answer. He strained to hear what was happening on the other side of the door, but it was impossible to hear anything over the pounding of his heart.

"She is," insisted Dr. Susan in a voice that sounded almost pleading. "If I didn't think it was true — if I didn't think you'd be okay — I'd never leave you here. You believe me, don't you, Ortega?"

Before he could say anything, Miss Rutherford returned.

"Ready?" she asked.

The door behind her was wide open. Ortega could see the feet of the children sitting in the front row of desks. He swallowed hard and clutched his knapsack in his arms more tightly.

This was it. There was no turning back now.

"I'll see you after school," said Dr. Susan, who was back to speaking in her usual cheerful voice. "What about a hug before you go?"

With a small huff, Ortega leaned forward and gave her several businesslike pats on the back. Then, without a backward glance, he loped quietly after Miss Rutherford into the classroom, where the world's first talking gorilla was about to make history.

Again.