

The Woodrat Chronicles

By

Grandpa Marty

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Elk Ridge

First Edition

Dedicated to my children:

*Loren, Julie, Katy, Megan, Will
And to their children too, of course...
Actually, to anybody's children anywhere!
This is a book for children and their parents.*

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Part One

The Suspicion

Chapter One

The Woodrats Make a Daring Plan

This is a story about six woodrats who will be having a great adventure, the greatest adventure woodrats have ever had, full of excitement, danger, suspense, magic and big surprises, and it all happened because one of them had a *suspicion* that wouldn't go away. That's why Part One is called *The Suspicion*. It's an adventure that people could also have, and it would be their greatest adventure too. These woodrats live where I myself live, up in the hills of Northern California, and that's how I know their story. I was there. It's a story I must tell, because I'm the only one who knows it.

The names of these woodrats are Lifeboat, Joyride, Karma (she's the one who had the suspicion), Masquerade, Wilderness, Smithsonian and Fall Guy, who took a terrible fall but didn't die, and one more woodrat who doesn't appear until Part Two, who is afraid people will laugh at his name.

There will be other creatures in the story, creatures who play a very important role in moving the adventure along, but the woodrats are the *main* characters, the ones who *have* the adventure.

Their names sound strange to you – and I will explain what they mean at the proper time -- because they are not the most fashionable names these days, names like Tyler, Emma, Jacob, Matthew, Samantha, Joshua, Abigail, Andrew, Madison and Ashley, and also Christopher, and Hannah, some of your names and the names of your friends in the classroom, schoolyard and multipurpose room, and in the school bus and on the soccer team. Names are important because without them we wouldn't know who anyone was.

So let's dive right in then! Let the story begin!

Lifeboat and Joyride woke up in their cozy nest of sticks and twigs on a cold rainy morning in December, up on that hill in northern California where I have lived for twenty-five years. From the big house you can see all the way to the King Range, which drops straight down to the Pacific Ocean. There are very tall trees all around, and after the rains you can hear water running everywhere and see shiny glistening rainbow drops on the leaves.

Lifeboat opened his eyes suddenly. They *popped* open, but they didn't make a popping *sound*. He always wakes up feeling alarmed, and looks around very quickly, listening carefully, because something dangerous may have happened during the night or might even be happening right now. He made a quick check and decided everything was normal. Lifeboat is a *worrier*.

He looked over at Joyride, who was sound asleep and had a smile on her face. Joyride is *not* a worrier.

"Must be having a happy dream," he thought to himself. "I wonder what that dream could be about? A clump of mushrooms? A birthday party?"

He stared at Joyride's sleeping face, wondering about her dream.

By the way: do you know what lifeboats are? Lifeboats are the small boats carried by big boats for everyone to jump into, without quarreling or fighting for a seat or pushing other people overboard, if it looks like the big boat is going to sink. That's what happened, for example, when the very famous big boat, the *Titanic*, ran into an even bigger iceberg in the middle of the night when it sailed from Southampton many years ago. It sank. I wonder if you have heard of that disaster. They made a movie about it that was very popular in China. It was sad when the great ship went down, to the bottom of the sea.

But that just reminded me of something, so I'll have to insert a *digression* here. What's a digression? A digression is when something you're talking about, or writing about – like Lifeboat's name, for example – suddenly reminds you of something else, something really interesting that you want to share, and you stop talking about the first thing for a minute and talk about the second thing, *never forgetting where you were up to with the first thing*, because you are going to pick up where you left off when you are finished with the digression. Most grownups have digressions in their minds all the time, secret thoughts, but they don't say them out loud, because they are crafty or polite or afraid.

Talking about the *Titanic*, the great ship that went down to the bottom of the sea after it slammed into the iceberg, reminded me of a poem by an English poet named Thomas Hardy, in which he found it funny that at the same time the hardworking shipbuilders in England were building the *Titanic*, the iceberg, thousands of miles away in the icy North Atlantic Ocean, was also being built by the water hardening into ice, and no one could ever have suspected what was going to happen, that the two were going

to meet one famous terrible day. He called that *Fate*, and he wanted very much to convince people that *Fate* was something you couldn't predict and couldn't do anything about, and you might just as well give up. Thomas Hardy, however, would *never* have used the word "funny" because Thomas Hardy never thought *anything* was actually *funny*. He was famous for being a man who never laughed. No one could ever make him laugh no matter how hard they tried, no matter how many jokes they told him.

So where were we before the digression? Do you remember?

Right! Lifeboat was wide awake. He had decided there was nothing to worry about, and was wondering about Joyride's happy dream.

"Oh well," he thought to himself, after wondering awhile. "No telling what she may be dreaming about. And who knows? Maybe I have happy dreams also, and just never remember them!"

Turning away, he peered out at the wet whitethorn branches and the dripping madrone forest on the other side of the path to the springbox. The woodrats would be able to forage -- a word used mainly for animals which means "search around for something to eat" -- and perhaps find some berries down by the old abandoned outhouse or even some St. John's Wort, a plant some grownups take as pills, or powder in their herbal tea, because they believe it will make them less nervous and confused, more confident that what they are thinking or doing isn't crazy.

Lifeboat, by the way, is brown all over with no white or gray, and Joyride has four white feet. These color details are called their *markings*, and help us know who they are when they are far away. Woodrats look just like mice, only they are bigger and furrier and very much smarter.

Joyride woke up, still smiling from her dream although she couldn't remember what it was about, and turned toward Lifeboat.

"Good morning, Sailor! Sounds like it's raining!"

Joyride liked to make up nicknames for the other woodrats.

Lifeboat was poking through a small backpack, checking what he thought of as his "emergency supplies." Joyride had once seen him going through it with a frown on his face, mumbling to himself, and when she asked what it was he had muttered, "Some stuff I have. Stuff. Just checking."

Joyride -- which is a word that means having wild reckless fun, the last thing Lifeboat would want to do -- sometimes thought of teasing Lifeboat about his worrying, but she never actually did.

She scurried up one of the whitethorn branches that supported their nest. "Let's run up to check out Karma," she said, catching raindrops in her mouth. "You know how she's been acting strangely lately! Like she's not really *here* with us, like her mind is a million miles away. Something is troubling her."

"Yes, that's true," answered Lifeboat. "I have been worrying about her."

Karma, you remember, because I told you, is the woodrat with the suspicion. But I just thought of something. Do you know what that word means, "suspicion"? A suspicion is something you think might be true, something you're pretty sure is true, but you have no *proof* yet, no hard evidence. You still might be wrong. Many people's minds are just bubbling with suspicions, all day long, and most of the time, believe it or not, they don't care about proof at all! And what was it that Karma suspected? You'll find out very soon.

Lifeboat and Joyride scurried out of their nest and ran behind the barn where the people stored all that interesting stuff the woodrats regularly inspected to see what was worth stealing, took a long roundabout route behind the sauna and along the hillside above the garden, then all the way around the vineyard to the nest shared by Karma, Masquerade and Wilderness about forty yards past the vineyard gate. *They knew they must never be seen by Jack and Helix, the dogs. Never ever.* Masquerade had once seen, to her horror, Helix bite a rabbit in half.

When they arrived at the nest they heard what sounded like a very serious discussion going on inside. They knew it must be about Karma's mood.

Wilderness heard them outside and came scrambling out of the nest. He was wearing a raincoat and rainhat he had pieced together from scraps of plastic sheeting he had stolen from the woodshed.

"Hi, Wilder," cried Joyride. "Give me a high four!"

"High four!" shouted Wilderness, smacking his paw against hers.

Joyride always called Wilderness "Wilder," sometimes rhyming it with "builder," and sometimes, to show how *wild* she thought he was, she pronounced it to rhyme with the word "*milder*," meaning even *more* wild. "Wilderness," as you probably know, is a word meaning Nature where people have never tried to change anything, just left it alone – "taken only pictures and left only footprints," as they say.

Wilderness, our woodrat with a white tail (his markings), was very fond of roaming around in Nature, exploring and

memorizing where things are, sometimes pausing to appreciate something particularly beautiful, a habit of his that will become important later in the story. He had ventured – a fine word you might use some day, meaning *bravely explored* -- all the way down to the woodlot below the pond where Fall Guy took his terrible fall.

Masquerade, brown with streaks of black and white, like camouflage, followed Wilderness out of the nest. She didn't *scramble*, like Wilderness, but marched out in her usual serious business-like way.

She gave Joyride and Lifeboat a brief low four. They could see she had something important to say and didn't want to waste any time with the usual small talk. As you will learn, some grownups love small talk and some just can't stand it. Takes all sorts to make a world!

"Morning, Joy-Joy, Sailor. We were just talking in there. Karma seems more gloomy than ever today. She woke up that way and didn't want to talk about it. She's definitely being nagged by that suspicion of hers! She can't shake it off and isn't even trying!"

"Karma," by the way, is a word that means something like "Fate," the word Thomas Hardy loved to use, but it's not quite the same. "Karma" means that yesterday, today and tomorrow are all *connected*, like a long chain, like a *story*. One thing flows into another, day after day, and that's our whole life, the story of our life. *Karma*! Unfortunately, most of the time we can't *see* the chain of karma, and that's why we say, "I just never should have said that yesterday! What got into me? Now I'm paying the price!"

The Beatles wrote a song about not seeing the chain. They called the song *Yesterday*, when all their troubles seemed so far away, and it looked like everything was going to be okay now. But

they didn't see the chain of *karma*, and all their troubles came right back the next day!

And what about the other woodrat's name, Masquerade? Do you know that word? It's a very useful word.

A "masquerade" is a big crazy party where everyone dresses up in *disguise*, wearing masks and costumes, pretending to be someone or something, like a Princess or a flagpole, a King or a chicken or a firefighter or a fire. It's like Halloween. Masquerade often wished she could put on a disguise even when it *wasn't* Halloween and there *was* no party, so she could be someone else for awhile and just not be bothered with being Masquerade. Sherlock Holmes, the great detective who played the violin and had a fat brother and a bad habit, often wore disguises when he was solving a mystery. Grownups are very often, almost all the time, "traveling in disguise," pretending to be someone they're really not!

Lifeboat frowned and shook his head when he heard Masquerade mention Karma's suspicion.

"A suspicion? A suspicion? What *kind* of suspicion? What does she *suspect*?" he demanded.

Masquerade paused and thought before she answered, so she could pick her words carefully.

"Karma has a suspicion that *there's more here than meets the eye*. That's all she'll say. *More here than meets the eye.*"

Joyride turned to the others with a puzzled expression on her face.

“More here than meets the eye? I wonder what she’s talking about? What’s here is what meets the eye, what we can see, and what meets the eye is what’s here!”

“Sounds pretty clear to me,” said Lifeboat loudly, secretly wondering whether there actually was “more here than meets the eye” and here was one more thing to check up on. He quickly looked around, but saw nothing that didn’t meet his eye.

Just then, right in the middle of this serious discussion, their concentration on Karma’s problem was shattered by a tremendously annoying chattering, coming from up by the holding tank where the Winnebago was parked, a frantic babbling about movies and movie stars and rock bands and quarterbacks and rappers and home runs and touchdowns and homecoming queens and television programs and aliens and celebrity scandals and Madonna and exciting marriages and divorces!

“It’s Showtime!” shouted Joyride.

“Showtime!” cried Wilderness, covering his ears with his paws.

It was Showtime the Chipmunk! One of the *messengers* we will be meeting later on!

“Brad and Jen! Britney and Angelina! George Clooney! A revealing interview! Who will she choose? Baby on board? Stars look pretty in bows! Stylish celebs ring in the New Year! I’ve gotten pretty comfortable with myself! Bright white teeth! Jessica Biel loves her leather bomber! The one-sided hug! Vanessa and Nick’s romantic holiday! Maria ditched the tights!”

“Showtime!” cried Masquerade, glaring with anger, “You again! Can’t you see we’re talking about something important?”

Can't you see you're *interrupting*, which is all you ever do? Scram! How many times do we have to tell you we're not interested in your trip?"

All four woodrats turned away, folding their paws and purposely turning their backs on him.

"Okay! Turning me off! Turning me off again! But I'll be back! Just like the Terminator! I always come back! Ha ha ha ha ha! Fashion rocks! Her 1982 book about Blondie! A campy Popeye T-shirt and a cool cap! Pucker up! Martin Scorsese's private jet is waiting! I know what paradise looks like! Sean gives Irena a ticket to ride in style! Levi's Capital E Skimmer jeans \$165!"

Wow! You must be thinking, "Who is this chipmunk named Showtime?"

Okay. Remember what I said in the very beginning of this story, that the great woodrat adventure is an adventure people could also have? Well, even though we may not have all that much in common with woodrats, even though we don't have four legs and fur and markings or live in nests made of sticks or dig for buried mushrooms when we are hungry, Showtime and the other messengers you'll meet are *part of that adventure*.

And that's all I'll say for now!

Lifeboat, Joyride, Masquerade and Wilderness breathed sighs of relief when Showtime's babbling faded away.

"He's part of the scene," announced Lifeboat grimly, "a big part of the scene around here."

"Here, there and everywhere," added Masquerade, with a dark edge to her voice.

And just then Karma, with dark pink markings, emerged from the nest. They all looked at her, concern in their eyes. "Concern" is an important word that has many meanings. As used here, it means they *care* about her, want to find out what's the matter so they can *help* her, find out why she's sad, find out about "more here than meets the eye."

Joyride turned to Karma and said, in her simple direct way, "We're here to help, Karma. That's why Sailor and I came over. We don't want you to be sad anymore. We want to know about your suspicion."

"Wait," said Masquerade suddenly. "I have an idea, an *approach to the problem*. I just thought of it."

They all turned to face her. They knew that Masquerade often came up with sharp ideas, clever solutions to the serious problems that woodrats face.

"Let's forget about what Karma means when she says 'more here than meets the eye,' and whether or not we agree with her. Let's put that question on the back burner. What do we know for sure here? We know that Karma is *preoccupied*. We're looking at a case of *preoccupied*."

"What's *preoccupied*?" asked Wilderness, who hadn't learned that word yet.

Lifeboat knew what *preoccupied* was, *in spades* – a figure of speech which has nothing to do with cards but means he *really* knew, that he was very familiar, from personal experience, with being *preoccupied*. He explained it for Wilderness, and for any of the others who didn't know, in the same way that I have been explaining words to you in this story.

"Preoccupied," he rather angrily explained, "means there's something you can't stop thinking about, something that haunts your mind like a ghost in a haunted house. You might try to *stop* thinking about it, but it won't go away, no matter how hard you try. And *trying* to stop thinking about it is just another way of being preoccupied by it! It's a very tricky situation. You want to move from *thinking* about it to *doing* something about it, but you don't know what to do, so you're just stuck with the thinking. You think and think and think and..."

"OK OK! We get the idea," interrupted Masquerade impatiently. "The question is, what can be *done* about it?"

"Distraction," answered Lifeboat, rather feverishly, revealing to thoughtful woodrats, like Masquerade, that he himself was no stranger to this trouble. "I need -- I mean *she* needs -- to be distracted, forced to think about something else, something besides 'there's more here than meets the eye,' something completely different that will push that thought out of her mind and replace it with something else."

Grownups, I might point out here, are almost always preoccupied with some problem, worried about something, nagged by some thought, often a totally *crazy* thought, and search desperately, going back and forth, for either a solution or a distraction.

"Well, how can we get her distracted? asked Wilderness eagerly, thinking there might be some *action* coming up now instead of a lot of talking.

"How about an *adventure*! suggested Joyride enthusiastically. "Something *dangerous* that will *really* distract her!"

And here she glanced apologetically at Lifeboat, because she knew Lifeboat was always preoccupied with the danger of danger, and she knew this suggestion would alarm him.

"Like going to *steal* something from a dangerous place!"

"Like the bathroom in the big house!" shouted Wilderness excitedly. "That's a dangerous place if ever there was one!"

"Quite true, Wilder, quite true," said Lifeboat thoughtfully. He turned to Wilderness, who was looking at him with an eager smile on his face, not realizing that Lifeboat was not at all excited about the idea the way he was.

"You're right about that. The bathroom *is* a dangerous place, very *creepy* even, from a certain point of view, much more dangerous than the wine cellar or the computer room where all those idiot mice file in to the mouse traps."

Lifeboat paused, narrowing his eyes, suddenly being struck by all the dangers.

"Yes," he continued, getting more worried all the time, "*very* dangerous. One of us might fall into the toilet and drown, for example, or one of the people might come in to pee or throw up in the middle of the night! Rebar's kitty litter box is right across the hall, the Paloma water heater might explode, or there could be a gas leak and we'd all..."

"OK OK!" interrupted Masquerade -- the same way, you probably remember, she had interrupted Lifeboat before when he kept repeating *and think and think and think*. "We get the idea, Sailor, and we are grateful to you for warning us about all the dangers. The bathroom in the big house does seem like an excellent place for a distracting adventure."

“Right!” said Wilderness. “That’s clear! Another one of my great ideas!”

Masquerade continued. “We have to sneak into the big house, using our secret passage through the dryer vent, and steal something.”

They all looked at each other for a moment, all, except Lifeboat, thinking the same thing, thinking that this is a good idea, a good plan, but it’s a plan that needs one more detail to be complete. Joyride *spoke for all of them*, a figure of speech meaning she was the one who said out loud what was on everyone’s mind.

“Right! Steal something! But *what?*” asked Joyride. “Steal *what?*”

There was a silence in which they all looked at each other. Wilderness broke the silence, “broke” here meaning not that he actually broke something, the way you might break a wine glass or a pencil or a bone, but that he *filled* the silence by speaking.

“I know what,” he said calmly, glancing around to enjoy the looks of surprise on all their faces.

“What?” asked Lifeboat immediately, a bit suspiciously. He feared it might be something, like the big rubber plunger next to the toilet, that would get them all into trouble, making the people angry and causing them to come looking for it.

“Dental floss. I need some strong non-stretching woodrat-sized rope to hang my backpack with when I go backpacking. So the bears won’t get it. That’s standard procedure when you go backpacking. Backpacking by the book. People keep dental floss in

their medicine chests. The medicine chest in the big house is in the bathroom."

The rest all thought to themselves: Why would a bear want to steal food from a backpack no bigger than a cookie? But they merely exchanged glances and didn't say anything. They didn't want to get into an argument with Wilderness, and at least this was something to steal, providing the last missing detail in their plan to distract Karma. So why create an issue?

"Create an issue," by the way, is a brilliant figure of speech that some people would say describes daily life completely. In this particular moment and situation it means "make fun of Wilderness and get into an argument."

"Standard procedure," he repeated in a challenging tone of voice, looking around to see if anyone was going to create an issue. "By the book."

"Sounds like a job for..."

"Smithsonian!" they all, except Lifeboat, cried gleefully before Masquerade could finish the sentence.

"Right!" said Masquerade, "Smithsonian. We do need to talk to Smithsonian about this. There are bound to be technical problems with climbing into the medicine chest. Lifeboat pointed out."

She turned to Karma, who hadn't said a word since she emerged from the nest.

"What do you think, Karma?"

"I guess I have nothing to lose. But I doubt this suspicion can be cured this way! It's true, I am preoccupied, but I *know* there's more here than meets the eye, even though I have no real proof."

Karma, as we will see, is a *mixture*. She's very *quiet*, doesn't talk much, but can be very *powerful* also. As we will discover, and the others also, there's something *mysterious* about Karma. She turned to the others and spoke calmly and firmly.

"Shall I tell you something? I often dream about a rainbow-colored unicorn named Grace. She speaks to me. She told me that because I have this suspicion I have a journey ahead of me. And I believe her. But I'll go along with the plan," she laughed. "I have nothing to lose. I'll come along, and maybe I'll get distracted!"

"OK!" shouted Joyride. An escapade! Let's find Smithsonian!"

What's an "escapade"? What does that word mean? An escapade is a *small adventure*, a mini-adventure, much smaller than the great adventure this story is all about, but the kind of thing Joyride found irresistible, and Lifeboat found alarming, and Wilderness regarded as a neat opportunity to show his fearlessness, and Masquerade saw as a drama or play in which everyone was playing a role, which is how she sometimes saw life altogether. Masquerade is one of those *shrewd* woodrats, always searching beneath the surface of things to find out what's *really* going on.

And I must tell you that I agree with Masquerade on that point about role-playing. As a matter of fact, a very great writer named Shakespeare also saw it that way. He wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." It's an idea that sometimes crosses our minds if we watch carefully what's going on around us.

So they all set off across the upper meadow, carefully skirting around the big pile of grape cuttings and the pile of scrap wood waiting to be burned, keeping a sharp eye out for Jack and Helix, who were actually dozing in the woodshed and doghouse, thinking about nothing as usual, and over to Smithsonian's nest about thirty yards up the driveway from the garden. It was still raining, sometimes a drizzle, sometimes a downpour, the usual weather that time of year.

But there was something they didn't notice. Overhead the two ravens, big black smart sly birds, Harry and Helga, were silently flying in circles in the rain. They are the messengers' secret sneaky spies. They had overheard the whole discussion about Karma's suspicion, and knew they would have to report back right away. They remembered that the leaders of the messengers, heartless dragonflies named Count Thinktank, Count Genepool, Count Gigabyte and Count Blackhole, had once explained to them, knowing that the ravens might be mixed up about that important point, that there *isn't* anything here that doesn't meet the eye, nothing at all. And Harry and Helga knew that these dragonfly Counts would want to convince Karma that she was wrong as soon as they impatiently emerged, choking and gasping, from their larva stage and could leave the pond.

They found Smithsonian in his nest, fooling around with a little flashlight he had stolen from the house.

Now, what about Smithsonian? Why did they shout, "This looks like a job for Smithsonian"?

Smithsonian was also a woodrat, with markings exactly the same as Lifeboat's, solid brown, except for a spot of white at the end of his tail. He was not part of the immediate family -- all five were brothers and sisters, as you probably guessed -- but a cousin, a very close cousin who was really the same as a brother. He was

especially close with Masquerade -- *close* here meaning that Masquerade understood the *secret* things in Smithsonian's character, the kind of woodrat he really was beneath his crusty attitudes. *Everyone*, I can assure you, has secret things in their character, and most of the time they don't even know it. Smithsonian often appeared impatient with the others, but Masquerade knew that he was really very fond of all of them and would do anything for them, but he just didn't want to show it.

There are people like that, you know, people who don't want to be *demonstrative*, an important word referring to those who don't want to show their real feelings because they don't want anyone to know they *have* real feelings.

Smithsonian, as you have probably guessed, was a kind of inventor. Smithsonian could solve all kinds of problems, build all sorts of clever things out of stuff he found lying around or stole from the people who lived in the big house, a loyal friend who would come to the rescue when necessary, a very useful type of woodrat, or person, to know.

"Hi, Smitherooney!" called Joyride. "What are you up to on this drizzly day in December?"

Smithsonian stuck his nose out of his nest. He wouldn't bother to invite them all in, even while it was raining, because there was no room for anyone. His nest was filled to overflowing with all sorts of things he had picked up and stolen: lengths of string and rope and wire, plastic and copper tubing, tin cans and plastic bottles he had stolen from the recycling barrels, flashlight batteries and sheetrock screws and corner braces and wire nuts of all colors, pliers and screwdrivers and drill bits, and all sorts of other stuff it would take too long to list, and he was always doing experiments with all this stuff, bent over the workbench made out of plywood he had stolen from the barn.

“Well, if you really want to know, and you’re not just trying to be sociable, which is what I suspect, I’m working on a way to build a stove in here, a cook-stove, so instead of chewing on cold subterranean fungi I can enjoy mushroom soup. There are, of course, many technical problems, but they’ve never stopped me before, and they won’t now. But enough of this small talk. What are you *really* here for? What’s the *problem* you want me to solve for you?” And he stared hard at them, making it clear that he was a busy woodrat with no time to waste.

Lifeboat cleared his throat and spoke with a trace of irritation in his voice.

“OK, Smithsonian. We can see that you’re busy, no time to waste, as usual, in just being *friendly*, just being a friendly regular old woodrat like the rest of us, so I’ll get right to the point. Won’t waste your precious time. I won’t even waste words telling you why this challenge arose. Here’s what it is. We need to sneak into the medicine chest in the bathroom in the big house and check it out for something we’re going to steal if it’s there and we’ll need you to build some kind of contraption so when we climb up that combination bookshelf and toilet paper thing under the medicine chest we’ll be able to get higher up and check out the shelves without spilling things all over the floor and waking up the people who might come down and cause us to run away and not accomplish our mission. If it’s not too much *trouble* for you. And notice how I said that all in one sentence, so as not to take up your terribly precious time!”

“What do you need to get in the medicine chest?”

Wilderness strode forward, waving around the leatherman tool he always carried in a pouch around his neck. He always took out his leatherman and waved it around when he wanted to show

he was really serious, really meant business, pointing at other woodrats with it, and in this case for the additional reason that he knew it would make Smithsonian envious. He knew, and was secretly happy, that Smithsonian did not have a leatherman of his own, and that probably in that moment would have liked to just leap forward and rip the leatherman out of his paw and run off with it. Wilderness had always felt a little rivalry with Smithsonian because both of them, Wilderness in the wilds of Nature and Smithsonian in his workshop, were very handy, very useful, very accomplished, and, as a matter of fact, very proud of their skills – a perfect set-up for *rivalry*. Rivalries happen all the time, everywhere from the basketball court to the Principal’s Office.

“We’re looking for some dental floss for me,” answered Wilderness. “I need it. It’s a case of standard procedure. By the book.”

“Right, Smithy,” said Masquerade, “and that’s why we need your help. The whole thing is for Karma,” she continued, speaking softly now. “We have a plan to help her shake off her sad mood, her moping and vacant look.”

And right after she said that she gave Smithsonian a significant look.

What’s a “significant look”? A “significant look” means that she is saying something important *without using words*. She has spoken before with Smithsonian about Karma’s condition and she knows he has a very soft spot in his heart for Karma. He had frowned and turned away silently when he learned about it. She is reminding him, without words, just by *a significant look*, of that soft spot in his heart. And he knows it. He *gets* it. Gets the *message*.

Karma had been listening to all this without saying a word. She knew it was not her place to add anything while others were

arguing her case. Here she was, disturbed by an enormous overwhelming suspicion, and she didn't think a distracting escapade in search of dental floss was the answer. And of course she was right, as we shall see.

But she didn't want to say that again when everyone was doing all they could for her. It seemed mean and tasteless, and would sabotage all the excitement about the escapade. "Sabotage," as used here, means that if she *did* say it again all the others would suddenly feel miserable, wretched and hopeless. Often, among grownups, someone will sabotage a situation, or a plan, or be *accused* of sabotaging the situation or plan, and then you can be sure there will be real trouble.

She *didn't* say, although she really *wanted* to say, "Oh don't bother about me, don't go to all this effort, I'll handle it myself," because she knew the escapade was under way, off the ground, and there was no turning back now. And, as a matter of fact, she was actually looking forward to the escapade in the bathroom, because, in addition to her *mysterious* streak, she was a very fun-loving and adventurous woodrat.

So Karma said nothing. But she knew that eventually they would have to consult Sidd, the Pond Turtle, for advice, maybe even Way Woo, the Seal, and maybe even Sophy, the Great Horned Owl, about her suspicion. Which, as you will see, they certainly will.

Smithsonian, looking around at them one by one, accepted the challenge Lifeboat had described in one long sentence and made up his mind. It was for Karma, and he had a soft spot in his heart for her.

“OK. You can count on me. I’ll get to work right away. We’ll meet under the house, by the batteries, at midnight. I’ll have something to do the job.” And he turned to go back into his nest.

Masquerade said, nodding her head, “Good. We knew we could count on you.

“Lifeboat said gruffly, “Good show, Smithy.”

Wilderness pointed at Smithsonian with his leatherman, innocently forgetting that Smithsonian didn’t *like* to be reminded of his leatherman, and said, “You da man!”

Karma said, “Thanks, Smithy. Whatever happens, you’re the one we came to first.”

But when the others had all run off, and before Smithsonian could get back into his nest, Masquerade ran up and tapped him on the shoulder.

“There’s something else I want you to work on, Smithy. Something that will be a real challenge for you, but I know you can do it.”

She whispered in his ear.

“What? What a crazy idea! But I’ll work on it, try to have it ready by tonight. I’ll have it down there under the house when we assemble. They’ll be scared to death!”

And that’s the end of Chapter One. And you know what? I’m excited! The Great Woodrat Adventure is now beginning! They have no idea what lies in store for them, and neither do you!

Chapter Two

A Surprise Under the House

Now in this chapter, Chapter Two, I am going to tell you about the daring dental floss escapade in the bathroom, the plan, figured out by Lifeboat, to *distract* Karma from being *preoccupied*. Most of the time daring escapades take place *outside*, in pickup trucks filled with laughing teen-agers, or at high school football games, not in bathrooms, although there may have been some that you and I don't know about and people have kept secret. But this bathroom, on this dark rainy night in midwinter, right up here on this hill, was a rare exception to that rule.

They arrived under the house one by one.

Smithsonian got there first. He wanted to be first so no one would see him dragging in the surprise, the “crazy idea” Masquerade had whispered to him about. But I won't tell you now what it was, because I want you to be surprised when all the others are surprised, so you can *share in* their surprise.

This surprise, however, actually began, not with the happy cries of delight we usually hear when someone has been surprised,

for example, with a really neat birthday present, or when they are told they have won a billion dollars in the lottery, but with *sheer terror* when they all first saw what Smithsonian had dragged in. Just you wait and see! *Sheer terror*, by the way, doesn't mean terror you can *see* through, like a thin stocking, nor very *steep* terror, as in a sheer drop off a cliff, but very *serious* terror. It means that the surprise, at first, will be very frightening, but then everything will be okay.

Next to arrive was Lifeboat, old solid brown Lifeboat, hugging tightly his emergency supplies and squinting in the feeble light of Smithsonian's stolen flashlight at the big batteries stored under the house. They were making a faint humming sound.

"Hmmm..." he thought to himself. "A humming sound. Electricity. Shocks! *Shocks!* You can get a shock if you touch those things the wrong way. Especially tonight, when it's wet down here."

He inched away from the batteries, an inch at a time, making sure his tail was on the other side. Smithsonian was watching him with a faint smile. Because he knew what the surprise was. It was a *faint* smile, but not a *mean* smile, because Smithsonian knew that after the sheer terror everything was going to be okay.

The next to slip in through the opening where the water enters the house was Joyride. They both glimpsed her four white feet skittering over the mud and *detritus* -- a good strong word meaning here the bent nails and stripped screws and pieces of wire and pipe and dried gobs of pipe dope and Teflon tape and rusty fittings left behind after hard work under the house -- as she burst in crying happily "Let's go for it! All we have is NOW!"

"Quiet, you thoughtless thing," whispered Lifeboat. "We might wake someone up! And what's that I see in your ear? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's an ear-ring, Sailor!" She turned her head so he could see it better. "This afternoon I finally decided to really wear an ear-ring, just *one* ear-ring, the cool style, as I've always wanted to. I found it on a dresser in the house. I think it's a real diamond!"

She quickly turned to Smithsonian. "Smitherooney! Did you build the thing we can use to climb up to the medicine chest? Where is it?"

But Smithsonian, shining the flashlight at the batteries, causing Lifeboat to suddenly snap his head around and clutch his emergency pack, just answered, "You'll see. No hurry." And he kept the flashlight pointing at the batteries because he wanted to make sure no one could see his faint smile, which was still there, and the mischievous gleam in his eye. Because he knew what the surprise was.

Next to arrive was Masquerade. She was wearing a rhinoceros mask. They only knew it was her, and not Karma or Wilderness, by her markings, the black and white streaks.

"Neat!" cried Joyride. "A rhino disguise! Anyone who sees you will be shocked out of their pants."

"Shocked out of their pants" is another *figure of speech*. It doesn't mean people will actually jump right out of their pants when they see Masquerade with the rhino mask, leaving their pants lying there on the floor, which would be very hard to do anyway because of belts, but that they will be very very *startled*, very confused and alarmed. Shocking people out of their pants is a way

of giving them a surprise that is big, totally unexpected and disturbing.

“That was just the idea, Joy-Joy. You’re shrewder than I thought you were.”

And, as we will see again and again in this story, Joyride really *is* shrewder than she appears to be!

“I was thinking ahead, something I specialize in,” Masquerade announced. “Life is full of ugly surprises and shocking discoveries, you know, or you *should* know. What if we’re discovered? Discovered coming out of the bathroom. What then? Well, I’ll run forward, wearing this mask, and I’ll make a frightening grunt or slurping sound, and anyone who sees me, a little furry creature with the head of a rhinoceros, will absolute *freak*! Just completely *freak out*! While they’re freaking, we make our escape! Simple? Simple.”

Lifeboat frowned to himself. “You know,” he thought, “that might actually work!” He took a deep breath and relaxed a little. He muttered to himself, “Masquerade has something there, thinking ahead. Better safe than sorry!” That was one of his favorite sayings, right up there with “Look before you leap!” and “Count me out!”

Karma and Wilderness arrived together. Wilderness had his leatheman tool and was waving it around in a belligerent threatening manner, thrusting and brandishing it like a sword.

“Really ugly under here,” he scowled. “Reminds me of what it must be like to be a miner. Slaving under ground, danger of a cave-in, tricked by the company bosses, never out in the sun under the blue sky. Let’s hit the trail, get out of here, get this show on the road!”

He squinted at Smithsonian who was still shining the flashlight on the batteries, smiling faintly. "What do you have to show us, Smithy? We're counting on you."

Karma turned and stared at Smithsonian. As soon as she did this he aimed the flashlight at the ground and felt a pang. A pang in his heart. You remember that Smithsonian has a special place in his heart for Karma? Well, there are *two* things in his heart now: a special place, and a pang. And *pang*, as used here, Smithsonian's pang, means that Smithsonian suddenly felt very worried about Karma, worried about where all this about "more here than meets the eye" might be leading, where it was heading, whether there was going to be a happy ending or a sad ending. He felt this pang in his heart, and then suddenly thought to himself, "Okay, let's get on with it."

And he aimed the flashlight behind him, so everyone could see what was there.

What do you think was there?

It's the surprise, of course! The surprise Masquerade had asked him to build when she ran up and tapped him on the shoulder that afternoon. But what was it? What was that surprise, the surprise that's going to cause sheer terror? *What was it that made all of them (except Masquerade) open their eyes wide, made Wilderness drop his leatherman and Lifeboat shriek with terror and Joyride do a backflip and Karma blink with horrified disbelief and Smithsonian laugh out loud?*

"HELIX!" they all (except Masquerade) shouted together, and froze with sheer terror! They *freaked!*

Yes! Yes, I tell you! There was Helix, the dog who bites rabbits in half, staring at them with two blazing eyes, one eye blue-green and the other red-purple!

"OK OK OK!" shouted Masquerade, waving her paws with the motion people use when they want to calm people down. "It's not really Helix! It's a *model* of Helix! It just *looks* like Helix!"

"Right. Calm down," said Smithsonian calmly. "Calm down. See how it's not moving, how it just slumps there, staring at us? It's a model I made, just a cleverly conceived and constructed model I made in my workshop in record time. Masquerade's inspiration."

"But why?" moaned Lifeboat, "Why?" demanded Wilderness, "Why?" laughed Joyride, "Why?" murmured Karma, after they had all gotten over their terror. "Yes," bellowed Lifeboat, forgetting all about being quiet so no one would hear them. "*What's the big idea?*"

"It's a thought I had," said Masquerade thoughtfully. "You see, we can get *inside* it, through the mouth, and we can make it *move*, walk and trot around, using the machinery Smitherooney built inside it, so it will look just like the real Helix. We'll all be able to travel around the place without having to keep an eye out for Helix! It's a safety measure!"

Lifeboat then said *ironically*, meaning he was thinking just the *opposite* of what he was saying, "Wonderful! A truly wonderful idea. I can think of only one teeny-tiny problem with this great wonderful idea. And I can only hope the rest of you are thinking of it too. What if the real Helix sees us when we're happily prancing around in this cleverly conceived and constructed contraption? Anyone see any problem there?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it!" shouted Masquerade, feeling terribly embarrassed when she remembered that just a few minutes ago she had boasted about her skill at thinking ahead.

Wilderness was also remembering that boast, but he prudently decided not to mention it. There was an escapade in the bathroom to take care of, a chance that he would get some dental floss to hang his backpack with when he went camping, and he didn't want the whole thing to blow up in a big argument.

"Right!" declared Smithsonian. "When we get to it!" he repeated, wanting to show his solidarity with Masquerade so she wouldn't feel all alone and ashamed, even though he was really feeling very embarrassed because he hadn't thought about the oversight Lifeboat had pointed out.

"Bump into the real Helix?" cried Joyride wildly. "What a trip that would be! Far out! Let's go for it tomorrow!"

Lifeboat whirled. "Tomorrow? *Tomorrow?* I say *Never!*"

"Forget all this" exclaimed Wilderness. "Forget it! We have a job to do here! Get this show on the road!"

And let me quickly say something now, just to give you a quick tip about what's to come later on in this great woodrat adventure. Yes! They *will* decide to use the Helix double, and they *will* bump into the real Helix when they're stumbling around in the model! And it *will* be quite a trip, as Joyride hoped. That's really going to happen. Personally, I can't wait! Should be a scream! But let's get back to the story. A strange thing is about to happen.

Masquerade had all along been staring at the model of Helix, staring at the eyes, the one blue-green and the other red-purple,

because she had noticed that the eyes were actually constantly changing color. Now the one that had been blue-green was yellow-orange, and the one that had been red-purple was emerald-silver, and suddenly both of them were bright pink. The eyes kept pulsing and flickering, going through all the colors of the rainbow and many more than those seven colors, colors with strange names like puce and fawn and magenta and vermilion.

(A brief *aside* here, a *short* digression. There are actually many many colors with strange names. I come across those colors from time to time in my reading, and I always wonder what those colors really look like! Ecru! Cornflower! Buttercream! Cardinal! Seafoam! Blush! Distressed Antique White!)

She turned to Smithsonian. "Smithy. What are those eyes on Helix? How did you make them? I thought there were just going to be holes there, holes we could look through so we wouldn't trip on things or walk into trees when we're inside the model and walking around. What are those eyes?"

All the rest turned and stared with narrowed eyes into the colored eyes, wondering.

"I never built a ladder thing for climbing up from the bathroom bookshelf to the medicine chest so we could check for the dental floss," Smithsonian confessed. "I had a better idea."

"And what, pray tell, was that?" asked Lifeboat, in a voice reeking with skepticism.

"Jane April and Maria Tallchief" answered Smithsonian with a smile, ignoring the skepticism. "They can *fly* up to the medicine chest!" he cried triumphantly. "And they are Helix's eyes!"

And then the eyes flew right out of Helix's head! Yes they did! They were the hummingbirds, the beautiful hummingbirds, Jane April and Maria Tallchief!

"Wow!" shouted Wilderness.

"Double Wow," shouted Joyride.

"Okay," laughed Karma. *"Looks like there's more here than meets the eye!"*

Everyone joined in her laughter, appreciating her clever wit, the *play on words*. They suddenly felt enthusiastic about the escape, because they realized it could really work with the help of the hummingbirds. They forgot about the Double Helix dilemma and the terrible fright they had been in when they first noticed the model.

Wilderness picked up the leatherman tool he had dropped.

Lifeboat tightened the straps on his emergency pack.

Masquerade adjusted her rhinoceros mask.

Joyride patted her gleaming diamond ear-ring.

And Karma cried, "The game's afoot, my brave friends! To the dryer vent! The dryer! And the bathroom!"

Jane April and Maria Tallchief led the way. Smithsonian, with a *broad not faint* smile now, because he was proud of his good idea about the hummingbirds, went second, shining his flashlight for the rest, who each tossed a suspicious but admiring glimpse in the direction of the Helix model before they disappeared into the dryer vent.

Far out! What a crew of woodrats! Will they find dental floss in the medicine chest? *Yes!* They were wondering about that. Will Karma be distracted enough to forget about things that don't meet the eye, the whole point of the escapade? *No!* But who cares? The adventure is off the ground, the action is beginning!

Many adventures in life, I can safely assure you, begin with a suspicion.

Chapter Three

The Adventure in the Bathroom

They crept silently up the dryer vent into the dryer. Although all the woodrats looked much the same except for their markings, they were having different feelings, different thoughts and emotions, as they dropped in a clump into the dryer, because they had different *characters*, just as all the kids you know have different characters.

So a little digression is called for here, not as long as the digression about Thomas Hardy and the Titanic, the great ship that went down to the bottom of the sea, but longer than an aside.

What does “character” mean?

Character means *the kind of kid or grown-up you are*, and sometimes it’s very hard to *read* someone else’s character, to guess what they are really like, whether, for example, they are *mean* or *nice*, and many terrible mistakes are made in this area, mistakes people sometimes regret for a very long time, even their entire lives, not only because it’s hard to read character, but also because some people, even some kids, *pretend*. They hide their true

character, sometimes without even knowing it! You see how tricky life can be!

And one more really remarkable thing about character. You would think that grown-ups, because they have had more experience dealing with the mystery of other people, would be better at reading character, would be better at it than kids. But that may not be true! Sometimes kids can tell right off the bat that someone all the grown-ups thought was *nice* was really *mean*, and someone they thought was *mean* was really *nice*! And this reminds me of Masquerade's idea, and Shakespeare's too, that everything is a play in which people are playing roles, which would certainly make the problem of reading character even harder!

As I was saying, no two woodrats and no two people are the same, and all the sorrows and joys of life, all the good and bad luck, all the sighs and tears and irritation, as well as all the smiles and hugs and kisses, come because of these very stubborn differences in character.

By now, as you are getting to know these woodrats better, getting a picture of their characters, you can probably guess how each one felt in the dryer.

Joyride's heart was pounding with excited anticipation. Joyride *lives in the moment*, a very popular figure of speech these days among certain types. It has an up side and a down side, of course, like so many life styles. If you *always* live in the moment, for example, as some people do, you are certainly heading for trouble. If you *never* live in the moment, you might be missing out on life!

Masquerade, finding it harder to see clearly through her rhinoceros mask than she thought it would be, was looking ahead as hard as she could – because she still felt that was her specialty despite the embarrassing exchange with Lifeboat just a few minutes

ago -- concentrating only on the plan, thinking about what might happen and how they would react in an unexpected situation.

Lifeboat was worried, of course, apprehensive, and thinking that he should have made up an excuse for not being able to participate in the escapade, although he never would have *really* done that because, as we shall soon see, he is a real trooper when there's an emergency. As there soon will be.

Wilderness, a woodrat of action, was keen to get to what he liked to call *the moment of truth*, the moment when he would have an opportunity to show how brave and resourceful he was.

Smithsonian, whose character was in a way deeper than the others -- *deeper* as used here meaning he thought deep serious thoughts when he was alone and enjoying privacy and solitude in his workshop -- was now ruminating about Karma's future. He was speculating about the *future*, not living in the *moment*.

And Karma? Deep in her heart there was a murmur, a heart murmur, murmuring to her that, although this escapade was truly distracting, and she was right now *into* it, and she was really grateful for the others going to so much trouble, facing real danger on her account, it would only be distracting while it was happening, and that when it was over she would still be troubled, be right back where she started from, still thinking that there was more here than meets the eye. The Suspicion, this particular Suspicion, was not the kind to go away so easily. And, I can safely assure you, that if *you* ever have this Suspicion, you might just as well think of it as your Karma. You'll have to follow where it leads.

Smithsonian, with his flashlight turned off, carefully pushed open the door of the dryer. He knew just how hard to push because he had done it many times before. He peeked out. There was just a

little bit of light coming from the inverter in the catbox room. He heard nothing but the sound of the rain.

“All clear,” he whispered to the others.

Jane April and Maria Tallchief, glittering even in the dim light like beautiful little ruby and sapphire jewels, flew out in their hovering darting hummingbird style.

The rest followed, slipping silently to the floor, in single file, Smithsonian last. They turned the corner into the bathroom. Following the gestures of Smithsonian, the rest climbed up onto the toilet and huddled together in the dim light of the flashlight. Looking up, they saw the eerie blue glow of the pilot light in the Paloma water heater reflected in the medicine chest mirrors. Joyride could hardly keep from clapping her paws. Wilderness lowered his leatherman tool, his eyes fixed on the medicine chest. Lifeboat was certain he heard a sound, but was too paralyzed with fear to speak.

Jane April and Maria Tallchief poked open the three doors of the medicine chest with their needle-like beaks and began to check out the contents.

And now I'm going to quickly tell you a curious thing. Hummingbirds don't speak. They can listen and understand, but they don't speak. No one has ever heard a humming bird speak, just as no one has ever seen an elephant fly. No one knows whether this is because they *choose* not to speak, bearing witness to the old, and I think very important saying, “Speech is silver, Silence is golden,” or because they *can't* speak through those long needle-like beaks they use to suck the nectar out of flowers. It's one of those mysteries we find all over the place in Nature, like how banana slugs can locate and find their way into bowls of dog food, how mosquitoes always buzz directly into our ears in total darkness,

how mice can squeeze through openings smaller than their heads, and so on.

But Smithsonian had instructed them. They knew what they were looking for. So, while everyone was staring up at them holding their breath, they ignored the Ibuprofen, Tecnu for poison oak, Vitamin C, Bactine, Nature's Prostate Remedy, Hydrogen Peroxide, more Ibuprofen, Motherwort Black Cohosh Compound, Western Family Calamine Lotion, and Witch Hazel.

All the woodrats were thinking, "Maybe there isn't any dental floss there! What will we do then?"

Jane April and Maria Tallchief kept going along the rows. Until... *they found it!* A little white box with a green sweet-smelling thread sticking out! Dental floss! Jane and Maria exchanged glances. Maria poked out the box and dropped it into Smithsonian's waiting paws. Everyone, as you know, had been holding their breath, watching *breathlessly*, and here was the *moment of truth* Wilderness had been waiting for.

When you wait for something to happen in a challenging situation, that's called *suspense*. When it *happens*, that's the *moment of truth*.

Wilderness suppressed a cry of triumph, a victory cry, something like a Viking Berserker's battle roar, his personal cry he always came out with when he discovered some secret thing, like a lost Global Positioning System or set of keys or digital camera, on his backpacking trips. Now he would be able to hang his pack without worrying about bears!

Maria Tallchief and Jane April flew out the bathroom window, which just happened to be open, vaguely recalling a tune they had once heard about someone who "came *in* through the

bathroom window.” The rest dropped quietly down from the toilet and lined themselves up again, preparing to climb back into the dryer and, “make tracks” – a figure of speech which doesn’t mean actually *make* tracks, like paw- or hoof- or foot-prints in mud, but means *get out fast*. The job was done, the dangerous escapade was a success, and everyone wanted to get right back into their nests as soon as possible. They rounded the corner to the dryer, Smithsonian in the lead.

And there, staring right at him in the light of his flashlight, was Rebar the Cat.

He was shocked out of his pants. He stopped dead in his tracks. He almost freaked. But, with great effort, he controlled himself. Masquerade, right behind him but not seeing Rebar, whispered, “What’s up? Why did you stop?”

“Masquerade,” he whispered in a strange choking voice, “we have a situation. We have a problem. It’s an emergency.”

“What is it?”

“Rebar. I’m looking straight at Rebar.”

Masquerade turned around and whispered to Joyride: “Emergency. Rebar.” Joyride whispered the message to Wilderness. Wilderness whispered the message to Karma. Karma whispered the message to Lifeboat. Lifeboat groaned, “I *knew* I heard something!”

For a moment they all froze.

And then Karma, calmly and quietly, said: “Everyone walk right out there and look Rebar in the eye. We can handle this. No need to be afraid.”

And the five of them, both amazed and encouraged, did just that. Clearly, there was something about Karma's character they had failed to read!

Have you ever looked into a cat's eyes when the cat was looking back at you? Can you tell what the cat is thinking? If it's thinking of anything at all. They just stare at you for awhile, with those strange narrow eyeballs, and then, and you can never tell when, suddenly turn away, maybe to lick their paw or go back to sleep or dart away. And what about *this*? Sometimes you turn around and discover that the cat is sitting right there staring at you! You can't help wondering if the cat just started to stare at you or if it has been staring at you for a long time without your noticing. Does anyone know what cats are really all about? They are very mysterious, and if your family has a cat you certainly know what I'm talking about and probably have stories to tell about your cat.

So they walked right out, joining Smithsonian, and stared back at Rebar, there in the faint light of the flashlight and the glow from the inverter. And each one did something that reflected their character.

Smithsonian, holding his paws very steady, shined the flashlight straight in Rebar's eyes, hoping to blind her – which doesn't really mean make her blind so she can never see again, but *dazzle* her, make it hard for her to see them right now.

Masquerade, in her rhinoceros mask, making frightening grunts and slurping sounds, charged furiously forward and backwards in a very threatening manner.

Joyride, turning sideways and jumping up and down, hoping that Rebar might be confused or scared by the dancing

gleam of her diamond ear-ring, shouted angrily, "Scram! Go back to your litterbox! We won't let you ruin our escapade!"

Wilderness, his brow furrowed with fearless determination, his sharp little teeth bared, opened his leatherman tool to the pliers position and brandished it furiously, shouting imitations of Japanese cries of defiance. He had once been secretly watching a samurai movie in the stove room where the VCR was kept.

And Lifeboat? When the chips were down and it was cards on the table, Lifeboat always came through.

And we're not talking here about *real* chips and cards, of course. These phrases are *figures of speech*, with which you are certainly now familiar. They mean something like the *moment of truth*, the time when, in a gambling den or Native American casino or someone's monthly poker game, everything is going to be decided right now one way or another, when someone is going to win the game and someone is going to lose, and as used here, those phrases mean: *When you have to courageously confront Rebar.*

Lifeboat always came through, always overcame his worries and showed that beneath them his character was very brave. An emergency? Well, as you remember, Lifeboat carried an emergency pack! He tore it open, looked through it for a second, and whipped out his rubber bands! And then he walked right up to Rebar and shot one straight at her, hitting her in the whiskers!

Rebar flinched, blinked, but held her ground, still staring at them in that way of cats which makes it impossible to tell what they're thinking, if they are thinking at all.

And then Karma walked out in front of the others. She walked right up to Rebar and stopped a few inches from her nose. She was truly amazing. The rest all realized that there was

something about Karma they had never suspected, that even now they could barely understand, that they had never even *begun* to correctly read her character.

She looked at Rebar with a kind smile on her face. No trace of fear or anger. She was perfectly calm.

She said, "It's Okay, Rebar, Okay. You can go back now to one of the special places where you like to sleep." And she actually patted Rebar on the nose.

And Rebar turned and did just that. Turned and walked away.

The others all looked wonderingly at each other. The emergency was over. What they faced now was a mystery.

Smithsonian handed the dental floss to Wilderness, who closed his leatherman tool. Lifeboat put the rest of his rubber bands back into his emergency pack. Masquerade removed her rhinoceros mask. They looked at Karma.

They knew there was some kind of mystery here. Had Rebar understood what Karma said? Did she leave because Karma told her to? Was that possible? Or was it because a rubber band hit her in the whiskers, and the flashlight was dazzling her, and the woodrat with a rhinoceros head freaked her out, and the wild samurai cries from the woodrat with the leatherman tool alarmed her, and the flickering glitter of the dancing ear-ring seemed like some kind of ghost?

All of them, except Karma, asked themselves these questions.

They wearily climbed up into the dryer. Smithsonian pulled the door shut, they filed silently through the dryer vent, down under the house past the humming of the batteries and the Helix double, out through the opening by the water filter.

The first faint light of morning reflected from the puddles of rain. The sky was clear, and they knew a sunny day was dawning. The escapade was over, it had been successful, and they were all exhausted. But they all, except Karma, were lost in thought, questions in their minds.

What was Karma all about? Her character was mysterious. Would this distraction put an end to her preoccupation with that suspicion about “more here than meets the eye”? Somehow, they all doubted it.

They returned to their three nests, lost in thought. What exactly had happened on this escapade? Masquerade and Wilderness didn’t say anything to Karma when they arrived at their nest. All three silently went to sleep. Smithsonian gave one last curious look at Karma, said nothing, and trudged off to his workshop to putter awhile before going to bed.

Back in their nest, Lifeboat said to Joyride, with a little secret smile lighting up his face, “Joy-Joy, my friend, I think the future is going to be full of surprises for us woodrats “

He’s right. Right beyond his wildest dreams!

Chapter Four

Wilderness Makes a Big Mistake with Dental Floss

Two weeks had passed since the escapade in the bathroom. There had been rainy days, one big storm where a culvert under the woodshed got blocked with mud. Then the sky cleared and for a week they enjoyed cold, clear sunny days. Today was such a day, a beautiful sunny day in January. There was plenty to nibble on in the garden, seeds and plant stems, and the subterranean fungi were all around waiting to be unearthed by their busy paws.

But there had been, among the woodrats, and it can't be denied, a change in *mood* since the escapade. They didn't *feel* the same, and they didn't *relate* to each other as they had before. This sort of change takes place, usually, after something *big* happens, like a dangerous bathroom escapade in the life of woodrats, or, among people, after a really terrible argument, or when someone confesses they are really unhappy and have been only *pretending* to be happy, or the discovery that someone had been keeping an important secret for a long time. The mood changes.

What is a *mood*?

Moods, as you probably know, are *the ways we feel*. Sometimes moods can last for a long time, and sometimes they come and go. They can be cheerful and they can be sad, they can be good and they can be bad, sometimes for no reason at all.

“What a good mood you’re in today!” people say to someone they know, often being totally wrong and causing that someone to pretend to be happy when they’re really not. Or they say, which is often very irritating to the person they say it to, and only makes it worse, “Why are you in such a bad mood?” People who have long sad moods are usually called *moody*, and there are many who are like that. People say, “She, or he, *can’t shake it off*.” Others have moods that are always changing back and forth from good to bad, sometimes very quickly; these changes are called *mood swings*, and they are even harder to shake off than a bad mood. Moods are a very big part of all our lives.

It was because of the escapade that their moods had changed.

Instead of being *cheerful* woodrats, just enjoying simple down-to-earth woodrat life, eating and sleeping and stealing things, and being careful, and keeping an eye out for Helix, they were now *worried* woodrats, worried that something had happened among them that would maybe change their lives forever. Which is just what Lifeboat had hinted at in the end of the last chapter. They felt that they were *caught up in something bigger than they were*. Which doesn’t mean bigger than 17 inches including the tail, the average size of a dusky-footed woodrat, but *really* big, the whole *new situation* they were in now. They all knew that Karma was still preoccupied with her suspicion. They all knew that the dental floss distraction had only been temporary. And they all knew that there was something mysterious about Karma’s character that they hadn’t known about before. They knew there was more to come.

Karma's suspicion was the start of something, a story that was going to unfold.

So how did they deal with this new situation?

Okay. They were all *thinking* about it in the back of their minds, and, at the same time, trying to *put* it all from their minds. Just forget about it and carry on, return to *business as usual*, a common figure of speech which here means *forget* about Karma's suspicion and the escapade that didn't work and just carry on *as if nothing had ever happened* and hope that the suspicion would go away by itself. Just dry up and blow away.

And this is a very common reaction! It's very common for grownups to try to carry on as if something, which really *did* happen – a remark, a lie, an important difference of opinion, a money thing, an outburst of ungovernable fury -- had *never* happened, to *pretend* it never happened. This is hard to do, and grownups try hard to do it, and that's what the woodrats tried to do, probably what *anyone* would try to do who wasn't looking for trouble. They never talked about what had happened. They *thought* about it, but they didn't *talk* about it.

But *I* know, because I'm the author, and *you* know, because I'm telling you, and the *woodrats* know, even though they don't talk about it, that Karma's suspicion, that little stubborn suspicion that won't go away, is the thing that starts off the Great Woodrat Adventure. Like a magic seed that's going to grow into something tremendous, into a great challenge, a great chance, and a great journey.

Let's return to the beautiful sunny Saturday in January. Something quite amazing is about to happen that will *definitely* make them, and all of us too, you and me, completely forget about the suspicion and the escapade and the mood change. Amazing

things *clear the air* -- a figure of speech that has nothing to do with actual air, the air we breathe, the air with which we blow out the candles on our birthday cakes -- but means instead *clear away the messes that develop in our minds and enable us to make a fresh start*.

Masquerade, Lifeboat, Karma and Joyride were foraging down in the area, called by the people the *staging area*, where the firewood for next winter was piled up. They were searching for signs of the snowdrops, wild violets and western dog violets that bloom usually in February, hoping that maybe some had bloomed early. It was about noon, when, at this time of year, the area was half in sun and half in shade. Robins were hopping and chirping in the apple trees, which hadn't yet been pruned and looked like huge pin cushions. They had seen Jack and Helix sleeping by the picnic table in the meadow, and knew from experience that they would be lying there for a long time.

It was very pleasant to be there, a very pleasant place to be on a beautiful cloudless afternoon.

"What a pleasant day this is!" remarked Lifeboat. "How wonderful to be here on a beautiful cloudless afternoon when nothing unusual is happening!"

"I have to agree with you on that," yawned Masquerade. "We needed a break," she added, here making a rather thoughtless *indirect reference* to the bathroom escapade, *indirect* meaning here that she didn't actually *mention* the escapade.

Karma gave her a quick sharp look, because she had *caught* the indirect reference, but said nothing.

They nibbled, Lifeboat told a really funny joke about a banana slug and a quail, chatted about this and that, and took

occasional naps in the drowsy warm afternoon. After awhile, they all fell asleep.

Masquerade was the first to wake up. She had suddenly remembered something.

"Where's Wilder?" she asked in a tone that was half confused and half alarmed, waking everyone up and looking around. "He was supposed to be back this morning."

"Back from where?" asked Lifeboat, immediately looking around also, alarmed by the sound of an alarmed tone.

"Back from his Vision Quest," Masquerade answered.

"What Vision Quest? How could Wilderness know how to go on a Vision Quest?" Lifeboat had been spending a lot of time alone, trying to shake off the mood, and hadn't heard anything about Wilderness's Vision Quest.

"You weren't there, you old Sailor," said Joyride, cheerfully, in a poking-fun manner. "Must have been off moping somewhere, like you do!"

"Right! Moping somewhere!" said Masquerade, not at all in a poking-fun manner but a little sharply.

Masquerade tended to be a bit *judgmental*, an important word, used very often by nervous grownups who want to live in harmony with each other at all costs, which means having a lot of really strong opinions about the way other people behave. People who are judgmental think they are always right and because of that have an obligation to set everyone straight. Masquerade thought Lifeboat should be more friendly, more outgoing, spend more time with the rest of them, although, curiously enough, she didn't feel

that way about Smithsonian -- with whom, you remember, she had a special closeness -- who spent almost *all* his time alone puttering in his crowded workshop nest. Judgmental people are often unfair like that, picking on others, and are often with good reason accused of it!

"Now just hold on a minute there, with that tone of voice..." began Lifeboat.

Karma, a *peace-maker* type, seeing an argument between Masquerade and Lifeboat might be coming down the pike, meaning here *on its way into the staging area*, quickly intervened and answered Lifeboat's question.

"Wilderness told us he was going off on a special backpacking trip called a Vision Quest. When we asked him what that meant, he said he had overheard the people in the big house talking about the people who used to live here a long time ago, and that those people who lived here a long time ago would go off into the woods hoping to see something special. He said it was standard procedure."

Karma had felt, by the way, that this Vision Quest might have some connection with her suspicion, and she intended to ask Wilderness about it when he returned. She didn't mention this to the others because she didn't want to say anything that would remind everyone about what they were trying so hard to forget.

"Oh right!" snapped Masquerade. "Like he always does. Standard procedure, by the book. I wonder if he has the faintest idea what a Vision Quest is!"

Lifeboat frowned, looking around. "And you say he was supposed to be back this morning?"

"Yes," answered Joyride, feeling worried and excited at the same time, unlike lifeboat, who was only worried. "Do you think we should go look for him? Form a search party?"

Suddenly they all exchanged glances.

"We certainly should!" said Karma. "And we should go get our search party equipment, notify Smithsonian, and leave as soon as we can. It's starting to get dark."

They had been nibbling and talking and napping for a long time. They had lost track of time. The sun was almost down.

What had happened? Why hadn't Wilderness returned when he said he would? I'll tell you. He had had a *misadventure*, which is exactly the opposite of an *adventure*. At the very moment when the search party finally set out, in darkness, Wilderness was hanging by one foot on a dental floss rope, upside down, from a big tree near the pond!

Here's how it happened.

Wilderness had set out on his Vision Quest on a Friday, at about three o'clock. He had great confidence in himself, thought very highly of himself, as a matter of fact, and had figured that a sturdy experienced woodrat like him, a *natural*, could easily conduct a successful Vision Quest on an overnight and be back Saturday with a full report.

He strode down the road to the pond, whistling a happy tune. He passed the two culverts, noticing that the stream into the lower culvert was dry. The big rains hadn't come yet. He was carrying an extra-large pack in case the Vision Quest called for collecting things.

Here's what he was thinking, his *stream of consciousness*, a new term for us, used by people like me who write books, which means *the thoughts which are running through our minds*.

You have probably noticed that when we are doing things that don't require close attention, like just strolling along somewhere or just sitting and doing nothing, rather than fixing a flashlight, which does require close attention sometimes, or playing soccer, which is so exciting that we can't think of anything except what we are doing right then, thoughts just stream through our minds, one thought triggering another thought and that one turning into another so you never know what you're going to think next. That's the stream of consciousness. It's full of surprises, and very often, for a great many people, no different from worrying.

"Vision Quest. I wonder what that is? It'll come naturally to me because I'm an outdoor woodrat, a lover of Nature, probably very like those people who used to live here a long time ago and invented Vision Quests. Exactly what is a "quest"? Vision, I know, has something to do with your eyes. I have fine eyes. Great eyes. I can see clearly, very far. I can see all the way to the top of that fir tree. Tall fir tree. I wonder if that's the fir tree Fall Guy fell from. No, I think that happened way down below, where the people call the lower forty. Forty what? Forty trees? A number. I'm also good with numbers. Have to be when you're an outdoors type like me, using maps, making calculations about distances, directions, inches of dental floss. Three and four make seven. Seven and four make eleven. Eleven take away seven makes three again! A circle. Round circles. Of course, a circle is always round, so you could just say circle. Probably some fungi over there. There too. Pack's getting heavy already. I'm tough. So is Smithsonian. He wishes he had my leatherman tool. That's one thing he'll never get. Masquerade. She's tough too. Not much of a sense of humor. Has a lot of opinions. I have opinions too. Not as many as Masquerade. Vision. Eyes."

By this time he was down by the pond, looking out over the water. He knew that the pond turtle, Sidd, who had some kind of reputation for giving good advice, lived down here in the pond. He had seen him a few times, but they had never been introduced, and never exchanged a word. He remembered that Karma had once said something about asking Sidd for advice about her suspicion, what it might mean.

He looked for Sidd, and even called his name, but no one appeared. Which doesn't mean that Sidd wasn't watching him from just below the water. He was.

He dropped his pack and lay down by the water's edge. It was very quiet and dreamy there, in the fading sun, the dragonflies circling over the water, making a faint buzzing sound as they snapped up the tasty unfortunate little bugs, little losers. The dragonflies: Count Thinktank, the egotistical not-too-bright leader of the Messengers, Count Genepool, Count Gigabyte and Count Blackhole, his eager flunkies. They were watching him too. He thought he was alone, but he wasn't.

And the dragonflies had not tried to forget Karma's suspicion at all. Remember the ravens told them about it? Oh no. Just the opposite. They intended to do something about it. They intended to straighten her out. They *knew* she must be wrong, for the simple reason that she disagreed with them, a conclusion that is reached millions of times every day among grownups.

Wilderness dozed off. When he awoke it was almost dark. He jumped to his feet. "Time to hang my pack," he thought.

And here's where he made his very big mistake.

He got out his dental floss. He knew that it was standard procedure to throw a line over a branch with a small weight, like a

pebble or a little stick, tied to the end. When that end came down, you tied your pack to it and pulled it up high where the bears couldn't reach it. You lowered it in the morning for breakfast. It was hard, a real challenge for a small woodrat, to throw a line over a branch, but Wilderness didn't know the meaning of "give up," and after many failures he succeeded. We have seen something of his determined *character*, his total fearlessness. Wilderness has what is sometimes called *sand*, or *grit*, or *guts*, or *gumption*, or *chutzpah*, all figures of speech again, not meaning *real* sand, grit or guts – or *gumption* or *chutzpah*, whatever they are -- which mixed together would make a disgusting mess, but meaning courage, bravery, daring. Wilderness, as he said in his stream of consciousness, was tough.

He tied the end of the rope to his pack. But when he tried to pull the pack up over the branch, he discovered that it was too heavy! It was heavier than he was! What to do?

Wilderness thought. "This is really very simple. A problem easy to solve, a challenge easy to meet. All I have to do is tie myself to something, like this bush right here, and then when I pull, using only my mighty front paws, the pack will have to go up! One of us will have to go up, either the pack or me, because I will be making the rope shorter when I pull on it, and it can't be me that goes up because I am tied to this bush! It'll have to be the pack! Wait till I tell the others how I figured this out!"

He tied himself to the bush with a short length of dental floss. He pulled hard on the floss that went over the branch. And it worked! He pulled very hard with his mighty paws and the pack went up. When it bumped up against the branch and stopped the job was done. He held onto the floss very tight. He was being stretched between the floss tying him to the bush and the floss he was holding onto that went over the branch, holding up the heavy pack.

He thought, still holding tight: “Now I have only two things left to do and I can begin my Vision Quest. All I have to do is untie *myself* from the bush and then tie the rope holding the *pack* to the bush.”

And here – Alas! which means, How sad! – he made his very big mistake. The mistake that turned his adventure into a misadventure.

He didn’t think which of the two things to do first: untie himself or tie the pack! Can you see which he should have done first? Tie the pack, of course! If he does it the other way he’ll go straight up into the air!

And that’s exactly what happened. As soon as he untied himself he started to go up as the pack went down. And when he tried to quickly let go the end of the floss tangled around his foot and the pack hit the ground with a thud. And that’s how he wound up hanging upside down from the branch. There, in the dark, down by the pond, hanging upside down from a branch.

Sidd, the pond turtle, saw the whole thing. He groaned, thinking what a pain in the neck this was for him, and crawled up out of the water and set out on a journey that would take a long time for a turtle who moves so slowly. He knew someone who could help. Someone who could climb a tree. Someone who had disappeared mysteriously over a year ago and was really still alive. Can you guess who it is?

And let me say this now, before we get back to the search party. This misadventure of Wilderness was a case of *a plan backfiring*, another very common figure of speech, very common because plans backfire all the time, so often that some people, whose plans have almost always backfired, just give up on making

plans at all and decide to leave everything to Fate, as Thomas Hardy did. Plans backfire when everything turns out just the opposite of what we had planned and we have no one to blame but ourselves.

Did you think that Wilderness might have been a little *too* sure of himself, a little *too* self-confident? I think he was. That's why his plan backfired, why very many plans backfire. But you know what? Wilderness is a winner. When a winner's plan backfires, the winner just says, "It was a good thing! I learned a lesson!" And when this misadventure is over, after the big surprise that's going to happen down by the pond, that's exactly what you're going to hear him say.

So it's Saturday now, almost Saturday night. Wilderness had been dangling by his foot since the night before, getting very hungry and thirsty, but singing brave songs all the time and thinking what a great Vision Quest this must be. He wasn't really worried because he knew the others would come and find him when he didn't return. The search party, now joined by Smithsonian and equipped with search party equipment, was setting out from the staging area. And someone Sidd had found was running back up from the lower forty as fast as he could.

Are you excited? A little tense? I am! Strange as it may sound, even though I am writing this book I don't know what's going to happen next!

The search party passed the two culverts where the stream was dry and Wilderness had been having his stream of consciousness. Two streams, one dry, one full.

Suddenly Joyride shouted, "I hear singing! I hear Wilderness singing!"

"I hear him too," cried Karma.

Their hearts leapt, a figure of speech again which doesn't really mean, of course, that their hearts, their blood-pumping organic hearts inside them, jumped up, which is quite impossible, but that they were suddenly very *happy*, very *relieved*, *overjoyed*, because they knew now that Wilderness was not only still alive but that he was OK. *Very* OK. He was singing one of his favorite Beatles tunes, "I Want to Hold Your Hand."

They broke into a run, stumbling and bumping into each other because it was so dark. Yes, their hearts *leapt*, and – a funny rhyming coincidence here – one of them *wept*, because she was so happy and had been so worried about Wilderness. Joyride wept. Wept for joy.

The darkness was quite total when they arrived down by the pond. You couldn't see your paw in front of your face. Smithsonian's flashlight was one of those very small pocket models and the batteries were wearing out, so it only made a dim yellow glow. But they heard Wilderness singing!

"Oh yeah – I'll tell you something – I think you'll understand – Then I'll – say that something – I want to hold your hand!"

The song seemed to be coming from somewhere up above them. Smithsonian aimed the flashlight up, but it was too weak to show anything. "Where are you?" he shouted.

"And when I touch you, I feel happy, inside!"

Joyride, so thrilled with all the magic of this adventure that she could hardly speak, shouted, "Stop singing, Wilder! Where are you? We're all here to rescue you!"

"It's such a feeling that my love – I can't hide!"

But then his voice suddenly changed.

"Hey! Who's up here with me? Who is this? Who are you? Friend or foe? Who are you? Say something! What are you doing? Don't mess with me! Don't mess with Wilderness! I have a leatherman tool! I have *friends*! Hey! Pulling me up onto the branch! Untying my back paw! I'm saved! I can climb down the tree now! You saved me! Thanks, buddy! Who *are* you? Identify yourself!"

He saw the weak glow of Smithsonian's flashlight. He hadn't heard the shouts because he had been singing so loud, but now he heard all their voices, the voices of his friends, and he cried, "Here I am! I'm OK! Someone rescued me up there, up there in the tree!"

They followed his voice and found him, there in the dense total darkness down by the pond on a Saturday night in January. They all hugged him, and each other too, and everyone gave everyone else a high four. It was one of those moments when any moods people might have been in before vanished completely, swept away like leaves in a gale.

And then suddenly they all stopped hugging and peered upwards into the dense total darkness. They were silent for a minute.

"Who's up there?" called Lifeboat. "Who's up there? We know you're up there and we know you rescued Wilderness, so you must be our friend!"

There was no answer.

"Should we wait here?" asked Joyride.

"Whoever it is can sneak down anytime they want, maybe sneaked down already and ran off," answered Lifeboat. "We'll never know who it was."

"I know who it was," said Karma quietly.

Once again, as they had when Karma confronted Rebar the cat outside the bathroom, they all turned to her puzzled and amazed.

"Who?" asked Smithsonian, with that same faint smile on his face that we saw when they were under the house by the humming batteries, Smithsonian, who secretly believed that Karma was magical and actually did know who it was, Smithsonian, who spent a lot of time alone, thinking about all sorts of things.

"Fall Guy."

"Then he didn't die when he fell sixty feet from the tall fir tree," said Masquerade immediately. "He's been out there all this time."

"But why?" asked Joyride. "Why didn't he come back with the rest of us?"

No one answered her question. They thought Karma might have had an idea why he stayed out there in the woods alone. But they didn't ask her.

What do you think?

Had he become a real *loner*, one of those woodrats who just found other woodrats *boring*?

Was he writing a long book and needed complete privacy while he worked on it?

Had he lost his memory or gone crazy?

Did he go on a long journey somewhere, an adventure at sea to faraway places with interesting food, or to the really high snow-covered mountains on the other side of the world where there were white leopards and base camps, and then come back wiser and world-weary?

They didn't know the answer to Joyride's question. But you can be sure we're going to find out.

"So it was Fall Guy who rescued me," said Wilderness thoughtfully. "And he didn't want me to know it was him."

Smithsonian suddenly turned his head. "Let's go back. We'll talk about all this tomorrow."

They trudged back up the road by the faint fading light of the flashlight. The stars were out overhead, Orion blazing, the Milky Way a river of light. It was quite exquisite. They were all very tired and happy.

Joyride asked, conversationally but a little mischievously, "How did your Vision Quest go, Wilder?"

"Oh, it was a good thing! I learned a lesson!" Which is exactly what we knew he was going to say! Remember? Wilderness is a winner!

"And what lesson was that?" asked Masquerade. "How to hang upside down from a branch singing a Beatles song?" I haven't described her tone of voice when she asked this question, but I'm

sure you can imagine how it sounded. You can even try to say it with the same tone of voice she used! It's actually a very common tone of voice.

"No, it wasn't that!" he answered in the huffy offended tone of voice we use when we know someone is making fun of us.

"Well, what was it then?" asked Joyride in a cheerful straightforward way. She wasn't too sharp at catching the secret meanings with which tones of voice are always overflowing. Some people think the tone of voice actually says more than the words! Grownups know *many* tones of voice!

"Something about *rigging*, the use of dental floss," mumbled Wilderness. "I'll demonstrate tomorrow," he added, although he was secretly hoping they'd all forget about it by then.

And that's how the adventure came to a happy end.

But there are some things we have to think about here.

Why did Fall Guy decide not to return to the others after his fall? As I said, we'll find out.

What are the dragonflies, Count Thinktank and his eager flunkies, planning about Karma? We'll find that out too.

And what about Sidd, the pond turtle with a reputation for giving really good advice? He obviously knew all about Fall Guy. Are we ever going to be introduced to him? Yes, we are.

And to other characters in the story. Other players, waiting in the wings, who haven't come out on the stage yet. Others who play a role in the adventure of a woodrat's suspicion. I know their names. Remember when the woodrats were feeling they were

caught up in something bigger than they were? They were right. Sometimes I feel we are *all* caught up in something bigger than we are! Not just woodrats!

Chapter Five

A Turtle is Very Rude to Lifeboat

“Is there more here than meets the eye?”

Probably you’ve been wondering about that. It’s the Big Question at the outset of the great woodrat adventure, the Big Question that started everything off, that *launched* the adventure, and we’d all like to see an answer.

What is this story all about so far?

Karma’s Suspicion. *Is* there more here than meets the eye, as Karma believes? Maybe there *isn’t*, which is what the dragonflies, Count Thinktank and his eager flunkies, believe. *Who’s right?* The *logic* of the story – “logic,” a very important word indeed, both in stories and in life, here meaning the *direction of the drama*, what we *expect* to learn later in the story because of what we have learned *so far* -- demands, sooner or later, *an answer to the Big Question*, and not just an *opinion* answer but the *correct* answer.

And Lifeboat, good old Lifeboat, lying awake at night as he so often does, tossing and turning, figured that out. *He saw the logic of the story, the direction of the drama.*

That Big Question had been running through Lifeboat's mind off and on all night long, so he only slept in little pieces, and that Big Question was still running through his mind when he woke up, repeating itself over and over in his thoughts.

He was struggling with himself about a decision: whether or not he should go down to the pond and ask Sidd for the correct answer. Just come right out and ask it! Go to the turtle who's famous for knowing correct answers and just ask him! Get the suspense over with, settle the question once and for all.

Very often, like Lifeboat, we find it hard to make up our minds about whether or not to do something. We say to ourselves, "Okay, I'll do it!" And then we think a minute, shake our head, and say, "No, maybe not, maybe it's not such a good idea." Back and forth, back and forth. This was happening to Lifeboat, who, as we have certainly seen, was very cautious by nature, cautious because of his *character*. Lifeboat was not the type to do something bold without first thinking about it for a very long time.

It was early morning, two days after they had rescued – or rather Fall Guy had rescued – Wilderness from his misadventure on the Vision Quest. He looked over fondly at Joyride, still sound asleep. She always slept soundly, often smiling and sighing in her sleep, as we learned in the very first pages of this story, unlike Lifeboat, who so often lay awake in the darkness of the nest, hearing the soft sound of the crickets and the night breeze, with something running and running through his mind. *She* certainly wouldn't be thinking about asking Sidd, or anyone else, the Big Question. As grownups often say, sometimes with concealed regret, it takes all sorts to make a world.

Finally he groaned – softly so as not to wake up Joyride. He had to do it. There was no way out for him. Not only because the

correct answer to the Big Question – not an *opinion* but the correct answer -- was the key to their future, but also because the sad *mood* was still hanging over them. Remember that sad new mood? How they didn't feel the same? How they were trying to carry on with *business as usual*, pretending nothing had happened, the way grownups do, but it wasn't working and they were no longer the normal average cheerful woodrats they had always been?

They were a *tight-knit group*, you see, the six of them, which means they all cared very much about each other, even Masquerade with her sharp tongue, and they knew that one of them, Karma, was preoccupied with something, was trying to be happy but really wasn't, was bothered by a suspicion, and there was no use kidding themselves that things were normal with them. They weren't. The escapade in the bathroom had been great fun, very exciting, very challenging when Rebar appeared, but it had been a failure. Karma was still preoccupied; the suspicion hadn't gone away.

All this was in the back of their minds and wouldn't go away, causing the sad mood, causing them *all* to be preoccupied. And Lifeboat knew it. He was very sensitive to group feelings, *group dynamics* – an important phrase which means what's *really* going on among people instead of what they each *pretend* is going on, or mistakenly *think* is going on -- and he knew they had to shake off that mood.

He thought to himself, "Why me? Is anyone else thinking of going down to speak with Sidd? Not a chance. It must be my fate."

Probably Lifeboat never read his work, but here we are reminded once again of the great English writer, Thomas Hardy, who never laughed, and wrote about the fate of the Titanic.

Lifeboat groaned again, took a deep breath, and quietly slipped out of the nest. He headed out toward the springbox, intending to get to the pond the back way, so there would be no chance of running into Helix, who, rumor had it, had been seen walking around with a chewed-up quail in his mouth.

He ran along, paused for a sip of water from the springbox overflow, then set off down the old path, nearly overgrown with whitethorn, to the hillside overlooking the pond. He stopped and stared down. There was a heavy icy mist drifting in the air. He could barely make out the pond.

"Am I really going to do this, really up to it?" he asked himself. "Me, Lifeboat? Take things into my own hands instead of letting someone else, like Smithsonian, take the lead?"

But he asked himself that question just to gather up his courage again. He knew he wasn't going to turn back.

"Yes, I am!" he imagined himself shouting, but really only whispered. He scampered down the hillside.

Here's what was running through his mind as he was running through the grass. Remember what that's called? The *stream of consciousness*.

"Sidd. A turtle. Okay, a turtle. Like the turtle who beat the hare in a race because he went slow and steady. Slow and steady wins the race. Makes no sense. Like everything else. Wonder what should be the first thing I say. Call him Sidd? Mister Sidd? Your honor? Sidd must be short for something. Sydney? Think I'll just call him Sir. That's right, Sir, because he's important, has that reputation for giving really good advice, he's supposed to be very wise, supposed to have great wisdom, supposed to know the correct answer to big questions. That's why I'm asking him the question, of course. Want to get the answer straight from the turtle's

mouth. He'll speak in a very solemn way, very slowly, very seriously. He's a Teacher, with a capital T, a Sage, like those wise people from the East who smile all the time and wear bark and live in caves. Do I know anyone who ever asked him for advice, asked him anything at all, ever even spoke to him? I don't think so. So what? I'll say Pardon me, Sir, but I was wondering if you have time to answer a question. Use those exact words. Pardon me, Sir, but I was wondering if you have time to answer a question. I'll be very respectful. I'll stand by the edge of the water. No, better kneel, to show my respect."

By this time he was at the edge of the pond.

He could see Sidd, half in and half out of the water. He respectfully sneaked around to where he could see him better and hid behind a tree, peering out with one eye. Sidd was absolutely motionless. He could have been carved out of stone. His eyes were half open. They were red. Red eyes showing through narrow slits. There was something about those red eyes that made Lifeboat a little uneasy. For some reason they seemed out of place for someone who gave advice. Or at least not what he had expected. He hadn't thought about Sidd's eyes, only his wisdom. And there were patches of mud and pond glop on what he could see of Sidd's shell, and even on his head.

"Mud?" thought Lifeboat. It seemed out of place, like the red eyes. "I guess turtles can't reach up and wash their shells," he thought. "Although they are in the water all the time. If they cared how they appeared they could...Oh well, maybe their appearance isn't as important to turtles like Sidd, wise turtles who know the correct answers to big questions, than it is to other turtles."

He decided to forget about the mud and glop. And bubbles were coming up in the water now and then just behind Sidd. Lifeboat quickly decided to forget about them also.

“Okay!” he whispered. “Here goes! Do it!”

Lifeboat walked out to the edge of the pond just opposite Sidd, whose red-eyed head was resting half on the shore, and respectfully kneeled. With all four feet. There was no way of telling whether Sidd was asleep or awake, even, for that matter, whether he was dead or alive.

He said exactly what he had planned to say. “Pardon me, Sir, but I was wondering if you have time to answer a question.”

Silence. Nothing.

Lifeboat cleared his throat, and spoke a bit louder. “Pardon me, Sir, but I was wondering if you have time to answer a question.”

Suddenly, the head popped up. The red eyes popped open. And Lifeboat, who almost fell over backward, heard this:

“Dude! My man! My rat! You woke me up! But that’s Okay, it was getting to be time for me to wake up anyway, don’t feel bad, no apologies called for! No hard feelings, Cowboy! Forgive and forget, least said soonest mended, bury the hatchet. There’s nothing going on anyway! It’s all a dream! Hey, you must be Lifeboat. I recognize your markings, solid brown, brown as the mud on my head. Brown as the mud on my head, Fred! Get that rhyme? Hey, babe! I’ve seen you around here before, you know. I know *all* you guys! Joyride, Smithsonian, the whole crazy charming little crew. Hey! Didn’t you wonder how Fall Guy found out about Wilderness hanging there? *I* told him! I saw the whole thing. ‘Good luck and bad luck twisted together into one rope,’ as they say in Korea. Sidd to the rescue! Listen to the bugles, the massed pipers! But here I am, running off at the mouth, without even asking you why you’re here. What’s your trip, Jack? Did I hear you say something about a

question? Questions are my specialty! They ask, I answer! Speak up! Speak up, Buddy! I'm here to serve, but I don't have all day!"

Lifeboat was stunned, speechless. Sidd spoke so fast he could barely follow. So different from what he had expected, as happens so often when people encounter famous Teachers with a capital T! So very different!

They stared at each other.

"Hey! What's the matter, Sam? Cat got your tongue? Which is a figure of speech, of course, no cats around here! See any cats? No! Not a hair! Not a whisker! No one here but us chickens!"

And here Sidd turned aside as if he was speaking to someone else right next to him, even though there was no one there.

"What's with this rat? I never saw anything like it. Did you? 'Save me from a small mind when it has nothing to do!' as they say in the Phillipines. This guy's a champion shadowboxer! Comes all the way down here, wakes me up, and now he just stares at me with his mouth open! Like a dog who's just been shown a card trick!"

He turned back from the imaginary person and spoke to Lifeboat in a more friendly manner. "It's Okay, little guy, okay, Harry. I'm not going to bite your head off! What's on your mind? *What's on your teeny tiny mind, boobalah?*"

Lifeboat pulled himself together. Alright, this wasn't what he expected, a long way from it, and this crazy turtle was constantly forgetting his name, but he was here to ask an important question, the *big* question, and out with it! He decided to use the

exact words again, even though he was thinking they sounded funny now, almost ridiculous.

“Pardon me, Sir, but I was wondering if you have time to answer a question.”

“Dude! My little furry pal! Of course I do! Do bears fart in the woods? Shoot!”

And he turned again to the imaginary person by his side and laughed, “What a *polite* little rat!”

Lifeboat decided to ignore that utterly senseless question about bears and just blast through. This whole thing was turning out to be so weird, so totally off the wall, so totally *wide open*, that he was actually losing his nervousness and beginning to feel completely at ease, giddy and reckless, ready to throw himself into whatever this turtle had to offer, ready to step out there and meet him head on, *mano a mano*. He almost felt like bursting out laughing!

“Okay, Bob!” (“Two can play at that game!” he said to himself.) “Here’s the question: Is there more here than meets the eye?”

“Did you hear that? Did *you* hear *that*? Of course there is! *Much* more!”

Sidd turned suddenly to the imaginary person next to him. “This is the kind of guy who tries to put both arms in the same sleeve! Jelly in a vise! Scared by his own farts!”

Lifeboat blinked. He could hardly believe this was really happening, but he knew it was useless to respond to these incredible insults.

“Okay, then you’re telling me that the answer to my question is Yes.”

He decided to push on. There were obviously no rules here, and he was feeling very bold, very much at ease. “Okay, I believe you, because of your reputation. But how can we see it if it doesn’t meet the eye? Explain *that* to me, Harry!”

“Simple! Simply *simple*, Dude! Because we don’t see it with the eyes of the *head*, we see it with the *Eye of the Heart*! Nothing we see with the eyes of the head is really real! Hasn’t that ever crossed your little mind, Buster? It’s only the Eye of the Heart that can see what’s really real! And that’s one Great Big Secret, you know. The answer to a Big Question is *always* a Big Secret! And now you know it, Jackson, thanks to me! And, because I really dig your style, you’re really starting to *grow on me* – another figure of speech, of course, meaning I like you more and more with each passing minute, not that you’re like a wart -- I’ll tell you something more, free of charge: You never see it all at once and forever! You get *glimpses*! Glimpses is the name of the game here, Otto. *Glimpses*!”

Lifeboat felt himself going wild inside, totally forgetting about politeness, a *very* unusual thing for him. Actually, he felt just great!

“Okay, Big Shot! Okay, Teacher with a capital T! Glimpse *what*? What’s this *It* you’re talking about? This *It* we see with the Eye of the Heart?”

There was a pause. Lifeboat stared at Sidd, waiting for an answer.

Then suddenly, as if there had been a signal, or as if he had suddenly made a decision, Sidd opened his eyes wide and stared

back hard at Lifeboat, his head on its long neck weaving from side to side. His eyes slowly changed from red to blue, sky blue. His voice changed completely. His voice, his attitude, his style. Suddenly he sounded the way Lifeboat had expected him to sound. Serious. Wise. Kind. A Teacher with a capital T.

“You’re really here for someone else, Lifeboat, aren’t you? Of course you are. You’re here for Karma. The question is Karma’s, not yours. Send her down to me.” And he concluded with a straight face but a twinkle in his blue eyes. “She should hear this straight from the turtle’s mouth.”

Lifeboat got the message. The interview was over. All of a sudden he felt awkward, a bit off balance. He knew it was time to be polite again. He realized that behind all the craziness there was something serious. And he knew exactly what to say.

“What time would be convenient for you, Sir?”

“Late afternoon, around 4 o’clock.”

“I’ll tell her. I’m sure she’ll be here.” He started to walk away and then paused and turned. “Thank you very much.”

“Don’t mention it, Lifeboat. My job.”

*And now, all of a sudden, I am remembering something. Did you ever read *The Little Prince*, that great book by a French pilot whose name is so hard for us to pronounce? If you did, you should be remembering, like me, what the fox said. He said, “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret :It is only with the heart that one can see rightly: what is essential is invisible to the eye.” Now isn’t that amazing? *The same secret!**

Lifeboat started out across the little clearing by the pond and turned up the path. There was still an icy mist in the air, making it hard to see very far. After a little while he heard voices. Joyride and Masquerade were on their way down the road, stopping here and there to nibble on roots and dig for seeds and subterranean fungi. He ran up to them.

Joyride laughed. "What's up, Sailor? What are you doing down here?"

Lifeboat had a lot to tell them.

Chapter Six

Four Dragonflies, A Chipmunk and a Skink

Now you probably think Chapter 6 is going to pick up where Chapter 5 ended, where Lifeboat was about to tell Joyride and Masquerade all about his wild and far out interview with Sidd. But it isn't. Why is that? Because something else, something very important to the story, was happening at the same time as the interview, and I have to tell you about that now. Then we'll pick up with Lifeboat, Joyride and Masquerade in Chapter 7. This happens very often in stories, almost all the time, because, just as in our own lives, many things are happening at the same time.

There's a spot further down the road to the Lower Forty where a giant fir tree once fell across the road. Back off the road, where the huge bottom part of the trunk is lying, there's a very good hiding place, a good place for a private secret meeting. Of course, there are good hiding places all over in the woods, but sometimes kids pick out one of them so they'll all know where to meet if a secret meeting is planned. And there was a very secret, very private meeting taking place there on the morning of Lifeboat's wild and far out interview with Sidd.

Who was at this meeting? And Why? First question first.

Showtime, the chipmunk, was at this meeting. You already met him earlier in this story when the woodrats first got together to talk about the Suspicion. Remember? He was screeching from the hillside about Brad Pitt and Jennifer Anniston and George Clooney, voted for the second time the most exciting man in the world.

The dragonflies were at this meeting. Count Thinktank, Count Blackhole and Count Genepool. As you know, they disagree completely with Sidd about whether there's more here than meets the eye. They're convinced there isn't, and that there's *nothing* that doesn't meet the eye. They haven't a *clue* about the Eye of the Heart. They believe Karma's suspicion is simply a big mistake, and they feel it's their responsibility to straighten her out by gradually, in a friendly coaxing way, bringing in evidence to prove they're right. They're not bad guys -- or, I should say, bad *flies* -- they mean well, but they're wrong. Sidd's right, and they're wrong. Very often -- not *all* the time but *almost* all the time -- *trouble is caused by people who mean well but are wrong*.

But did you notice something?

Where is Count Gigabyte? Remember? There are *four* dragonflies, and one of them is missing at this meeting. At first, when they all arrived, the dragonflies -- all wired up because they had only recently emerged from their larval state -- buzzing all over the place, their wings flashing even in the icy mist, Showtime chattering and hopping back and forth on the trunk, no one noticed he was missing. But *you* know he's missing, because I just told you so!

And not only that: I'm going to tell you *why* Count Gigabyte is missing, and where he is! He's spying on the wild and far out interview, spying on Lifeboat and Sidd! Yes! A sneaky slippery spy! He just happened to be there, getting ready to take off for the secret

meeting, packing his little briefcase with important messages about blogs and internet explorer and the latest breakthroughs in cell phone technology, when Lifeboat arrived and said, as you know, "Pardon me, Sir, but I was wondering if you have time to answer a question."

"What's this?" thought Count Gigabyte, suddenly fluttering his delicate hearing feelers. "What's this? I better hang around and see what's going on here! Could be something really *significant*, some kind of *trouble* for us! Then I'll report back to the secret meeting and tell them what I learned."

And he stopped buzzing, landed on a tall reed in the pond, and listened with his delicate waving hearing feelers.

And now back to the meeting.

There was someone else there to whom you haven't yet been introduced. Anchormann, the Western Skink. The last part of his name doesn't rhyme with "fan" or "pan" or "tan" or "man" spelled with one n, but with the word "on," with the names Ron, Don and John and Juan. AnchorMANN. This is because his ancestors came over from Austria at the turn of the century with the great wave of immigration. Western Skinks are about 8 inches long with smooth shiny scales and black stripes running from their heads to the end of their striking bright blue tails. They like to hide under bark, logs and rocks. Without their tails sticking out.

So there's the answer to the first question. We know *who* was at the secret meeting behind the huge fir trunk. They're the *Messengers*, part of the scene on the Land, as Lifeboat pointed out about Showtime. They're part of this story about the great woodrat adventure, not a *big* part by any means, a *small* part, but they're always there in the background, delivering their messages even when no one is listening, and the picture wouldn't be complete if I

left them out. You'll be hearing their messages from time to time, just as we heard Showtime's message in Chapter One.

And sometimes, but not often, the woodrats, maybe right in the middle of a daring escapade or emotional moment or heart-rending confession, will be distracted by them and forget what they were doing or feeling or talking about and not be able to pick up where they left off – but only briefly, because *nothing*, even the tireless Messengers, can stop this great adventure of The Suspicion from unfolding.

The second question was, *Why?*

To rehearse their messages. They are *Messengers*. They bring reports to everyone who doesn't know what's going on, everyone who has been "left in the dust" – a frequently used figure of speech which has nothing to do with dust but means *out of it*, without a clue, completely uninformed, very much not up to speed. They have a secret meeting every month to rehearse their messages in front of each other to see if anyone has any tactfully stated suggestions, any delicate criticism that won't hurt anyone's feelings, any helpful advice for improvement.

And *this* meeting was a little more secret than the others, a little more important, because the dragonflies had received the disturbing report that one of the woodrats, Karma, wasn't listening to their messages at all! She was preoccupied with something else, a Suspicion. This was what the ravens, Harry and Helga, had told the dragonflies earlier in the story when they had overheard the woodrats talking about Karma. And now, at this meeting, Count Thinktank is going to share this disturbing report with Showtime and Anchormann.

And what are these messages? What are they all about?

Showtime's messages, which he loved to chatter about from the trees as loud as he could, were about all the wonderful and shocking things being discovered about movie stars and famous people and all the wonderful and beautiful things we can look at and buy at the mall.

Anchormann's messages, which he loved to hiss from his hiding places under bark and logs and rocks, were about all the wonderful and disturbing things we can discover every day in the newspapers and on television and on the Google home page.

The dragonflies' messages, which they love to buzz about as they fly around snapping up mosquitoes, were about all the wonderful and surprising things being discovered about instant messaging and frightening diseases and global warming.

All these messages are called Information.

Karma, as we know, and as all the Messengers will soon know, hasn't been listening at all to the messages. She is *short on information*. But just imagine what a hard job it would be to hold on to an important and *true* Suspicion when you're always being distracted by chipmunk information about "What will be hot in 2007?" and Western Skink information about mayors who drank too much and made embarrassing mistakes, and information from dragonflies who mean well but are wrong. It's the same kind of real hard job that people have in the grownup world when they have a true Suspicion that there's more here than meets the eye.

Count Thinktank called the meeting to order.

They all knew, especially Count Thinktank himself, that he ought to be the boss – not because he was a *good* boss, which he definitely wasn't, but because he was a *bossy type* and just took charge from the beginning. This happens all the time.

Anchormann peered out with his lazy yellow eyes from behind a layer of bark, mulling over the important report about a man who was brought back to life with jumper cables and the striking fact that Ferdinand the First had assumed the title of Holy Roman Emperor.

Showtime was hopping up and down on the trunk, trying his hardest, just biting his tongue, to keep from shouting out some terrifically important information about skinny jeans, the new bob, the heart-shaped face and a great ten-day sale at Mervyns. Count Blackhole looked sternly at him with all eight eyes and quietly croaked, "Sit still, you little silly-willy! This is a secret meeting!"

"Order Order *Order!*" cried Count Thinktank. "Order! Time to take role! When I call out your name, say Here!"

"Showtime!"

"Here!"

Anchormann!"

"Here!"

"Count Blackhole!"

"Present!" Showtime immediately giggled uncontrollably because he thought it was so funny that Count Blackhole said "Present!" instead of "Here!"

"Wise guy! How many times have I told you that your sense of humor is tasteless and *not funny*? I said say *Here!*" Count Thinktank turned to Showtime and barked, "And stop giggling, you little silly-willy!"

“Okay. Here!”

“Count Genepool!”

“Here!”

“Count Gigabyte!”

Silence. Everyone looked around at the others and counted the Counts. It was a Count count. Three Counts.

“I count three Counts,” muttered Anchormann, looking around suspiciously. “One Count is missing. By my count.”

Count Thinktank looked around, frowning, a worried expression on the little black glob he would have called his face.

“That’s right. Three Counts, including me. Where could he be? He’s never been late before. Do you suppose there’s been foul play?”

Foul play is an interesting old-fashioned figure of speech having nothing to do with bad smells, or hacking someone on the arm when they’re taking a shot, or stepping across the line when you’re bowling. As used here by Count Thinktank, it means, “*Do you suppose someone has captured or otherwise prevented Count Gigabyte from attending this secret meeting?*”

Count Blackhole thoughtfully licked one of his wings. “That’s always possible,” he murmured. “We do have enemies, you know. But in this case I doubt it. I know Gigabyte. Hard to catch that fly by surprise! Has eyes in the back of his head!”

"So do we all!" blurted out Count Genepool. "All dragonflies do!"

"Of course, of course, I knew that," answered Count Blackhole, suddenly embarrassed. "I merely meant, I merely meant, I didn't *mean*..." He trailed off, furiously licking a wing, not knowing how to finish the sentence.

"Okay, okay!" snapped count Thinktank, suddenly realizing that as the boss he should take charge before everyone started talking at once and the secret meeting fell apart.

"Not to worry! Anyone can be delayed, delayed by one little thing or another, there are always late arrivals at secret meetings. Let's carry on now! I'm sure he'll be here soon, maybe with something important to share with us!"

And of course Count Thinktank had guessed right about that. We know why Count Gigabyte was late.

Count Thinktank continued. "So let's just everybody settle down here. Be at ease. No reason to fall apart. No need to panic. I'm sure our missing member will be here soon. He's probably on his way right now! This is a meeting, a *secret* meeting. We all have important jobs to do on this beautiful retreat in the California hills, handing out important free information free of charge, and we have to do it right! Make sure our important messages have the kind of appeal that gets them across in a powerful and effective way!"

Here Count Thinktank "assumed an important air," another useful figure of speech, having nothing to do with air, usually meaning, *indicated that the assumer of this air was about to say something important and everyone better listen carefully or else*, and meaning here that Count Thinktank suddenly fixed four of his eight beady little eyes on the other four members present, making it

clear that they had better listen carefully if they didn't want to make him really furious, and snapped the other four little eyes tightly shut in a dramatic manner.

"Look at me!" he shouted. "Can't you see that I have assumed an important air? I have something *important* to say! *Listen!*"

"We're listening!" shouted Showtime.

"Okay! Just in case you haven't heard, and I doubt you have, let me clue you in right now that one of the woodrats, that airhead dreamer *Karma*, is preoccupied with a groundless suspicion that's distracting her from our messages! Not that the others are listening very well either, as a matter of fact, but we don't really care because our most important guideline in the Information Rulebook is – and I quote word for word for those of you who either don't, can't or won't read – "*It doesn't make any difference whether or not they're listening, just keep shouting it out!*"

Here Count Thinktank took a deep breath into his teeny-tiny dragonfly chest and looked around quickly with his eight glittering eyes to make sure everyone was listening carefully.

"Got that? Okay? Okay! Now let's get on with it."

He paused and looked around anxiously, licking one of his wings. "Any sign of Count Gigabyte? Not yet? No? No sign? Nothing?" Everyone quickly shook their different kinds of heads.

"No sign. Okay, Okay! We're here to rehearse our raps, not to thrash around and collapse in tears just because one of our members is a little delayed! This is a secret meeting and we're here to rehearse our message raps and check each other out! In a tactful loving sensitive way, of course. We don't want to hurt anyone's

feelings or gash a hole in their self-esteem. Who wants to volunteer to go first? I appoint Anchormann the first volunteer!"

Anchormann crawled slowly out from under the piece of bark, looking around at the others with a grim expression on his face.

"Up on the trunk!" Count Thinktank shrieked. "Everybody delivers their rap from up on the trunk!"

Anchormann, never hurrying, slithered up to the highest part of the tree trunk. Turning his back on the others, he stood up on his hind legs and proudly flexed his muscles, his little arms, little shoulders and little back, like the famous Governor Schwarzenegger did in the Mister Universe Contests where he always came in first. He weaved in a slinky reptilian way – because skinks actually are classified as reptiles. Then he slowly swirled his beautiful striped blue tail around his neck, and hugged it. And then suddenly he burst out with his message!

"The Founding Fathers Knew Best! Wayne Ford's murder trial began in San Bernardino! A large crowd of immigrants and supporters marched down Seventh Street! Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, the king's chief adviser, beheaded! Alexander Cuza, Prince of Rumania, dethroned! Fireworks explode as New Year rolls around the world! Horrified zoogoer recalls tiger attack! Pelosi's husband prefers a low profile! First Viking colonies established in Greenland by Eric the Red! Vic Steelhammer crashes his small plane in a remote area! Nebuchadnezzar the Second burns Jerusalem! Jets fly past Raiders! Dada artists use shock tactics! One million coal miners strike in Britain! Clones on the range! Two shootings probably not related! Emperor Constantine imprisons his mother Irene!"

Here he paused for breath and looked around with an expectant and triumphant smile lighting up his face, flexing his

little arms and making the V sign like a winning athlete at a track meet.

“Shall I go on?”

For a moment everyone was stunned speechless.

Showtime broke the silence. “Wow! That was *great!* What a great *message!* Wait till they hear that! That will knock Karma’s suspicion out of her head forever!”

“Yes, indeed!” said Count Thinktank enthusiastically. “Yes, indeed! That’s the kind of message we all love to hear! Good work! My congratulations! That was simply *rip-roaring!* That was the best news I ever heard!”

Anchormann blushed with every one of his smooth shiny scales. His bright blue tail whipped back and forth in a bright blue blur. “Thanks, fellas! I worked hard on that one. Good to be appreciated.” He crawled away smiling and exhausted, knowing he had given it his all.

“Showtime!” bellowed Count Thinktank. “Hop up here, you sweet little thing, you living chocolate doll! Take us away!” (Count Thinktank had never been able to resist the cuteness of chipmunks.)

Showtime scurried eagerly up to the high spot on the trunk. He couldn’t wait to get there and started his message rap on the way.

“Customer Appreciation Sale! Ten Percent Off! Embrace Your Inner Opposite! Beauty and the Geek! Happy Honda Days! Mariah Carey, 37, is joining the ranks of celebrities with signature fragrances! The New Adventures Of Old Christine! The Most Significant Trends! Motion Activated Security Light was \$79.99 Now \$59.99! Save \$1.00 On

Any One Box of Kashi Instant Oatmeal! Mason Fired After Meltdown! Miami Holds Off Nevada! Brainy Thrillers Courtesy of the BBC! Bright White Teeth by New Year's! Are Her Pals Pregnant Too? Luciana and Matt Showed Their Love! Melissa's Organic Tofu \$1.98! Outrageous And Absolutely Wicked! Priced Less for Smart Shopping! The Best Spy Movie Ever!"

Here Showtime ran completely out of breath and collapsed gasping on the tree trunk with his tongue hanging out of his mouth -- at the same moment as they all heard a frantic buzzing sound and Count Gigabyte came zooming in from the direction of the pond!

"Count Gigabyte" shouted Count Blackhole and Count Genepool at the same time. "A sight for sore eyes!"

"For *twenty-four* sore eyes!" cried Count Thinktank with relief, almost in tears. He had been pretending that he wasn't worried, because he was the boss and had to set an example to the others, but he really was.

"But wait!" he cried. "Before we ask Count Gigabyte what happened to cause his delay -- and we all can't wait to hear his report -- simple courtesy, good manners, and good breeding demand that we congratulate Showtime on that incredible message! It almost drove me out of my mind! *So much information! So much to take in! Great work!*"

"That's what I'm always aiming at, everybody!" sang out Showtime. "*Drive them out of their minds!*"

"And I'm sure you will succeed, Showtime," said Count Blackhole fondly, patting him on the head with one of his wings.

"I'm sure too," said Count Gigabyte. "I just caught the last part of that message and my little black head is reeling! Congratulations! *So much information!* But now listen to this, all of you! I just happened to overhear – that's why I'm late –a shocking interview between Lifeboat and Sidd. Guess what! *Sidd told Lifeboat that there is more here than meets the eye! And Lifeboat is going to tell Karma!*"

"Is? Is?" said Count Genepool, in a puzzled tone of voice, rapidly licking one of his wings.

"Is?" said Count Thinktank, as if he couldn't believe his little black hearing feelers.

"Is!" shouted Count Gigabyte. "Are you all deaf? *Is, Is, Is!* That's what Sidd said! *Sidd said Is!* And not only *that!* He said you can see what doesn't meet the eyes of the head with the *Eye of the Heart!*"

"Eye of the Heart?" said Count Blackhole, slowly and thoughtfully. "What can that possibly mean? It makes no sense at all. Sidd may be a turtle, but that doesn't mean he's totally lost touch with reality. Turtles are always very down to earth. Down to *mud!* He must have made up this whole story just to make Karma feel better. He can't possibly *believe* it! It makes no sense! Eye of the Heart! Ridiculous! Hearts have no eyes! That's a fact!"

And here he paused, thinking. "But then Sidd's no fool..." he murmured. And his voice trailed off.

"Madness," muttered Count Thinktank, shaking his little black head. "Sheer madness. Pitiful."

"The question is," said Count Genepool, narrowing four of his eyes and blinking rapidly with the other four, "what does this mean for us?"

"Not a thing!" shrieked Count Thinktank in some kind of panic. "It doesn't mean a thing! We don't care what Count Gigabyte said Sidd said! We don't care about Sidd at all! He's a *turtle*, for crying out loud! We carry on as always, delivering our messages. *Business as usual!* I call this secret interrupted meeting *over*. Meeting adjourned!"

"But what about *our* message?" asked Count Genepool timidly. "Count Gigabyte and Count Blackhole and I put together a great rap we want to do together, like a rap *trio*. We were even going to sing it!"

"Next time, next time!" Count Thinktank barked. "Meeting adjourned!"

And he flew off with a loud angry buzz blast.

The other dragonflies sorrowfully flew off also, making lazy circles in the icy mist, disappointed that they didn't get a chance to rehearse their message and get some loving tactfully stated sensitive feedback.

Showtime shuffled slowly to the foot of a nearby madrone tree and suddenly scampered up to a comfortable place he knew about.

Anchormann stayed right where he was on the trunk, mulling over the baffling news brought back by Count Gigabyte. They had received news, and news was his business.

And what do *we* think about this secret meeting of the Messengers? We who are telling and hearing this story.

Here's my opinion. The most important thing, of course, is what Sidd is going to tell Karma, if Lifeboat doesn't blurt it out first. And even if he does, she'll still want to hear it straight from the turtle's mouth when she goes down to the pond about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the convenient time for Sidd.

And the interrupted secret meeting of the Messengers?

Here's something I noticed. I noticed that Count Blackhole was thinking very hard, harder than the rest, about what Count Gigabyte said Sidd said about the Eye of the Heart that can see what the eyes of the head can't see. Remember? "But then Sidd's no fool," Count Blackhole had to admit to himself, his voice trailing off.

So I think the rest of the messengers will carry on as always, business as usual, just as Count Thinktank ordered them to, but I also think Count Blackhole might want to check it out. He is feeling some doubt about the dragonfly position on the question of more here than meets the eye, and I wouldn't be surprised if he requests an interview with Sidd, later on in the adventure. A friendly little chat. Not *pretending* to be friendly, like college professors smiling when they chat about a new teacher who's very smart, or lawyers chuckling when they chat about an important merger involving billions of dollars, but *genuinely* friendly, no one pretending. I think that might really happen.

And one last thought that just occurred to me. Why do you suppose it was Count Blackhole, and not any of the other Counts, who was most intrigued by what Count Gigabyte said Sidd said?

You know what I think? I think it was because Count Blackhole's special area of interest is *astronomy*. He spends a lot of time just staring up at the stars with all eight of his eyes. Staring up at the heavens. He's what is called a *stargazer*. Orion, the Big Dipper, the Great Bear, Gemini the Twins, Libra the Balance, Aquarius the Water-Bearer, Sagittarius the Archer, and the Milky Way, reaching across the dazzling radiance like a shining river of light. I'm sure you know what staring up at the stars in the night sky makes us do. It makes us *wonder*.

Chapter Seven

The Woodrats Make Another Daring Plan

I think I want to start off this chapter with a Summary. I want to remind you, and myself, of some of the things we should remember, some of the *important things* that have happened so far.

One. Sidd told Lifeboat that there *are* more things here than meet the eye. That was very important, really the most important thing that has happened in the story so far. Karma's Suspicion, as we all know, is at the heart of this great woodrat adventure, really what the adventure is all about. Lifeboat will be sure to tell the others and tell Karma about her interview with Sidd at four o'clock when the time is convenient for him. Probably he has other appointments scheduled in the afternoon.

Two. Sidd also told Lifeboat that he was the one who saw the big mistake Wilderness made with the dental floss, and that he had gone off to tell Fall Guy so Fall Guy could come to the rescue, which he did. This means that Sidd *knows* Fall Guy, probably had interviews with him, and that Fall Guy probably didn't want to have some privacy so he could write a long book, or go off on a sea adventure to faraway places with interesting food, or to very high mountains with snow leopards and base camps, or lose his

memory, but stayed right there someplace down by the lower forty where he took his terrible fall. Lifeboat will probably forget that Sidd revealed that he knows Fall Guy... but maybe not. And let's not forget that it was Karma -- maybe using what Smithsonian thought, with his faint smile, were magical powers -- who identified Fall Guy as the rescuer.

Three. Count Blackhole, because of the *ecstasies* -- a *great* word meaning really super-duper happy times -- he has enjoyed while gazing up at the stars with his eight eyes, has a sense of wonder which makes him *not so sure* that Sidd is wrong, and Count Thinktank is right, about more here than meets the eye. He is planning on having a friendly chat with Sidd about this crucial question, like college professors and bigshot lawyers have when they chuckle over faculty appointments and billion dollar mergers, because he'd like to find out where Sidd is coming from on this important question. And if he decides Sidd is right and Count Thinktank is wrong, what will he do?

And here, as fast as I can, I have to say something about opinions and correct answers.

We know that Sidd doesn't have *opinions*: he has the *correct answer*. That's why people go to him for interviews. *But how can we tell the two apart?* How can we tell an opinion from a correct answer? This problem of telling the two apart is the biggest cause of trouble in the whole world! Some cases, a precious few of them, are clear. For example, take the question, "Which is right, being cruel or being kind?" This is clearly a *correct answer situation* where we know the correct answer. It's right to be *kind*.

Now let's take the question, "Which tastes better? Chicken Flavored Ramen or Beef Flavored Ramen?" This is clearly an *opinion situation*. There's no "right answer." It's just a matter of what tastes better to you: no accounting for tastes, different strokes

for different folks, one man's ramen is another man's toxic waste. No argument.

But it's almost never that simple.

Someone may think they're in a *correct answer* situation and another person think it's an *opinion* situation! The second person might casually say, "It's just a matter of opinion!" and the other person will shout angrily, "No, it's not! I'm right!"

Or two people may have *completely different* "correct answers" about something, and if it's very important to them they may get into a big fight! There's no end to the way this head-scratcher plays out! Which you will discover for yourself as you get older. Grownups know a lot about this problem.

And anyway, for us the question is settled. Sidd said there's more here than meets the eye, and that's all there is to it, it's not just an opinion. Sidd's right! What would an *opinion* be worth here, on such an important question? Nothing! I am reminded of something Macbeth, a very unlucky man in one of Shakespeare's plays, said to his crazy wife: "I have bought golden opinions from all sorts of people!" He knew what opinions were worth!

Okay? Okay! Let's finally pick up where we left off at the end of Chapter 5. Lifeboat was running up from his wild and far out interview with Sidd at the pond and he bumped into Joyride and Masquerade on their way down.

"What's up, Sailor?" Joyride laughed. "What are you doing down here? Where's the fire?"

Lifeboat looked back and forth from one of them to the other. Carefree fun-loving Joyride – who, you should remember, had *concealed depths* in her character -- had a big smile on her face,

half teasing half welcoming. Masquerade, on the other hand, was looking at him suspiciously through narrowed eyes. She could tell he was very excited about something. Sometimes I think Masquerade *always* looked at the world through narrowed eyes. What had he been doing down at the pond?

“Yes. What’s up, Lifeboat?” she asked *pointedly* – which means it wasn’t just a casual question, wasn’t just a friendly greeting. She suspected, from Lifeboat’s excitement, that something important had happened and she wanted to know what it was immediately.

Lifeboat said nothing for a moment, struggling to get control over himself. He didn’t want to blurt out what he had learned. He wanted to pull himself together.

“What’s the matter?” Joyride grinned. “Cat got your tongue?”

This innocent remark, of course, instantly brought back a painful memory. Remember? This was exactly what Sidd had said to him when he was stunned speechless by the crazy way Sidd was talking to him. Lifeboat pushed the painful memory from his mind. He took a deep breath and pulled himself together. *Pushed* the memory, *pulled* himself.

“Okay, you two. Now just listen and don’t interrupt! I’m coming back from an amazing interview I just had with Sidd. Down at the pond.”

Here he *paused for the effect* -- something people often do when they know they have just said something startling or upsetting, or something to prove how smart they are – here meaning *allowing time for Joyride and Masquerade to get really curious*

and be ready to be impressed. He wanted them to have time for the drama of this moment to sink in.

He stared back and forth at them in a challenging manner, as they stared back and forth at each other in a baffled and impatient manner, until he could see that it had sunk. Then he purposely continued before they had time to say anything.

“Yes. Didn’t expect I would ever do something so bold, did you?”

Here he relaxed a bit, in a superior sort of way, as if such boldness was really no big thing for him.

“Well, to be perfectly frank with you, neither did I. But I woke up this morning just *knowing* that we had to get an answer, a *correct answer* and not an *opinion*, to the question about whether there is more here than meets the eye.”

And now he suddenly spoke very dramatically.

“We were at a standstill! Spinning our wheels, a heavy dark mood hanging over our heads like an icy fog, like *this* icy fog,” he said, pointing wildly all around them, “pretending to ourselves that if we just waited Karma would forget about her suspicion!”

Here he paused again, glaring at the two of them as if the whole thing was their fault.

Joyride looked over at Masquerade, who was staring off to one side with a thoughtful frown on her face. She turned back to stare at Lifeboat.

“Well? What did you learn? What did Sidd say?”

"I learned that there *is* more here than meets the eye! Just as Karma suspects! More!" He said this in a suddenly very simple tone of voice, shaking his head as if baffled and helpless, holding out his paws as if pleading for something.

Joyride smiled and said, "Well, great! That's great, isn't it? I'm *glad* Karma is right!"

Masquerade continued, fixing her narrowed eyes on Lifeboat's baffled eyes. "Okay. What else did he say?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, but first I want to say that it wasn't only *what* he said, it was the *way* he said it, the way he *spoke* to me! I was stunned! It was just exactly the opposite of what I had expected! He's probably the most vulgar ill-mannered turtle in the world! He uses the word 'fart' all the time, he insulted me in a thousand ways, he's absolutely *terrible* at remembering names, he must have called me a *dozen* different names even though I'm sure he perfectly well knew my right name, and he kept pretending to talk to someone else right next to him, saying insulting things about me, when there was no one there..."

Here Lifeboat ran out of breath and stared down at the ground for a moment, overwhelmed by the memory of what he had gone through.

"But I held myself back! I never allowed my understandable anger to get the best of me, never flew off the handle! I refused to sink to his level. I think I deserve credit for that. I preserved my dignity."

Lifeboat was breathing heavily again at this point. He had delivered what's called a *tirade*, a fiery word which means *an indignant protest about something*, and I can assure you that there isn't a person you know who hasn't delivered and received tirades

many many times, and will deliver and receive them many many times in the future. There are some people for whom “tirade” is practically like a language! Lifeboat had delivered a tirade because he had to get a feeling, the feeling of having been taken by surprise by a crazy turtle, *off his chest*, meaning *out in the open* so he wouldn’t have to keep repeating it over and over and over again in his own mind with an angry expression on his face.

Joyride was amazed, and even amused, by the tirade. She kept smiling over at Masquerade expecting Masquerade to smile back. But Masquerade never smiled. She listened to the tirade in a patient calculating way, peacefully chewing on a piece of root, waiting for Lifeboat to run out of steam and get it off his chest. Then she calmly repeated her question.

“What else did he say?”

Lifeboat blinked as if waking up from sleep. During his tirade he had almost forgotten where he was.

“Right. What else did he say. That was your question?”

“Yes. That was my question.”

Lifeboat felt himself calming down.

“Okay. After his eyes changed from red to blue, he said he wants to talk with Karma at four o’clock today. That’s a convenient time for him. For Karma’s appointment. Her interview. We have to go right now and tell Karma.”

And here is proof of just how thoughtful Lifeboat really is!

He had suddenly decided, just when the words were on the tip of his tongue, not to say anything about the Eye of the Heart or

the thing about glimpses. Somehow he felt that Karma should hear that, just like him, straight from the turtle's mouth, rather than have it relayed to her by someone else, someone who had no idea what it meant. Realizing that this was the right thing to do in the situation is proof that Lifeboat is a sensitive and tactful woodrat. A *mature* woodrat.

They started out up the road, past the two culverts. They noticed that the icy mist had lifted, burned off by the sun, and it was now a sunny day. And here Joyride suddenly was struck by what she thought was just a *great* idea.

"Hey! Why don't we *all* go down at four o'clock with Karma! We can be there as a support group in case Sidd insults her the way he insulted Lifeboat! And you know what? We can all go down inside Smithsonian's Helix! Wouldn't that be a trip?"

She looked eagerly at both of them.

Now I don't need to tell you that Lifeboat thought this was a perfectly hideous idea. Asking for trouble in a big way. He started violently shaking his head. But Masquerade was suddenly taken off balance, a very uncomfortable feeling for her. In a way she agreed with Lifeboat. But the fact was, and there was no escaping it, the model of Helix had been her idea. She had asked Smithsonian to build it. If she agreed with Lifeboat, it would appear that she was *confessing a mistake*, and this is something that simply *no one* likes to do. Some people will *never* confess a mistake, would rather die! Even when they know that everyone else knows that they *know* they made a mistake! Won't admit it. Rather die.

"It was your idea, Masquerade!" shouted Joyride with a huge encouraging smile.

Just the absolute wrong thing to say!

Masquerade gritted her teeth. She forced herself to speak brightly, in a carefree swinging way.

“Right! I don’t see anything wrong with that! I should have thought of it myself! Wilder will be for it all the way. Karma will go, of course, it’s her appointment. And I think it’s a *great* idea, a real *lark*! Lifeboat will come around also!”

And here she gave Lifeboat a really hard look, a threatening look.

“Lifeboat will come around. He wouldn’t want everyone to think he was *afraid*, after boasting to us about how *brave* he was to go down and have an interview with Sidd! Right, Sailor? *Right?*”

Lifeboat knew he was trapped. “I suppose so,” he answered weakly.

They continued up the road, gradually accelerating into a trot in order to keep up with Joyride, who was filled with excitement. Lifeboat, who was filled with misgivings, kept lagging behind and hurrying to catch up. Masquerade, filled with an uncomfortable off-balance feeling, would have preferred trudging to trotting, but bounced along with Joyride anyway, knowing there was no turning back and very aware that if they got into trouble using the robot Helix everyone would blame her.

“Hurry up!” shouted Joyride, looking back. “Why aren’t you hurrying?”

They found Wilderness hanging out with Smithsonian at Smithsonian’s nest, trying to figure out what to do with a chisel they had found in the woodshed.

"Guys!" shouted Joyride as they ran up. "Guess what!"

Smithsonian and Wilderness looked up with irritated expressions on their faces, because they didn't like being interrupted when they were trying to figure something out. Nobody does.

"What?" said Smithsonian. "We're busy."

"Lifeboat just found out from Sidd that Karma's suspicion is right! There *is* more here than meets the eye! Sidd wants Karma to come down at four o'clock to talk about it! And we're all going down together in Smithsonian's Helix model to be a support group for Karma in case Sidd insults her and keeps forgetting her name like he did with Lifeboat! He changed his eyes from red to blue!"

Lifeboat started to say something but changed his mind. Smithsonian and Wilderness exchanged glances. Wilderness put down the chisel.

"Well," said Smithsonian thoughtfully. "This will be big news for Karma. Big news for sure..."

He reached for the chisel and stared at the ground, poking at stones with it, many things running through his mind. You remember Smithsonian has a special place in his heart for Karma.

Wilderness, as soon as he heard the news and the Helix plan, shouted, "Hey! Dude! I've been waiting for this, a chance to use the robot! Karma's up in the vineyard. I'll go get her. I'll tell her what's going on!"

Smithsonian was about to call out, "Wait! Let me tell her!" But it was too late. Wilderness was already out of sight.

He thought to himself, "Oh well. There's no turning back now. Life unfolds. Unfolds and unfolds."

Wilderness found Karma and told her what was going on. She looked at him but didn't move. He had expected her to jump right up and run down with him.

"What's the matter? Let's go!"

"Go back and tell them I'll be down in a little while. I'm going to think about this."

"What's there to think about? Let's go!"

"*You go! Go!*"

Wilderness shook his head and went running. "Don't take too long," he shouted over his shoulder.

Now let's pause a minute here. Things have been happening very fast ever since Joyride, Masquerade and Lifeboat started walking and then trotting and then running up the road. We'll save the wild adventure in Smithsonian's Helix model, Joyride's great idea, for the next chapter.

Why is Karma thinking awhile up in the vineyard?

I'll tell you. In five parts.

One. Karma's Suspicion, as I have often pointed out and we must always remember, started the adventure off and keeps it going. It's the *power* behind the adventure, which, as I said all the way back on the first page, is one of the greatest adventures woodrats or grownups could ever have.

Two. And Karma *knows* that her Suspicion, that there's more here than meets the eye, is the most important suspicion anyone could ever have -- much more important, for example, than the suspicion that someone was copying on a test, or that the cat was licking the butter, or that someone told someone something when they promised they wouldn't.

Three. And finding out that the most important suspicion is *true*, that it's not just a suspicion that may turn out to be a mistake - - which is what the dragonflies believe, except maybe Count Blackhole, the star-gazer who may change his mind -- will be the most important thing that could ever happen to anyone, woodrat or grownup, in their entire life! Why? Why is it the most important thing that could ever happen to anyone?

Four. Because it will launch them out on the Great Path! The Great Journey leading to the discovery of *what* is here but doesn't meet the eye and can only be seen with the Eye of the Heart! The Great Mystery!

Five. And Karma knows that Sidd is a turtle who gives *correct answers*, not just *opinions*. So the question that had been the main thing in her mind is now really settled. There *is* more here than meets the eye. Now she can launch out on the Great Path.

Now you know, from a five-part explanation, why Karma wanted to think awhile up in the vineyard and sent Wilderness running.

Was she excited about this?

No! You don't get excited about the Great Path. You feel *overwhelmed*. You're relieved that the Suspicion was true, but you don't feel something like, "Wow, this is exciting, I was right all along!" No way! You feel *overwhelmed*, you know something *big* is

going to happen in your life, a big *challenge*. You realize *it's a whole new ballgame now*.

That's how Karma felt. That's why she wanted to *compose herself*, to wait awhile in the vineyard before she came down to join the others. She knew that her interview with Sidd was going to be *a turning point in her life*. And she needed time to let that sink in, and to prepare herself.

It took about ten, maybe fifteen minutes. Then she headed out of the vineyard and down the driveway. She felt very light-hearted now, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She broke into a run. She couldn't wait to join the others.

Chapter Eight

Helix Meets Helix!

“At last! The traveler!” shouted Joyride happily when Karma came running down from the vineyard to join the others.

Karma, a bit surprised, but not *too* surprised, that Joyride remembered she had spoken about being on a journey, was feeling that a great weight was now lifted from her shoulders, the great weight of not knowing *for sure* that there was more here than meets the eye.

Smithsonian cleared his throat and spoke to the others in his most important sounding tone of voice.

“Okay! It isn’t going to be easy to make that Helix robot move. Not a piece of cake! I’ll have to give all of you a lot of instructions, an *in-service* on how to use the handles and knobs correctly. Any mistakes and Helix is going to flop over on one side and we’ll have to get out, push him up to standing position and start all over again.”

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute,” interrupted Lifeboat, looking around nervously. “Has anyone seen the *real* Helix lately?

Isn't that an important question? Helix, or Jack? Wasn't that the one *minor flaw* in this totally reckless, totally pointless suicidal scheme, that we may run into the real Helix and then what?"

He was being very sarcastic, of course, when he called it a *minor* flaw. He didn't think it was minor at all. He thought it was *major*. Minor flaws in our plans are *disturbing*. Major flaws are *alarming*.

"I saw both of them sleeping in the upper meadow on my way down," said Karma. "I don't think we have anything to worry about."

"Famous last words," muttered Lifeboat grimly.

"Let's go down single file behind the old outhouse," said Masquerade thoughtfully. "Keep out of sight, just in case."

"Right!" said Wilderness. "Right arm! Military style, by the book, by the numbers!"

They filed down, Smithsonian in the lead, past the leaning outhouse and the sacks of compost, pausing to glance curiously at the rope tied to the outhouse to keep it from completely toppling over. They dashed across the open area on the south side of the house and slipped through the hole by the water filter into the dimly lit space under the house.

They stopped and stared. There it was. The Helix double.

Lifeboat carefully avoided the humming batteries again. "Careful. You can get a real killer shock from those things," he mumbled to the others.

They hadn't looked at it very closely before, the night of the bathroom escapade, because first they had been terrified – except for Smithsonian and Masquerade – that it was the *real* Helix who had somehow learned of their plan and sneaked in under the house, and then, when they were told it was a model, they had been all caught up in the dental floss theft.

"Ears look a little bigger than Helix's," said Wilderness. "But otherwise it's dead on! Great work, Smitheroonie!"

"I worked real hard on that thing," said Smithsonian gruffly and proudly. "One of my greatest challenges." He looked around for signs of appreciation. "All Masquerade's idea, of course," he added modestly, smiling in her direction in a conspiratorial way, wishing to give credit where credit was due.

Masquerade, as we can imagine, was not interested in receiving credit where credit was due, and did not smile back. She was remembering the night of the escapade, when she had been boasting about her special skill at thinking ahead, and Lifeboat had spoken sarcastically about the "one teeny-tiny problem" of bumping into the real Helix when they were "stumbling around," as Lifeboat put it, inside the double. She had been secretly embarrassed then, and thinking back to that moment now was having what is called a *painful memory*. Grownups have painful memories very often, for some grownups every day. They try to put them from their minds, but never succeed.

Suddenly Smithsonian became very businesslike.

"Okay! Let's get down to business here. There are six of us. One will be in each leg, one in the head to look out the eye-holes and tell us where to go, and I'll be in the belly to watch over everything and give technical instructions. Who wants to be Helix's eyes?"

"I do!" shouted Wilderness immediately. "I have great eyes, excellent vision, I am very sharp-sighted! I'm perfect for the job!"

And we shouldn't be surprised that he volunteered so quickly. Remember how he had been congratulating himself on his excellent vision in his stream of consciousness on the way down to his ill-fated Vision Quest?

Smithsonian looked around at the others. No one seemed to want to make an issue out of this. It would certainly be more interesting to be eyes instead of legs, but the rest of them knew Wilderness would never allow anyone else to take over a job for which he was perfect.

"Okay, then," said Smithsonian. "Wilderness will be the eyes. I see it this way: Wilder the eyes, Masquerade front left leg, Joy-Joy front right leg, Karma hind left leg, and Sailor hind right leg. I'll be at the Command Station in the belly. We climb in through the mouth."

They climbed in.

"Okay!" called Smithsonian, a growing excitement in his voice. "Now listen carefully! I'm talking to the *legs*. Everybody listening? Listening *carefully*?"

"Yes!" "Roger!" "Yes!" "Yes!"

"Who said Roger?"

"I did. Me. Masquerade."

"Okay!" said Smithsonian, sounding pleased. "That was a good answer! Good show! Very professional! From now on, *everyone* says Roger! Got that?"

"Roger!" "Roger!" "Roger!" "Roger!"

"Great! That's great! Now. Listen carefully. Everyone has right in front of them a *handle* and a *knob*! When you lift *up* on the handle, your leg comes *up*. When you push the handle *down* again, the leg goes *down*. Everybody got that?"

"Roger!" "Roger!" "Roger!" "Roger!"

"Hey! We're cooking with gas! Now. Listen carefully again. The *knob* tells you the *direction* the leg will go when you push it down with the handle. Left, right, forward, backward! Everybody got that?"

"Roger!" "Roger!" "Roger!" "Roger!"

"Okay! This is marvelous! It's going to work! I think it's going to work! *This could work*! I'm a miracle-worker! Like Annie Sullivan! Okay. Now here's the part that sounds tricky, *but it isn't*. Listen carefully. What do you think will happen if both left legs lift up at the same time? *Don't answer*! I'll answer *for* you. *Helix will fall down flat on his left side. Flump!* We don't want that to happen, right? Right! So whenever Helix walks, we want *one left leg* and *one right leg* to lift up at the same time! Got that? Everyone say Roger."

"Roger!" "Roger!" "Roger!" "Roger!"

"Hey, you rats are great, just great! What a crew! Now listen. Listen the most absolutely carefully of all these times you have listened carefully. I'm going to call *Masquerade*, handling the front *left leg*, and *Lifeboat*, handling the hind *right leg*, TEAM A! TEAM

A! And I'm going to call *Joyride*, handling the front *right* leg, and *Karma*, handling the hind *left* leg, TEAM B! TEAM B! The Teams work *together*! Like a *unit*!"

He took a deep breath.

"Okay! Who's on Team A? Call out your names!"

Masquerade cried out, "Masquerade! Team A!"

"Who else?"

"Oh, Okay, all right, that's me. Lifeboat. Me, Lifeboat, right hind leg of a dog, just what I always wanted to be," answered Lifeboat, as if he didn't really want to be on a Team. And he really didn't, but we know, recalling his courageous performance with the rubber bands back in the bathroom escapade, that even if he doesn't like it he'll do his job, and do it well. Some people are like that. No enthusiasm, no zest, totally deadpan, they just take care of business.

"A little *enthusiasm* there, Sailor! A little *zest*! You'll get into it once we start walking. You're one wild and crazy woodrat, right? Right! *Saturday Night Live* kind of woodrat? Okay! Who's on Team B? Call out your names!"

"Me! Joyride!" shouted Joyride, overwhelmed by excitement.

"And me too, Karma!" called out Karma, laughing at the sheer craziness of it all, the sheer madness!

"Wilderness! Can you see out the eyes?"

"Roger!"

“Okay then! This is the Captain speaking. We’re cleared for takeoff! Wilder! Can we walk straight forward out the opening by the water filter?”

“Roger!”

“How many steps can we take before we bump into the ramp to the bathroom door?”

“Seven!”

“Okay! Team A. *Step front!*”

Masquerade and Lifeboat lifted their handles, pushed the knobs forward, then pushed the handle back down again.

“Okay! Dynamite! Team B. *Step front!*”

And the Helix robot took one big step forward.

“Wow! I say *Wow!* It’s working, just as I always knew it would! A masterpiece of design, just like the Rolls Royce! The Seiko Kinetic Watch! A masterpiece. Team A. *Step front!*”

The Helix robot stepped forward again, and it kept stepping forward for seven steps. Helix’s nose hit the ramp.

Wilderness called out. “We’re at the ramp! Smitheroonie? Is it okay if I call you Sir? Seems more professional to me, like real standard procedure. Only when we’re in the dog, of course.”

“Is it okay? Is it *okay*? Do fish poop in the ocean? *You bet your rump it’s okay!* Everybody hear that? While we’re in Helix, *everybody calls me Sir!* Got that?”

“Roger Sir!” “Roger Sir!” “Roger Sir!” “Roger Sir!”

“Oh, this is *just too much! Too much!* What now, Wilder? Right turn?”

“Roger Sir!”

“How many steps?”

“One turn, three forward Sir!”

“Okay. My congratulations, Wilder. I see you figured it out. Now listen. *No teams this time!* Front legs only! Masquerade and Joyride: *Right step!*”

“Roger Sir” “Roger Sir!” They lifted the handles, pushed the knobs to the right, then pushed the handles down again. Helix turned right.

Everyone followed the orders from the Captain in the Command Center. It worked perfectly. The Helix robot was now out in the open, on the edge of the cement wall for the new greenhouse.

“Wilder! Where are we?”

“Facing down towards the meadow, Sir. About ten steps to the turn-around down onto the road to the pond, Sir”

“Great! Marvellous! Too marvelous for words, too marvelous, too marvelous, too marvelous for words! *It’s delightful, it’s delicious, it’s de-lovely!* Okay! Ten steps forward now, starting with Team A!”

(Smithsonian was remembering the words to a song he had heard one night coming from the house.)

Again everyone followed orders from the Command Center, and again it worked perfectly. And they were all getting into it now, even Lifeboat. It just seemed so neat! They couldn't wait for more orders!

"Sir?"

"What is it, Wilder? Speak up."

"I think we have a situation, Sir."

"What? A situation?"

"I'm looking straight at Helix, and he's coming toward us. Jack's here too, lying on the picnic table. They must have come down from the upper meadow while we were under the house, Sir."

Now I don't have to tell you how they all reacted to this report. You can imagine for yourself. The phrase "stunned with terror" comes to mind. All jaws dropped except for Wilderness's, who had clenched his teeth instead.

There was a long suspenseful pause. All were holding their breath. Their eyes were tightly shut, except for Wilderness, whose eyes were wide open, staring straight into Helix's eyes, even though one of those eyes was blind.

Finally Smithsonian managed to speak.

"What's he doing?"

“He’s jumping up and down, Sir. Jumping from side to side and wagging his head. His tail is wagging too. I think, I *think*, he wants to *play*, Sir.”

Lifeboat also finally managed to speak. He shouted from his cramped position in the right hind leg.

“It’s like what he always does with Jack! Can’t you see, you hopeless fools? He wants to gambol! He wants to frolic and frisk! He wants us to gambol, frolic and frisk with him!”

Now this is the very last place you’d expect a digression, because it’s such an exciting and scary moment in the story, but there’s something that has to be mentioned here, a question we have to ask ourselves, and I’ll make it very brief.

The question is this: *Can dogs recognize themselves?*

We recognize ourselves only because we have seen ourselves in mirrors and have seen photographs of ourselves. Those are the only two ways we know how we look. Right? So Helix, a dog, who’s never seen a mirror or a photograph, can’t actually recognize *himself* in the Helix model, because he has no idea what he looks like! What he sees is *another dog*.

And what’s the main way dogs, so we are told, gather information? Much more through *smelling* than *seeing*. And what does Helix smell here? A woodrat! Actually *six* woodrats. So he must be thinking to himself, “I see a dog, a dog that smells like six woodrats, and maybe he wants to gambol, frolic and frisk like I always do with Jack!” That’s what Helix was thinking.

Smithsonian thought, “Gambol, frolic and frisk? Lifeboat and his big words! Lifeboat! Answer immediately! What do those words mean?”

“They mean run around and jump from side to side! Crazy dog stuff! *Play! Dog play!*”

Smithsonian thought quickly. “Lifeboat’s right. We have to go along with Helix or he might get angry. Wilderness! Is he still there?”

“Yes, Sir. Jumping around. I think Lifeboat is right. He wants to gambol. Frolic and frisk also. I’m sure of it, Sir!”

“Okay!” Smithsonian decided. “Gambol, frolic and frisk it is! Team A! *Step right!* A big step!”

Masquerade and Lifeboat, desperate but determined, pulled up their handles, pushed the knobs to the right as far as the knobs would go, and pushed down the handles again. “Roger, Sir!” they shouted.

“Great!” Smithsonian thought rapidly to himself, “Jump around from side to side, gambol, frolic and frisk.”

He shouted, “Team B! *Step left,* a big step!”

And here, if you can picture this in your mind, in his excitement he made a big mistake. Like Wilderness with the dental floss.

Joyride and Karma, also desperate but determined, pulled up their handles, pushed the knobs to the left as far as the knobs would go, and pushed down the handles again. “Roger, Sir!” they shouted.

The front legs crossed each other. The hind legs spread far out. The Helix robot teetered for a moment, then fell forward flat on its face.

"Man down, man down, Sir!" shouted Wilderness.

A stunned silence filled the Helix filled with woodrats.

Lifeboat thought to himself, "This is incredible. Absolutely incredible. Am I dreaming? Is this a dream? Is this really happening to me?"

Smithsonian shouted, "Everybody do nothing! Nothing! Don't make a move!"

He scrambled forward and looked out of the other eye. Helix's nose was an inch from the Helix robot's nose. He had a stick in his mouth. His hind legs were frisking.

Smithsonian and Wilderness looked at each other.

"What do you think, Sir? I believe he still figures we're a dog, Sir, even with two woodrats looking out the eyes. And it looks like he still wants to gambol with us. Do we have a plan for this situation, Sir? You know, rules of engagement and that kind of stuff? Is there a plan, Sir?"

"You bet there's a plan, Wilderness!" Smithsonian shouted wildly, and ran down into the mouth of the robot.

"If he wants to *play*, we're going to *play*! *Play* is the *plan*, Wilder!"

Smithsonian, glaring straight at Helix from the robot's mouth, reached out *and grabbed the stick*!

"Playing!" thought Helix happily in his dog brain.

Immediately he pulled on the stick, thinking, "This strange woodrat dog wants to play the great game where we each try to pull the stick out of the other's mouth!"

He pulled. Smithsonian, gritting his teeth, lashing his head from side to side, held on with every ounce of his strength.

His eyes wide with amazement, Wilderness watched from the eye. "Hold on, Sir, hold on, Smitheroonie!," he shouted. "Go, *Smitheroonie!*"

Can you guess what happened? Can you guess what the plan was? *Helix yanked the Helix robot back up on its feet! The plan worked!*

As soon as the robot was back up on its feet, Smithsonian let go of the stick and ran back up to the other eye.

"Good show, Sir, good show!" shouted Wilderness.

"Thanks, Wilder," gasped Smithsonian. "For awhile there I didn't think we were going to make it."

"I think it was our finest hour, Sir."

"Look!" said Smithsonian from the other eye. "Jack jumped down from the picnic table and he's frisking with Helix, a real frolic! This is our chance! Looks like we wound up facing straight down the road! Let's get out of here while they gambol!"

"Roger Sir!"

Smithsonian charged back to the Command Center. "Now hear this! Now hear this!" he shouted. This is the Captain speaking! Team A: *Step front!* Big step!"

Now, of course, the other four had no idea what had been happening. They knew nothing about Smithsonian's brilliant and daring plan and his heroic feat in the mouth. They didn't know it had been their finest hour. All they knew was that they had better follow orders.

"Roger Sir!" shouted Masquerade and Lifeboat.

And so it went. Team A, Team B, Team A, Team B, until they were down in the orchard, then in the staging area by the hydraulic splitter and the pile of firewood.

Safe!

Silently, they filed out through the mouth and sat by the woodpile. Wilderness filled the others in on what had happened, Smithsonian's plan and heroic feat. Smithsonian was too exhausted to act proud. He just smiled weakly and said, "Thank you, thank you," when they congratulated him for saving them from a fate they didn't want to think about.

Suddenly Lifeboat looked up.

"Karma's appointment! She mustn't be late! That turtle is unpredictable, I can assure you. I'm sure he expects us to be punctual. If we arrive late, at an inconvenient time for him, he'll probably just swim away!"

Wearily, they took their places again inside the Helix robot. They could have just left it there in the staging area, but Lifeboat didn't want Sidd to know that they had all come down with Karma

to make sure he wasn't rude to her, because he might be offended and act rude just out of spite – something people do very often when they think they've been offended -- and the Helix robot would be a perfect hiding place. Here, and only for this reason, he had to change his mind about the robot.

Once again, it was Team A and Team B, Team A and Team B.

After not too long they were down just short of the clearing next to the pond. They stopped there, where Sidd wouldn't be able to see Karma climb out of Helix's mouth. Then, when she went down alone to the pond, they could walk the Helix double, Smithsonian taking over for Karma in the left hind leg, closer to the pond, close enough so they could look out through the eyes and mouth and watch and listen. That was the plan.

Karma walked down to the pond. Sidd was there. She walked slowly. Her heart was beating. She knew – or maybe she just *hoped*, because you never can really be *sure* – that this was going to be a very important moment for her.

And we know why. We learned why at the end of Chapter Seven, when Karma was thinking in the vineyard.

But you know what? I think this thrilling chapter is already long enough. Let's take a *breather*, an interesting word which means the time in the middle of an action-filled adventure when you take a break from the action and just *breathe*. Let's breathe awhile and pick up with Karma's very important interview with Sidd in Chapter Nine.

Everybody breathing? I hope so!

Chapter Nine

Karma Learns the Truth and Helix Meets Helix Again!

Karma arrived at the edge of the pond. Sidd had been watching her approach across the clearing, his head turning slowly on its long neck. His red eyes, that had made Lifeboat feel uneasy because they weren't what he had expected, turned blue.

"Good afternoon, Karma," he said in a pleasant voice. "I have been expecting you. Please sit down."

She sat down. Woodrats look a bit odd when they sit down, because they really don't have any laps. You will have to picture it in your mind.

"I was told by your friend, Lifeboat, that you have a suspicion that there is more here than meets the eye."

"I do."

"And I assume that Lifeboat told you that your suspicion was well-founded, that there really *is* more here than meets the eye?"

"Actually, it was Wilderness who told me. Up in the vineyard. Lifeboat told the others."

"I see. And did Lifeboat tell the others about the Eye of the Heart?"

"No."

"It's with the Eye of the Heart that we see what is invisible to the eyes of the head."

"The Eye of the Heart. I thought it might be something like that."

"I imagine you did. And did Lifeboat tell the others about *glimpses*?"

"No."

"What we see with the Eye of the Heart is always seen first in glimpses. The first glimpse is always unforgettable, because we are seeing It for the first time, and had no idea how astonishing it would be. Then come the rest of the glimpses, each time wonderful, each time carrying us a little further on the Great Path, but not astonishing like the first one. Sometimes there are false glimpses, but when the real one comes, you know it."

"You know it."

"You know it."

"And how do we know we are on the Great Path? Where does it lead?"

"The Great Path leads out, and the Great Path leads in, at the same time. That's what the glimpses show, and that's how we know we are on the Great Path. We see that out and in are One. There is only the One."

"One what?"

"One."

"One."

"Yes. And that's all I am going to tell you now. It's enough to get you *launched*. There's much more you will learn. But for now you have to make yourself ready for the Eye of the Heart to have glimpses. After the first astonishing wonderful glimpse, you'll know what to do, what to look for, how to keep looking."

"The interview is over."

"Yes. Now you may return to the others hiding in the Helix robot."

"You knew."

"Of course!"

"Thank you very much. You have been very brief, very clear, as I hoped and expected. I have one question."

"And what is that?"

"What is your real name?"

"Siddhartha."

(This is a very powerful moment in the adventure, this revealing of Sidd's real name. There was a real Siddhartha. Find out who he was, if you don't already know! I'll say no more.)

Karma turned away and walked thoughtfully back to the Helix robot where the others were watching her through the eye-holes and the mouth.

"That was so quick!" shouted Joyride. "Was he rude the way he was with Lifeboat?"

"No, he was very polite. Very brief, very polite."

Smithsonian looked at her through the eye-hole with narrowed eyes, "And are things going to be different now?"

"Right!" said Masquerade shrewdly, eyeing Karma through the other eye. "Are things going to be different now?"

"Well, the Suspicion is gone. I know it's true."

"You still haven't answered my question," insisted Masquerade. "Are things going to be different now? Will you stop being moody and preoccupied?"

Karma thought a moment before answering.

"No. I think I'll still be a little preoccupied. Now I'm looking for glimpses. I'll see them with my Eye of the Heart."

"Glimpses!" remarked Joyride with a mischievous smile. "Nothing like those glimpses!" Which makes us wonder whether Joyride already *knows* about glimpses!

Karma smiled back, wondering the same thing.

"That's right. Glimpses."

"Enough," said Smithsonian, looking back and forth between the two of them, also wondering the same thing.

"I see bridges ahead, and we'll cross them when we get to them."

"Sounds good enough for me," said Wilderness, looking out the mouth of the Helix double.

Lifeboat was also hanging out the mouth, looking down at Karma. "Well, I'm happy to learn he wasn't rude to you," he said gruffly. "One strange turtle! Definitely picks favorites."

Karma looked up at him. "I guess I have you to thank, Sailor, for making my interview happen."

"Oh it's nothing, nothing," Lifeboat mumbled. "Do it anytime. Anything for you, Karma."

Lifeboat's eyes got a little misty. He turned away and looked off into the woods for moment, so the others wouldn't notice. Then he turned back. Like many grownups, he didn't want to show his feelings.

"You know, Karma, I knew about the Eye of the Heart and the glimpses, but I didn't mention it because I thought you would want to hear it straight from the turtle's mouth."

"You were right, Sailor!" she answered with a big warm smile. "It wouldn't have been the same."

She also turned away for a moment and then turned back.

"I can never thank you enough, Sailor."

Lifeboat turned away again so his feelings wouldn't show.

Do you get it? The importance of this moment? It was because Lifeboat was brave enough to go down on that rainy morning and have his strange interview with Sidd that Karma was invited down to have her interview, and Karma's interview with Sidd, proving her suspicion was true and teaching her about the Eye of the Heart and glimpses, is the big turning point in the Great Woodrat Adventure! Karma and Lifeboat don't know I'm writing this book so they don't know why this Chapter Nine is the end of Part One, "The Suspicion," but they do know it is the turning point in the adventure!

"Enough!" shouted Smithsonian again, impatiently. "Karma! Get back in here! You're the left hind leg, you know!"

"Right! Left hind leg!"

Karma climbed back in through the mouth, got to her post, and they started back up the road, Team A and Team B. The sun was getting low, but there was still enough light to see well.

Wilderness, seated at his post in the left eye, was admiring, as he always did, the way the setting sun sent long rays through the branches of the trees down there on the road past the culverts, and cast long shadows. He always felt sundown was the most beautiful time of the day.

"Am I glimpsing something?" he thought. "Have to talk about this with Karma."

Now the fact is, except for Smithsonian and Lifeboat they had forgotten all about Helix. Probably because they *wanted* to

forget all about Helix. As we have seen more than once in this story, people spend a lot of time trying very hard to forget about things. They were soon reminded, however, when they rounded the corner up into the meadow.

“Sir?” said Wilderness. “I think we forgot about someone.”

“I had not forgotten, Wilderness. I had *hoped*.” There was a long pause while Smithsonian thought about life and bad luck. “It’s Helix again, right?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Well, we’ll just keep on walking,” Smithsonian said stubbornly, and then a little angrily, “We don’t have time to frisk, frolic and gambol all day, even if Helix does!”

“Sir?”

“What? What *now*?”

“I can’t see anything anymore, Sir. Remember we noticed under the house that the robot’s ears were a little large? I believe I pointed that out. I think they dropped across the eyes, Sir. I can’t see a thing.”

Smithsonian said bad words under his breath.

“If it ain’t the hog it’s the windmill!” he shouted. “This is getting really frustrating! *Must I take arms against a sea of troubles?*”

“I think so, Sir.”

“Okay! Okay! Let me think!”

Smithsonian racked his brains, a figure of speech which means “think very hard when there’s a difficult problem to deal with,” and here means *thought very hard about what to do now that the robot’s ears had fallen across his eyes and they couldn’t see to move.*

Suddenly he shouted wildly, “Okay! I have a plan! I’ve had enough of this aggravation! Wilder! Scramble back to the rear of the robot! There’s a hole directly underneath the tail! Look out that hole! Shout directions! We’ll walk *backwards!*”

“Roger Sir!” And he ran back and stuck his head out of the hole.

“Team A! Team B! When I say step now, step *backwards!* Pull the knob *backwards!* The ears fell across the eyes, so we have to walk *backwards* now!”

“I can’t believe this, I just can’t believe it! Am I dreaming? Is this a nightmare?” I’m sure I don’t have to tell you which woodrat was thinking that to himself.

“Okay! Team A: *step back!*

“Roger Sir!”

“Now Team B: *step back!*

“Roger Sir!” answered Team B. Smithsonian was sure he heard Joyride laughing.

“Sir?”

“What?”

“Helix is looking right at me, Sir.”

"Shout at him! Stick your head out and shout at him as loud as you can! Tell him to go away! Tell him we'll come back to gambol tomorrow! Tell him anything you want! Just get rid of him!"

"Roger, Sir!"

Wilderness took a deep breath. Helix's nose was no more than an inch from his face.

"Beat it!" he shouted. "Beat it beat it beat it! We don't want to frolic now! Tomorrow! We'll frisk and frolic tomorrow! Beat it!"

Now you can imagine how all this looked to Helix.

Smithsonian shouted, "Team A: *step back!*"

"Roger Sir!"

"Team B: *step back!*"

"Roger Sir!"

Once again, it was Team A, Team B, Team A, Team B!

"Wilderness! What's happening back there?"

"Every time we take a step back, so does Helix. I think he's backing down, Sir. I think he can't figure out what's going on. I think he can't believe his eyes. I think he may even be *scared*, Sir!"

"Great! Great! I knew it! He's *chicken*! He's *yellow*! Got a yellow streak a mile wide down his back! Guide us back under the house!"

"Roger Sir! Helix is retreating. We faced him down!"

"Great! Faced him down all right! *Faced him down! Faced him down with a woodrat's face!*" Smithsonian shouted triumphantly.

"Give directions, Wilder! Take us home!"

Wilderness gave directions, Smithsonian shouted orders to Teams A and B from the Command Center. And Yes! After stumbling about for awhile walking backwards under the ramp by the water filter, they arrived safely back under the house.

Exhausted but tremendously happy, they climbed out of the Helix double. They all climbed up on its back and patted it on the head, laughing with relief and joking about the day's adventures.

"Great job, Helix!" laughed Masquerade.

"Great job, *Wilderness!*" laughed Joyride. "What a sight that must have been to Helix! No wonder he backed down!"

"Smithy was great too!" shouted Wilderness. "Hurray for Captain Smitheroonie!"

"Helix meets Helix!" they all shouted.

Even Lifeboat laughed. He looked over at Karma. They smiled at each other for a long time without turning away.

Part Two

The Rabbit Seeds

Chapter One

A Birthday Present for Joyride

I have to start Part Two by telling you – it'll just take a minute -- a funny thing about Time.

It seems to *me* like a long time ago that I was writing and you were reading the story about the woodrats in Part One of *The Woodrat Chronicles*, called *The Suspicion*. Why? Why a long time ago? Because three whole months have gone by since I wrote all that down! And three months have gone by for the woodrats too. For *you*, on the other hand, no time at all has gone by, all you have to do is turn the page, which only takes a second, but for *me*, it's *back again at last*, after all that time wondering what was going to happen next. I've really missed that brave little crew! I've been thinking about them. A long time gone by for me, no time at all for you. Two ways that three months went by! And now we meet again!

And guess what? In Part Two there's going to be *magic*! Do you believe in magic? Some people think that when you try to tell people about magic "it's like tryin' to tell a stranger 'bout a rock and roll!" They'll never believe you! But whether you believe in

magic or not – and I *certainly* do, because sometimes it seems to me that *the whole world* is magic! -- you can be sure there will be plenty of magic in Part Two of our story.

OK then! Let's pick up with the adventure!

It's a clear cool morning in May. California buttercups and wild iris dot the hillsides and the fringes of the meadows. The whitethorne is blooming behind the clothesline. The tall clump of eye-catching Calypso Orchids, blue and yellow, has appeared near the fire hose stand, and miner's lettuce, in the eyes of our woodrats, is demanding to be chomped.

Nothing unusual or dramatic has happened since three months ago, since the escapade in the bathroom, and the adventure of Wilderness's misadventure on his Vision Quest, and that last dangerous confusing confrontation between Helix and the Helix robot, when our six friends were returning from Karma's interview with Sidd, the interview that was so different from Lifeboat's painful interview where he was repeatedly insulted for no good reason – something that, incredible as it may sound, happens quite often among grownups – nothing *important* has happened, nothing that was part of the Great Adventure. Just the usual foraging and nibbling and gossiping together, falling asleep and dreaming and waking up, as grateful for the rain as for the fair weather, joking sometimes about little unimportant things, slapping each other on the back and nudging each other in the ribs, and winking at the right times. The peaceful daily routine, the peaceful rhythms of daily life in the woods, and everywhere else too, as long as no one forgets what life is all about and goes ballistic or opens a can of worms or gets big ideas.

And each one, on their own, had been doing and thinking the special personal things that come from their *characters*, a word we have examined in Part One.

Smithsonian had been working away, frowning with concentration – a figure of speech meaning *thinking very hard about how to overcome problems* -- trying to “iron out the wrinkles” – another figure of speech meaning about the same thing -- in his project to get electric lighting into his nest using stolen batteries and wires and brightly colored wire nuts for different size wires.

Masquerade had been imagining neat disguises she could wear, like her rhinoceros mask, because, as you will recall, Masquerade thinks, like the great English poet, Shakespeare, that everyone is really traveling in disguise anyway, because all the world's a stage and everyone is playing a role. I think I might have mentioned that I feel that way too. Masquerade is a woodrat who is not easily tricked by anyone who is *pretending*, but she never makes fun of anyone because that would be mean. Masquerade is one of those woodrats who is very interested in personalities and enjoys what Herman Melville, a great English writer who wrote a famous book about a big white whale, called “striking through the mask!” In this book a very angry ship captain named Captain Ahab shouted to his sailors, “Strike through the mask!” -- although most of them probably didn't know what he was talking about.

Wilderness still hadn't got around to talking with Karma about whether or not he had had a “glimpse,” with his “eye of the heart,” of something that doesn't meet the eye. (Remember when he was admiring the shadows and splinters of light cast by the setting sun on their way back from the pond?) He hadn't just *seen*, with his eyes, the sunset, shadows and splinters of light, but had *felt* something, felt a *feeling*, somewhere in the neighborhood of his heart. During much of the three months he had been studying his collection of topo maps, planning backpacking trips with challenging trails and dangerous cliffs.

What about Joyride? Well, I have to tell you something surprising about Joyride, something that didn't show up in Part One of this Adventure. Joyride often went secretly off into the woods and *shed tears of joy*. Why? Because she felt it was just wonderful to be alive! That may sound strange, especially when we think of *the secret life of grownups*: all the troubling discoveries and discouraging setbacks and bewildering waves of terror and despair that they confront so courageously, but I'm quite sure that there are others besides Joyride who feel that way, at least from time to time, or maybe only *one* time that they never forget for the rest of their lives.

None of the other woodrats knew about Joyride's secret, and she would have been terribly embarrassed if anyone found out, because it was *private*. Everyone, as I'm sure you know, has *private* things, silly secret things they think and do that *they themselves* know are silly.

But Smithsonian, because he loved Joyride so much – although he would never dream of *showing* it, because he is not *demonstrative*, another word we examined in Part One – suspected, or at least would not have been surprised. Remember when Joyride *wept*, rhyming with *leapt*, when they discovered that Wilderness was alive, hanging upside down from that branch? That was a *tipoff*, a neat word meaning a *clue*, about her character. Some believe that certain things about people's characters, the secret harmless things about them, are actually seen with the eye of the heart! But that may only be true if we *love* them, the way Smithsonian loves Joyride.

And what about Lifeboat? Lifeboat was very relieved. The scary escapade in the bathroom and the crazy senseless adventure inside the Helix robot had put a great strain on his fragile nerves, and he was very relieved that nothing exciting had happened since then. Many days now he even left his emergency kit back in the

nest. Lifeboat actually *hates* excitement and thrills and enthusiasm and stuff like that. He is happy when everything is going along smoothly in sort of a monotonous routine and nothing unusual is happening. There are people like that, and, even though they sound boring, they have their place in the world just like everyone else. I even think that *I*, as I get older, am becoming something like Lifeboat!

Also, during the past three months Lifeboat and Wilderness have discovered that they are both very interested in herbs, especially the herbs that have interesting uses, like the plantain you can make into a bandaid that heals the cut while you wear it, the milk thistle which is good for kidney problems, and especially the mugwort and rosemary you can use to make pillows that help you remember your dreams and maybe even plan them ahead! They have, the oldest and youngest of the woodrats, what is called a *shared interest*, which helps to bridge their different approaches to life due to age.

And Karma? Karma now knows, of course, having been informed by Sidd, that there *is* more here than meets the eye. It's no longer a suspicion, because now she *knows*. And she has decided to be patient about it. The pressure is off, she is no longer preoccupied. Sidd had made it clear that you can't *push the river* – an important figure of speech meaning *try to make things happen faster than they are ready to happen*, something grownups do all the time, *especially* grownups who advise *other* grownups not to push the river – not where glimpses are concerned. So woodrat affairs were more unstressed, the atmosphere tranquil, more peaceful, now that *Karma* was unstressed, no longer preoccupied, and simply waiting patiently for glimpses without pushing the river. Very often indeed all it takes is one person in a family, or a group, even a large group, *even an entire country*, to make everyone feel really stressed.

And one other thing about the past three months. Do you remember the important secret private meeting of the dragonflies back in Chapter 8? When they got together behind the big fallen tree to rehearse their messages? When Count Gigabyte arrived late because he had been spying on Lifeboat's crazy interview with Sidd, the turtle who knows the correct answers to important questions?

That was when Showtime, the chattering Chipmunk, rehearsed his message about stuff like "*Angie Finally Talks!*" and "*Her signature print is leopard!*"

And Anchormann, the Western Skink, rehearsed his message about stuff like "*The quest for empire and the thirst for petroleum met in turn-of-the-century Persia!*" and "*Fighting all over the globe reaches a climax of fury!*"

And the Counts -- who never got a chance to rehearse their message at the meeting because Count Thinktank became angry and confused and shouted "Meeting Adjourned!" and sent them all away -- rehearsed their message on their own, stuff like, "*Crick and Watson used beads, wire and cardboard to set up a double helix!*" and "*Adobe's Lightroom Processes Gobs of Images!*" and "*Jupiter! Average distance from the sun 483.7 million miles!*"

Well, the messengers had been busy during the past three months, hadn't let the grass grow under their paws or claw-pads or bug-feet, and you could never tell when you would suddenly be interrupted by Showtime, Anchormann and the dragonflies blasting some crazy *information* at you.

But the woodrats were not fooled by this sly trick and never allowed any of this crazy information to distract them from what they were thinking or saying or doing, or from each other, or from what they knew was *really* important to them. And don't forget *this*:

If we have these messages rattling around in our minds all the time, 24-7, even in our dreams, *then we will never have time to wonder if there might be more here than meets the eye, Karma's suspicion!* And that wondering is the most important thing we ever do – at least in my opinion.

And now, having reviewed the past three months that went by so slowly for me and so fast for you, let's pick up again with our story. Back to the clear cool morning in May.

They were gathered together, except for Joyride, up on the driveway, in front of Smithsonian's cluttered nest. Joyride's birthday was coming up, and everyone had waited till she wasn't around to plan for a birthday present. (We know now, of course, and Smithsonian suspects, where she might be!) They wanted to give her a surprise Birthday Party, and a surprise present.

"Well? What's a good gift?" Masquerade asked, looking around impatiently, with her typical no-nonsense approach to life, wanting to get right down to business. "Anyone have any bright ideas?"

They all exchanged glances.

Wilderness spoke first. "I think I have an insight here. I often have terrific insights. It's really probably the best idea we're likely to come up with."

He looked around at all of them with a challenging air. He was the youngest, and expected to be shot down – a figure of speech which means *totally ignored*, not worth listening to, looked at is if you had suddenly gone crazy.

Everyone else exchanged glances again.

Lifeboat stared at him suspiciously and cleared his throat.

“What? What best idea?”

“OK,” he answered excitedly. “Remember how proud she was of that ear-ring she used to frighten Rebar? She thought it was cool to wear one ear-ring? I think we should give her some jewelry! That’s what she’s in to. It’s pretty obvious.”

Again they exchanged glances.

Masquerade spoke first, a bit reluctantly, but with the sincere air, and Masquerade was *always* sincere, even when her tone was sharp, of someone who wants to “give credit where credit is due” – an important figure of speech which means *make people feel good about things they are proud of, even when they are too shy to talk about it, give them big compliments, tell them they did a great job*. Some grownups are slow to give credit where credit is due, always for reasons that have nothing to do with the credit thing at all!

“You know, I actually think that *is* a good idea, Wilder. A *smashing* idea. A real *insight*! Wilder is our rat!” And she smiled at Wilderness, who looked away to conceal the satisfied expression on his face.

Karma looked around at the others. “Well? Do we all agree? I do! She’d love some jewelry! It’s her thing.”

Lifeboat looked around now, trying to get a sense of the group’s reaction, searching for a *consensus*, an important word referring to a sometimes awkward situation where everyone agrees, or pretends to agree just to get it over with, about something very serious to some and ridiculous to others.

“Anyone object? Think they have a better idea?”

No one said anything.

"Anyone object?" he repeated more loudly. "Smithy? We haven't heard yet from you."

"Sounds good. What kind of jewelry? Necklace? Bracelet?"

"I think a bracelet," said Karma. "A necklace would keep falling off, because our necks are thicker than our heads."

"That's true," said Wilderness. "Thick necks. Fall right off. Pretty obvious."

(A quick aside here. Have you noticed how often Wilderness says, "It's obvious"? When people say that, they're *really* saying, "What's the matter with you? How come you can't see something right in front of your face? I must be so much smarter than you are!" It's an annoying habit of Wilderness, and of all the people who share that habit, but the others long ago decided to ignore it, even Masquerade.)

They all turned to Smithsonian.

"Right! Thick necks. A bracelet. My job. I have a lot of washers and nuts, even some of those neat lock washers, also rubber hose washers in assorted sizes, and plenty of wire. Easy money."

Masquerade announced, "Good! Then it's settled. Smitheroony will make her a bracelet. She'll love it. Wilder had an insight!"

But Wilderness, who had happened to glance up the driveway, suddenly turned to the others and, speaking quietly, in a warning tone of voice, pointed.

“Hey. Everyone. We’re not alone. Look up there.”

They all turned to look up the driveway. Two white rabbits, one with a green backpack, the other carrying a Frisbee, were strolling down towards them. As they got closer, it was clear that there was something alive in the backpack.

Chapter Two

The Craziest Rabbits in the World!

They exchanged glances again, each one making sure to glance once at all the others so they were *all on the same page*, a figure of speech here meaning all alert to what was going to be some kind of surprise or challenge they would have to deal with. Visitors were merely a vague idea in their happy little scene, something that *might* happen, something they had *heard* about.

As a matter of fact, as they exchanged glances, none of them could recall *ever* having received visitors. Lifeboat and Smithsonian, as the oldest, stepped a little forward. Wilderness frowned and fumbled with his leatherman tool. Masquerade looked at the rabbits through narrowed eyes, and Karma stared calmly, curiously, at the strange visitors, wondering if this might have something to do with her Journey.

The rabbits stopped in front of them, saying nothing. The one with the frisbee smiled. The other, the one with the green backpack that had something alive moving around in it, didn't.

Lifeboat had read about moments like this. The right thing to do was to *greet* the visitors, *welcome* them in a friendly cordial way, introduce themselves, and ask if they could be of any help to the visitors. Maybe they were lost and needed directions. Maybe they had some kind of financial problem. Maybe they needed medical attention.

Lifeboat smiled at them in a friendly cordial way.

“Hello! We’re woodrats who live here! How may we help you? Are you lost, maybe, or do you have some kind of problem?”

There was no answer, but the rabbit with the green backpack that had something alive in it now smiled, and at the same time the other rabbit, the one with the Frisbee, stopped smiling and just stared at them.

Lifeboat stared back for a moment, a little confused by the smiling changes. He remembered the other thing you’re supposed to do when meeting strangers.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is...”

“Don’t bother! Stop right there!” shouted the one with the Frisbee, suddenly smiling again and looking at all the woodrats with a very affectionate expression on his face.

“We know your name! We know *all* your names! We know your *markings*! You all look just the way we expected you to look! You’re all so cute! Like little chocolate chip cookies! Chips and salsa! *Moo Goo Gai Pan with Peanut Butter*! You’re Lifeboat, of course! And I see Smithsonian, and Karma, and Wilderness, and Masquerade!”

“Where’s Joyride?” asked the one with the green backpack curiously, craning his neck to peek behind them as if she might be hiding. “Where is she?”

They were all stunned, of course, just totally *flabbergasted* – a truly terrific word you should use as often as you can, meaning completely astonished, can’t believe this is happening, just absolutely *blown away*. They didn’t even exchange glances. Who *were* these guys? How did they know their names? What did that rabbit mean when he said, “You look the way we expected you to look”?

Masquerade stepped forward. “How do you know our names?” she demanded sternly.

“Right!” cried Wilderness. “We don’t know *your* names! It’s not fair!”

Smithsonian, his mind racing, trying to figure out what all this might mean, practiced self-control and said courteously, “I believe we have a right to an explanation. You have the advantage of us.”

“Right!” shouted Wilderness. “The advantage!”

The rabbit with the Frisbee jumped into the air several times and tossed the Frisbee rapidly from one paw to the other. The one with the green backpack twirled himself around in wild circles until he cried out, “Oh oh oh! I’m so dizzy!” and fell over.

The rabbit with the Frisbee, while he was still jumping, sang out, one word with each jump, “*My! Name! Is! Jefferson! His! Name! Is! Airplane!*”

Then he suddenly stopped and stared at them with a big smile on his face.

“Got that? Our names! We’re friendly! Friendly rabbits! The friendliest rabbits you’ll ever meet even if you live to be a million years old!”

“Right! A million!” said the other rabbit, pulling himself to his feet and stumbling around. “And we remember what the Dormouse said!”

“And of course,” said Jefferson with a sly smile, “as you can probably guess, we’re you-know-what! *Magic!*”

“All too true, all so very true, and wonderful also,” said Airplane, nodding his head dreamily. “We’re magic. We *believe* in magic! We *are* magic! Magic white rabbits, on the road. Dharma bums.”

(“Dharma bums,” in case you don’t know, is a name a little group of crazy people gave to themselves many years ago when they were driving all over the place searching for something different. They became famous.)

The woodrats had at first been amazed, and alarmed, by all this startling weirdness, until gradually they relaxed and actually started to laugh at the antics of their visitors. Wilderness did a little jumping himself! They were relieved to hear Jefferson and Airplane say that they were friendly rabbits, and very intrigued – a word that means very *interested*, means they were really looking forward to *seeing* something far out -- when they said they were magic, because magic, *friendly* magic, is very rare, very exciting, very *stimulating*, and always a very special treat.

"Well?" said Jefferson breathlessly, gasping after all that wild jumping. "What do you think? What do you think *now*? Great jumping, right? And you know our names!"

"Right!" said Airplane. "You know our names! Now think *what*? What now *think*?"

Smithsonian said, "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

He turned to the others. "We want to talk this over, right? Figure out where to go from here. I don't think there's any danger, but we want to find out what this is all about, why they're here, how they know all about us. Right?"

"And don't forget to ask them what the Dormouse said!" added Karma. "That might be a clue!"

They all nodded their heads, staring from time to time at Jefferson and Airplane. Airplane had dropped his backpack and the two of them had hopped over into the meadow and were having a frisbee catch.

Smithsonian shouted to Jefferson and Airplane, who were darting all over the meadow and seemed to be very skilled at throwing and catching a frisbee.

"Hey! You guys! We're going to take a moment and talk all this over! Okay? Then we'd like you to tell us why you're here. Okay?"

"No problem!" shouted Jefferson or Airplane, running like mad after a frisbee. "We'll tell you all about it! We're here to help!"

They stood in a circle, occasionally glancing out at the meadow where Jefferson and Airplane were galloping after the

flying frisbee and shouting, "Great Catch!" and "Nice try!" and "Bad throw!"

And just then Joyride came running up.

"What's going on? Who are those rabbits?"

"Come over here right now, Joy-Joy," said Masquerade. "Get in the circle. That's just what we're talking about."

Joyride squeezed in and looked from one to the other with an eager questioning smile.

"Okay," said Smithsonian to the others in the huddle. "What do we know? We know they know our names, that they say they're *magic*, that they say they're here to help, and their names are Jefferson and Airplane."

"And they're dharma bums," added Wilderness, with a puzzled expression on his face. "What *are* dharma bums?"

"And don't forget that green backpack Airplane is carrying," added Karma. "There's definitely something *alive* in it!"

"Right," said Lifeboat thoughtfully. "Dharma bums, with something alive in a green backpack. Friendly dharma bums!"

He frowned and glanced out at the meadow, shaking his head.

"Crazy stuff. Bizarre, a bizarre development. Can this be a *good* thing for us?"

Smithsonian spoke decisively -- a fine adverb meaning *putting an end to a discussion and coming to a decision*.

"There are a lot of questions here that we can't answer at this point. Not enough information. Caught off guard. I say we call them back and tell them we are woodrats who practice the ancient virtue of all civilized creatures called *hospitality*, we entertain strangers with generosity and kindness, we offer them food and shelter and anything else they need and we can provide. We'll just have to ask them how we can be helpful."

"I already did that," said Lifeboat, with a trace of irritation. "Remember? I said 'How may we help you?' and they didn't answer."

"Well, we're just going to ask them again!" said Masquerade.

"Yes!" cried Joyride. "We'll say, 'How may we help you bums?'"

"Sounds right to me," said Wilderness, trying to sound decisive. "How may we help you bums? That's the ticket. Hospitality. Ancient virtues. Do it by the book." He looked around at the others as if the question was settled.

Everyone nodded.

Lifeboat narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, glancing again out at the meadow where Jefferson and Airplane were still tearing all over the place chasing the frisbee.

"Right. Hospitality. That's what we have to do. We have no choice here. The ball's in their court. Just ask them how we can be of help, ask them what they're here for – although I have my doubts that we'll get a straight answer. They're obviously not your average run-of-the-mill strangers."

And then, with a grim shake of his head, he added, "It's in the hands of the powers-that-be now." And he muttered to himself, "The tricky sneaky treacherous hands of the powers-that-be."

"OK then, it's settled! Our path is clear!" said Wilderness. "And I have the loudest voice! Everyone knows!"

Again everyone nodded.

He turned toward the meadow and shouted, "Jefferson! Airplane! You guys! We're finished talking! We finished taking a moment to talk all this over! You can come back now!"

They looked out at the meadow. One of the rabbits had just missed the frisbee and was rolling over and over on the ground, shouting as he rolled and tumbled down a slope.

"Did you hear that? Did *you* hear *that*? They finally finished taking a moment to talk it over! I thought they were going to take forever! Longest moment I can remember!"

The other rabbit shouted back, "Seemed like an eternity, all right! But the true sage can wait, even for a million years, with a smile of serene patience, never going ballistic because it's taking so long, without losing his or her cool, for the mud to settle and the water to become clear again! Right?"

"Right! Right! Right! You're absolutely right about that! The mud!" shouted the other as he jumped to his feet and ran charging back to the startled woodrats waving the frisbee.

"What was he talking about?" whispered Joyride, her eyes wide.

Masquerade answered quickly, patting her rapidly on the back, "Crazy stuff, just crazy stuff. Forget it. Not important!"

The rabbits came galloping up. The one without the frisbee picked up the green backpack with something alive moving around in it, and the two of them stood in front of the six woodrats, smiling and swaying and drooling and holding hands.

Masquerade whispered to the others, "Let me do the talking."

But as she was about to begin to speak she realized that she couldn't tell who was who.

"Pardon me, but which one of you is Jefferson and which is Airplane? You are, as I'm sure you know, identical."

The one with the frisbee immediately answered, "Well for crying out loud! Who's carrying the frisbee? I am! *The one with the Frisbee is always Jefferson!*"

Lifeboat instantly turned to the others, waving his paw frantically.

"Just let it go by, just let it go by! Don't go there! Just go on with the plan! Go on with the plan!"

Masquerade cleared her throat.

"Right! Of course! You're Jefferson, he's Airplane. We've talked all this over, very seriously and thinking clearly, with everyone making a contribution, and although there are some important unanswered questions here, many very important unanswered questions, like, for example, how you know our names, what the Dormouse said, and what's in that green

backpack, *and above all why you are here*, we've decided to overlook them for the time being and practice the ancient virtue of hospitality. So. How may we help you bums?"

"What great woodrats! Just like we were told you would be by the boss!" shouted Airplane. "Willing to help us pilgrims!"

"I thought you said you were dharma bums!" shouted Wilderness.

Airplane spun around in a circle, crying, "Yes! We are! You're absolutely right! We did say that! And pilgrims too!"

"And drifters!" cried Jefferson joyously. "Drifters! We drift along like the tumbling tumble-weeds!"

"And adventurers! Explorers! Daredevils! Scientists! Snipers!" shrieked Airplane, swinging his backpack around and around his head.

The two of them linked arms and danced in a slow circle, chanting passionately all the names they had just given themselves, until, as if at a signal, they suddenly stopped and faced the woodrats.

"Listen, you guys, you lucky little woodrat guys, our brand new best friends," said Jefferson, "all we need is a place to pitch our tent and spend the night. You know? Know what I mean? See what I'm saying? Isn't that a simple thing? A simple thing, a simple humble innocent request from two exhausted maniacs. How about it? Can you help us out? Give us a hand?"

Masquerade turned to Smithsonian.

"You take over. I need a break."

Smithsonian stepped forward, totally baffled, aware that he and all the rest were definitely in over their heads, but determined to carry out the plan no matter how crazy the situation. By the book, as Wilderness always put it.

"Yes. Of course we can. We are very happy to offer you our hospitality. We are woodrats who entertain strangers with generosity and kindness. There's a nice flat meadow down there in front of the house. We invite you to pitch your tent there and spend the night. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks a million," said Jefferson, "Thanks a million. We knew we could count on you. We knew we could count on you, and we knew your names, your markings, your personality quirks, and we have big plans for you. *Big plans, comrades, big plans!* Thanks again. Do we have to register, sign a book or something, show you photo I.D.?"

Smithsonian didn't bat an eye at this disturbing reference to "big plans." He ignored it completely.

"No, that's quite all right," he said politely. "Just pitch your tent down there and we'll see you in the morning."

Jefferson and Airplane bowed several times to each one of them and strolled down the driveway, chattering happily, waving their arms and exclaiming over the glorious view of the coastal range. They pitched their tent and got inside. The sun was setting. The woodrats watched them from the driveway, lost in thought – a figure of speech which doesn't mean really *lost*, like when you don't know where you are, but just thinking so hard you aren't aware of your surroundings. Lost in thought and saying nothing.

They stood there silently a long time, huddled together, until about eleven o'clock, when it was very dark, with only the faint light of a half moon. The only one who broke the silence was Lifeboat, who muttered, with his eyes shut tight, "He mentioned a boss. What boss? Whose boss?"

Suddenly Wilderness whispered, "I'm going down there. I want to check something out." And he ran down to the meadow before anyone could say a word to stop him. Cautiously, very carefully, very silently, he lifted the tent flap and peeked inside. He paused there for a moment and then came running back to the others.

They stared at him.

"It's empty. There's no one there."

Chapter Three

The Wild Underground Birthday Party and the Magic Bracelet

They all stared at Wilderness.

And, as you should expect by now, they all responded to this bizarre news, just as people would, just as all your friends would, according to their *characters*. And there are few things as interesting, and mysterious, and disturbing, as people's characters!

As we have seen, our woodrats were really taken by surprise by the Rabbits and the crazy things they said and did, *thrown into a dither, completely floored, thrown for a loop*, figures of speech meaning *they had no idea how to react*, and before I tell you about the amazing *adventure* part of this chapter, which I can't wait to do, we should see how they *reacted*, according to their characters, to Wilderness's startling report that the tent was empty. Reading and discussing and arguing about people's characters is one of the main things you will be doing when you grow up. And don't be surprised! People will be discussing and arguing about *your* character all your life!

"Empty," said Lifeboat helplessly. "He said empty. What's happening around here? What's going on? Who *are* those guys?" he

asked himself, repeating, without knowing it, a famous line from the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

And he groaned under his breath. Lifeboat, you will remember, although he was very brave when the chips were down, as he was in the bathroom escapade when Rebar appeared, had a keen, even eager eye for trouble.

Joyride shouted enthusiastically, happy to be pointing something out.

"How can it be empty? We saw them go in! Didn't we? I know! Let's go down into the tent! Let's check this out! They're hiding in there!"

Joyride, unlike Masquerade, delights in the excitement of life, delights in *playing the game*, delights in *adventures*, throws herself into things. People like that are wonderful to know, of course, but we often have to *curb their enthusiasm*, an important figure of speech meaning *hold them back for their own good*, because they may be overlooking something important, or even crucial.

"I tell you it's empty!" Wilderness fiercely insisted, waving his leatherman tool. "I peeked under the flap and saw that it's empty! There's no one there! You think I can't tell when a tent is empty? Empty!"

Masquerade answered, also fiercely. "Well, I for one am not surprised. Those guys are crazy! They even *confessed* they were maniacs! They don't even have their own names!"

Masquerade is as suspicious as Lifeboat, but for different reasons. Lifeboat *worries* a lot, and people who worry, as you will some day learn, are always suspicious: they scent *danger*, something that will *disturb the routine*. Masquerade is suspicious

because she is very *insightful*, and has concluded from bitter experience that *things are never what they appear to be*. And I agree with her about that!

"So, it's empty," said Smithsonian, nodding thoughtfully. "Well. Either they just disappeared, which is a serious violation of the laws of nature, or they became invisible, which is also a serious violation. It's got to be one or the other. Nature has laws."

He looked around at the others to make sure he had impressed them with his knowledge. Smithsonian is *impressed with himself*, and feels others should share this view. You will often meet people like that, and when you do, it's best to *agree* with them, even when you think they're totally wrong, because then they are happy and you are amused.

"Who cares which it is?" shouted Wilderness, who was totally unimpressed by Smithsonian's knowledge *and wanted him to know it*, because, as you should remember, there was a little friendly *rivalry* between them. Rivals *never forget* that they are rivals.

"What difference does it make? We're in a *situation*! Just like the Apollo astronauts! It's cards on the table! We *live* here and we have a *challenge* to meet!"

Wilderness, as we all know by now, is a *woodrat of action*. He *takes the bull by the horns*, a great figure of speech which has nothing to do with bulls but means *stop talking forever and act right now* – which is sometimes good advice and more often definitely not.

"Invisible rabbits," murmured Karma. "Invisible rabbits. Well, remember they said they were magic! Looks like some magic here! And they did say they were friendly!"

Karma tends to look for the brighter side of things. People like Karma are called *open to experience*, fearless and optimistic, which is basically a *good* thing, of course, but many people decide, as they get older and go through a lot of surprising disappointments, that it might be better sometimes to “Lie low, wait and see,” as a dear departed friend of mine, a very shrewd man named Albert, often used to say.

“Right!” said Masquerade sarcastically. “Friendly magic invisible dharma bum pilgrim sniper rabbits who are here to help! Give me a break!”

“And drifters too!” shouted Wilderness. “Did you hear what they said? They think we’re their *best friends*! How could we be their best friends when we just met?”

“And they have a boss,” said Lifeboat gloomily. “Don’t forget they have a boss.”

“Okay, Okay!” said Smithsonian, tactfully choosing to ignore, for the time being anyway, Wilderness’s failure to be impressed by his knowledge of the laws of nature and the violations of those laws.

“I think I know what we have to do. It’s bold, it might be dangerous, but we have no choice.”

They all looked at him, each thinking very hard. Finally Masquerade said, speaking for all of them, “What? What do we have to do, Smitheroonie?”

“Joyride was right. It’s not a time for curbing her enthusiasm. We have to go down into the tent and investigate.”

And since everyone agreed that they had no other choice, that they couldn't simply shake their heads and walk away from this rabbit challenge hoping it would go away by itself, that's exactly what they did. Silently, in single file with Smithsonian in the lead, casting faint shadows in the moonlight, they walked down to the tent.

Masquerade turned to Wilderness. "Where did you peek in?"

"Back there, on the other side, they didn't use a lot of tent stakes."

They circled the tent. Smithsonian got out his flashlight. Lifeboat got out *his* flashlight from his emergency pack.

"OK. We're going in!" said Smithsonian dramatically.

Joyride could hardly contain her excitement, Lifeboat could hardly contain his dismay, Karma could hardly contain her curiosity, Masquerade could hardly contain her impatience, and Wilderness could hardly contain his eagerness.

They crept into the tent.

And what do you think they found immediately? A hole!

"Look! There's a hole!" Joyride whispered loudly. "How come we never thought of that? They dug a hole!"

For a moment they were all embarrassed that they had never thought of such an obvious explanation for the empty tent. Sometimes we all fail to notice something right in front of our noses, or think of something totally obvious. It's called "spacing out."

They peered down the hole by the light of their flashlights. They could just glimpse a little wooden door at the bottom.

"No turning back now!" said Wilderness grimly, slowly drawing out his leatherman tool. "The die is cast!"

"Right," murmured Masquerade. "They started it."

"And we're going to finish it!" cried Wilderness wildly. "I'll lead the way!"

He plunged into the hole and scrambled down to the door.

"Open up! Open up" he shouted, banging loudly on the door with his leatherman tool. "We know you're in there! Open up!"

"Only if Joyride comes in first!" someone shrieked from inside, laughing like a maniac. "Only if Joyride comes in first!"

And then they heard other voices chanting together, over and over again, accompanied by a rhythmic pounding.

"Joyride first! Joyride first! Joyride first!"

They exchanged angry puzzled glances, bumping into each other in the narrow tunnel.

"Why?" bellowed Lifeboat – of all woodrats! – "Why? Why Joyride first, you rascals, you liars, you worthless *bums*?" Lifeboat just lost his temper! He had had enough! He had had it *up to here*!

But the chant just continued.

"Joyride first! Joyride first! Joyride first!"

Joyride thrust the others aside, elbowed past them in the narrow tunnel, and pushed her way up to the door, yanking back Wilderness by his leatherman strap.

"Okay, you rabbits! Okay! It's me, Joyride! I'm at the door! Open up!" She quickly looked back at the others. "It's alright, it's alright, I can handle this!"

Immediately the door burst open and a chorus of voices sang, "Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday Dear Joyride, Happy Birthday to you!"

It was a surprise birthday party for Joyride! There was a huge birthday cake on a table in the middle of a tiny room with pictures of movie stars and tropical fish and famous museums on the walls. Seated around the table were a big Snail, a Caterpillar with a dreamy smile on his face, a giggling Dormouse, and standing behind the table, smiling brightly, were Jefferson and Airplane. There wasn't a sound after they finished singing.

The others pushed their way behind Joyride into the tiny room. They stood in a row, staring at this incredible scene, stunned.

Yes! They *were* ashamed because they all instantly realized they had forgotten all about Joyride's birthday when the rabbits had appeared and didn't remember it until now!

And Yes! They were even *more* ashamed at the thought that the *rabbits* had remembered, or somehow *knew*, like they knew their names, about the birthday, and planned this surprise party for Joyride! *It took the wind out of their sails*, a great figure of speech that has nothing to do with boats but as used here means *completely drained them of their resentful determination to confront the rabbits and*

demand an explanation for their behavior. The whole situation was turned upside-down. They were terribly embarrassed and couldn't think of anything to say. They just stood there, paralyzed.

Only Lifeboat noticed that there was someone hiding under the table.

"Well, this is certainly a great day in the dead of night!" announced Jefferson or Airplane. "An underground birthday party! Perhaps not the *first*, but certainly the *craziest*!"

"Look! Look at the cake!" screamed the other rabbit, jabbing his paw in its direction. "Read!"

They leaned over the cake and read the inscription.

"Hippy Birthdew, Jayroad, and Moony Moony Mare!"

"It's not the spelling, but the sentiment that counts," remarked the Snail casually, in a very deep voice.

Jefferson and Airplane nodded their heads violently, pursing their rabbit lips and humming through their noses.

"Isn't that so?" he snapped suddenly, whipping his tentacles around and pointing them straight at the woodrats. He had no eyes.

Karma was the first to recover from their embarrassment at having forgotten Joyride's birthday, and was now amused by it all. She was recalling her interview with Sidd, and was thinking that maybe outlandish situations like this would be a time to get a glimpse of something that doesn't meet the eye.

She answered, laughing, "Of course! Correct spelling is very overrated, Mister Snail!"

"Sit down, sit down, all of you!" cried Jefferson or Airplane, even though there were no chairs. "I'm going to serve huge generous portions of cake! Eat! Eat! Eat!"

The other rabbit immediately whipped out a tennis racket, grabbed off pieces of the cake and began batting them all over the room. Bang, bang, swat, slam! Everyone had to duck and dodge to avoid being hit by flying birthday cake! It was so utterly crazy and so typical of the rabbits' crazy behavior that the woodrats just laughed and jumped around, joining in the fun, and didn't get angry at all! Whenever they got a chance, they licked pieces of birthday cake off each other!

"Great service!" shouted Smithsonian, leaping from side to side and panting with laughter. "That one was an ace! What's the score?"

"Love Love Love! All you need is Love! I heard it on the grapevine! Everybody loves my baby but my baby don't love nobody but me!" shrieked both rabbits, dancing around each other in circles.

When Jefferson or Airplane had served the whole cake and collapsed exhausted over the table, the other rabbit banged a fork against a huge baby bottle on the table.

"Time for the birthday present now!" he announced. "We've all stuffed ourselves and now it's time for the present! Step forward, Joyride! *Look what we have for you!*"

By the way, did you get the rabbits' dumb joke back there? About "serving" the cake? The word "serve" can have more than

one meaning. It can mean serve *food*, as in a restaurant when the waitress brings you your pizza, or it can mean the first time someone hits the tennis ball in a game of tennis. And the word “love,” in tennis, means the score is tied. Except in tennis, however, grownups use the word the word “love” to mean anything the grownup saying it wants it to mean! It’s like the joker in a card game! Like the one-eyed jack and the suicide king, a *wild* card! Like the blank tile in Scrabble!

The woodrats, still chuckling to themselves over this wild mad birthday party, smiled at Joyride and pushed her forward. The Caterpillar, covered with splashes of birthday cake because he had never bothered to dodge, and who seemed to be getting drowsier and drowsier, reached behind him and fumbled out a blue sock with something inside.

“Here, Dormouse,” he whispered in a groggy lisp, “You give it to her. I can’t remember whath going on around here. I really need shum shuteye!”

The Dormouse leaped to his feet.

“In the Name of the Game, we, the strangely resembled, hereby present, accent on the second syllable, you, Joyride, with this present, accent on the first syllable, and may you be grateful! Happy Birthday from all of us, and from the Boss!”

He handed her the sock.

“The Boss!” whispered Lifeboat to Masquerade, suddenly alarmed. “Remember Jefferson mentioned a Boss? That’s the part that worries me most in all this lunacy! Remember I said it!”

"You may, Joyride my friend, my *best* friend, now remove the present from the sock!" announced Jefferson or Airplane, very solemnly.

Wilderness turned to Karma and whispered. "There's that stuff about 'best friends' again! These guys are over the top! How can guys like them have *friends*?"

Joyride reached into the sock and pulled out the present. It was a bracelet. It was made of small red hearts, with one big red heart as the main part, the part you wear on the top of your wrist or paw. On the big red heart was carved an eye, closed.

"Thank you very much!" she said. "I was hoping for a piece of jewelry! This was very thoughtful of you bums!"

"They must have heard us talking about a bracelet when they were walking down the driveway," whispered Masquerade to Karma.

Joyride smiled and looked up at the rabbits. One of them was now carrying a frisbee. The other one, whom she knew now must be Airplane, because the one with the Frisbee is always Jefferson, kicked over the baby bottle and stamped his foot.

"And that's one magic bracelet you bet! Not one of your ordinary cheapo costume *unmagic* bracelets you bet! We play for keeps! We play *hardball*! We take no prisoners! Listen to the rules!"

"And listen carefully, my furry little best friend, my furry little birthday girl," said Jefferson, suddenly speaking very plainly and clearly. "*The rules are what it's all about.* You *wear* the bracelet on your *left* paw. Always on the left paw! Got that?"

"Got it!" shouted Joyride.

“Great! Sharp rat you are! Then you guys wait for either a *Situation* or an *Invitation*! Got that?”

“A Situation? An Invitation?”

“Right! Sharp rat! Then you switch the bracelet to your *right* paw and something magic will happen! That’s all there is to it! Simple as that! See how we make it simple? Make it simple! That’s our latest motto! *Make it simple!*”

“Make it simple!” shrieked Airplane. “Simple *food*, simple *ideas*, simple *chords*, simple *people!*”

“And one more important part of the bracelet rules,” he added importantly. “*Very* important. You can only use it *once*. We gave it to Joyride first because she’s super-special, a Birthday Girl Woodrat! After *you* use it, special-rat, you have to pass it on to someone else, *share* it, another one of you guys, another one of my other little furry best friends. *No one can keep it. You always pass it on.* Got that now? Do you want us to run through it again? *Those are the Bracelet Rules!*”

“What happens when the last rat uses it?” asked Smithsonian, who had been listening very carefully.

“You’ll see! Oh boy, *will you see!*” the rabbits sang out joyfully, linking paws and dancing in a circle.

The woodrats gathered around Joyride and admired the birthday present. They knew it was much prettier than the one Smithsonian was going to make out of wire, washers and nuts, but no one mentioned that to Smithsonian, of course, because they knew it would hurt his feelings, and if Smithsonian himself thought

of it he decided it wasn't important. He knew no one could compete with magic rabbits, so he didn't take it personally.

And what do you think Karma noticed about the bracelet, that made her heart leap? It's so obvious I won't say it!

Suddenly both rabbits spoke in unison, which means they said the same words at the same time.

"Okay Now! Party's over!" They looked at each other and laughed. "Time for you to try to get out of the room!"

And at those words, a tiny pirate, wearing bright yellow boots and an orange vest with shiny silver buttons, sporting a black beard with ribbons woven in it, with a hook for one hand and brandishing a sword in the other, jumped out from under the table and stood in front of the door!

"What's this?" they all shouted. "What now?"

Lifeboat turned to the others, waving his paws wildly and shouting.

"I knew it! I saw his yellow boot sticking out when we first came into the room! Then I thought it must have been a mistake, but now I see I saw truly!"

"My name is Captain Zen!" shrieked the tiny pirate in a shrill high-pitched tone of voice. "And you can't leave this room until you answer my riddle! What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Their heads snapped around. They stared at each other.

Behind them, Jefferson and Airplane had leaped up on the table and were holding paws and jumping rope, chanting a jump rope rhyme.

"Captain ZEN, meanest of MEN, how many cut-throats in his DEN? ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!" And they kept on counting with each jump.

"Now what?" cried Lifeboat. "The mood keeps changing! First we were tense, ready for a real confrontation, maybe a fight, we wanted an explanation! Then everything got funny and crazy with the birthday cake! Then it was serious about the bracelet rules! And now it's tense again! For crying out loud!"

"TEN! ELEVEN! TWELVE!"

"The riddle is clearly senseless," said Smithsonian calmly. "One hand can't make a clapping sound. It takes two."

"FIFTEEN! SIXTEEN! SEVENTEEN! EIGHTEEN!"

"Let's rush him!" cried Wilderness, pulling out his leatherman tool. "It's six against one!"

"TWENTY-TWO!"

"Forget that!" cried Joyride furiously, running forward straight at Captain Zen.

"This ridiculous little joker is ruining my birthday party! Take that!" And she slapped him right in the face.

Instantly he changed into a princess.

"Right!" she cried. "That's the correct answer to the riddle! I'm released from my spell and now I can go back to my castle and fall asleep and wait for Prince Charming to wake me up with a kiss! Thanks a million! Oh I just can't thank you guys enough! Some day my prince will come!"

And she disappeared with a dreamy smile on her face.

"She still has the hook," said Karma.

Masquerade frowned thoughtfully. "Yes, I noticed. Still has the hook. When Prince Charming comes to wake her up with a kiss..."

"Forget it!" snapped Smithsonian. "Not our problem. Let's get out of here. The door is open now."

They turned around for a last look after they bustled to the door. The room was empty. They climbed the steps out into the tent, then slipped out into the meadow. They were totally exhausted. They fell asleep in the moonlight.

But one last word, while they drift off into dreamland. What do we know now? What did we learn from that bracelet present?

The red heart with a closed eye carved on it. Remind you of anything? Remind you of what Sidd said? It's the Eye of the Heart! We now know that the rabbits are not just two crazy dharma bums who just happened to wander by, but are playing a role in the Great Adventure, bringing magic into the Great Adventure of Karma's Suspicion!

Wait till you see what they do in the morning, when you find out what's in the backpack!

Chapter Four

The King of the Snakes and the Magic Seeds

Early morning in the meadow. The sun had risen, but it was behind the hill, so the meadow was in the shade. All the woodrats had fallen asleep as soon as they crawled out of the tent and were curled up in the grass, still all sound asleep after the exhausting excitement of the surprise birthday party in the middle of the night and Joyride's solving the riddle of one hand clapping, breaking the spell that had turned a beautiful Princess into a pirate, even though the Princess still had a hook. Everything was silent, the Earth clothed in the silence of the morning, until suddenly...

"Angela Jolie has the world's most famous mouth! Don John of Austria defeats the Turkish fleet at Lepanto! So you want to be a YouTube Star? Use a Camcorder!"

All the woodrats stirred.

Masquerade opened her eyes. "What's that crazy screeching?" she mumbled to herself, half asleep.

"Showtime? It sounds like Showtime," groaned Karma, rolling over and opening her eyes.

"May we suggest our Special of the Day? Jen is one of the most regal women in Hollywood! Simon Marius, 1573-1624, rediscovers Andromeda Nebula! 30 million computer users don't trust the power grid! Mexico cops seek a softer side! Doctor Ian Wilmut cloned a sheep! The technique he used was deceptively simple!"

It was the messengers, of course! Showtime, Anchormann and the dragonflies, Thinktank, Blackhole, Gigabyte and Genepool. The woodrats knew Showtime, whom we met in Chapter One of Part One and who was the loudest and most frenzied of the messengers, but not the others.

Very soon they were all wide awake, holding their paws over their ears as an avalanche of information came pouring out over the meadow. Harry and Helga, the ravens, had seen the woodrats sleeping in the meadow and quickly flown to the dragonfly headquarters and told them it was a great time for a sudden barrage of Information.

But suddenly there was a new voice, a voice like really loud thunder.

MESENTERS! MESSENTERS! WHEN WE COUNT TO FOUR YOU WILL ALL FIND THAT YOUR CHIPMUNK AND SKINK TEETH AND DRAGONFLY GUMMIES ARE STUCK TOGETHER WITH GORILLA GLUE FOR THE REST OF THE DAY! ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR!

Instantly the information stopped. Dead silence. All the woodrats jumped to their feet and looked around.

"What was *that*?" said Smithsonian, amazed.

"Who was that?" said Joyride, also amazed.

Suddenly they heard a familiar voice.

"It was *us*! Airplane and me! Who did you *think* it was? Who but your *best friends*, Jefferson and Airplane! Jeff and Air to the rescue, it was! Like always! Jeff and Air to the rescue!"

They all whirled around. The tent was gone, and there were Jefferson, with his frisbee, and Airplane, with the green backpack that had something alive in it, dancing around and laughing wildly, looking just as they had – it seemed like ages ago -- when the woodrats first met them on the driveway.

Lifeboat turned to Masquerade, rolling his eyes.

"There they are. It wasn't a dream. If I hadn't seen them with my own eyes this morning I would have thought the whole thing was a dream."

Masquerade pointed toward Joyride. "Couldn't have been. There's the heart bracelet on Joyride's paw."

Wilderness added. "Right. Couldn't have been. And how come we all slept out here on the meadow? We always sleep in our nests!"

Jefferson turned to face them, beaming and nodding his head reassuringly.

"Listen, my little best friends! Listen to your Jefferson who is so fond of you! Now comes the time we have all been waiting for!"

"Right!" shouted Airplane. "Right-O! Right on! Right field! Right turn! Right as rain! Right to the jaw!"

“Hold on to your hats!” shouted Masquerade,“ her eyes flashing with mingled rage and anticipation. “More crazy rabbit stuff heading our way! Fasten your seatbelts!”

Jefferson chimed in joyfully. “Right! Right, Airplane! The right stuff! Now you get to see what’s been simmering on the back burner of your cute little minds ever since that wonderful magic moment when we first set eyes on each other and fell head over heels in love! Love at first sight! *You get to see what’s in the green backpack!*”

“Right! Right livelihood! Right arm! Jeff’s right! *Two* magic gifts from us to you! Not just one! *Two*! First was the magic birthday present, the bracelet with the eye of the heart,” sang out Airplane, pointing at Joyride and waving the backpack around his head and twirling in circles, “and now the...”

“Stop!” cried Jefferson. “Stop right there! Don’t tell them! Let them see with their own little eyes! Airplane! Airplane! Airplane of the sun, moon and stars! *Open the green backpack now!*”

“My pleasure!” he shrieked. “*See? I pull the shiny zipper!*”

And Airplane opened the green backpack. Instantly there was faint strange flute music in the air. The woodrats’ eyes were riveted on the backpack. The rabbits’ eyes were riveted on the woodrats.

Wilderness whispered, hypnotized. “It’s a snake!”

Slowly a huge snake rose up out of the backpack, weaving and swaying to the music. For a brief second, out of the corner of her eye, Joyride saw that Airplane was sitting cross-legged playing the flute. But she couldn’t take her eyes off the snake. It was jet black with bright gold half-moons down its whole length. Its eyes

were also gold. It rose up, weaving and swaying to the music, till it was very tall.

Karma said to herself, "It's Vasuki, King of the Snakes."

Karma was right. It was Vasuki. King of the Snakes. How did she know? We've already seen that Karma knows things. Remember when she knew about Fall Guy? Did Grace, the rainbow-colored unicorn she dreams about, tell her about Vasuki? Probably. But how did she know *this* snake was Vasuki? Well, if a unicorn in your dreams ever talked about a King of the Snakes named Vasuki, and then you saw this huge snake coiling out of Airplane's backpack, wouldn't you guess that's who it was?

And the woodrats fell into a trance.

Hearing the flute music and staring at Vasuki put them in a trance, which is like a deep dreamless very peaceful sleep. At first, as they entered the trance, their eyes were open, but after a few minutes their eyes closed. They sat motionless. Jefferson was watching them alertly, hopping around from one to the other, making sure they were in the trance. After about an hour he stood up and clapped his paws. It made a loud noise, even though furry paws really can't clap the way hands can, because *his* paws were magic.

The woodrats woke up and opened their eyes.

"Time to wake up, you sleepy-heads!" he shouted. "Wake-up time! It's a real wake-up call!"

"I think I fell asleep when I saw the snake," said Wilderness, looking around at the others.

Joyride jumped to her feet. "We *all* fell asleep! It was some kind of rabbit trick! Like a *spell*!"

Lifeboat looked around with an alarmed expression.

"How long were we out?" he asked anxiously. "Sometimes wizards put people to sleep for *years*! Anybody got the time?"

"I got the time!" shouted Jefferson. "Half past a rowboat's mast and a quarter to the moon!"

"Half past a monkey's butt!" shouted Airplane. "That's the *real* time!"

"It's the same day," said Smithsonian dryly, ignoring them. "I can tell by the position of the sun. We were out about an hour at the most."

Jefferson and Airplane were standing next to each other, Jefferson with the frisbee and Airplane with the green backpack, looking just as they looked when they first came down the driveway, with one big difference. They were growing larger!

Masquerade pointed at them. "Look! They're getting bigger," she said indignantly. "More of their senseless crazy magic stuff!" She whirled around. "And look! Their tent is gone!"

"They're breaking camp!" cried Lifeboat. "Pulling up stakes! I think they're going to leave us in peace at last!"

Jefferson and Airplane were definitely growing larger. They were almost as tall as the fir trees, and still growing. And they were becoming transparent! The woodrats could see the hills through them!

“And now we must leave you! Do not let the parting grieve you! Oh parting is such sweet sorrow!” cried Airplane, looking down at them affectionately.

“You know, it’s been great, really great! A real slice! The stuff of memories! We can’t thank you enough for entertaining us with generosity and kindness, for practicing so well the ancient virtue of hospitality! You’re the cream of the crop! Top drawer! We’ll never forget you!”

He waved his arms. “Never as long as we live!” he shrieked.

And the rabbits were now truly huge, towering into the sky, more and more transparent, vanishing, vanishing away.

“Goodbye now, woodrats! Farewell! Farewell!” called Jefferson from a great height.

“Oh and by the way! I almost forgot! Listen to the good news! We planted *seeds* in your heads while you were asleep! Isn’t that neat! Seeds in your woodrat heads!”

“Neat?” shouted Smithsonian angrily. “*Neat?* Seeds in our heads? What’s neat about that? What kind of seeds? What are you talking about? What did you do now?”

Airplane, still growing larger and larger, shouted down to them.

“Not to worry! Not to worry, woodrats! Our little best friends! *Good* seeds! When they sprout you’ll see Vasuki again! Yes! Vasuki again! And you’ll suddenly know all sorts of things! *Insights!* Nothing like an insight! Real insights into the mysterious nature of things! You’ll see into the future, knowing ahead what’s about to happen, defying all the strict laws of time! You’ll know

what's going on in other places! It's so terrific, so far out! Oh I can't bear it! Too much, too much! It's so *beautiful*! So *beautiful* what we do!"

And then the strangest thing happened, when you recall how the woodrats had been thinking and talking about the rabbits before, how they felt the rabbits' visit was something like a crazy roller coaster ride making them feel totally confused and off balance.

They all were hit with a sudden surprise attack of *mixed feelings*!

What are mixed feelings? Mixed feelings happen very often, some people would even say they are happening all the time! It means that you have two different feelings about something, most often two *opposite* feelings, at the same time! For example, someone might be anxiously wondering, "Is this clever plan I'm thinking of a *good* plan or a *bad* plan?" Or "Is this thing that just happened something I should *celebrate* or something that may turn out to be *the end of my life*?" Or, "If I go to this party I've just been invited to will I have a *great* time or a *horrible* time?"

The woodrats felt happy and relieved that Jefferson and Airplane were leaving, but at the same time they felt really sad, and wanted them to stay!

Masquerade was surprised to hear herself suddenly call out, "Oh don't go! Can't you stay just a little while longer? What's the big hurry?"

Joyride buried her face in her paws and exclaimed in a strange choking voice, "Oh I know they won't stay! They're really leaving and we'll never see them again!" And she started to cry.

Wilderness called out, "Take us with you! Why can't you take us with you?"

They heard Jefferson's faint voice, from an empty sky, fading away.

"Where we are going you can't follow. Remember us. Remember us. Remember us!"

They looked up into the sky, searching for Jefferson and Airplane. But now they were gone. They heard a fading "Farewell! Remember us!" And then there was nothing. They searched the empty sky and suddenly all felt desolate, just wretched.

"Where are they going?" Smithsonian blubbered. "Where are they going?"

Karma smiled through her tears. "They're going to their Boss. Back to their Boss."

"Their Boss," repeated Lifeboat, shaking his head wonderingly, wiping away tears. "Their Boss!"

Joyride jumped up and tried to smile through her tears.

"Oh well. They were so nice, after all! They were crazy, but they were also nice. They made a surprise birthday party for me and gave me a magic bracelet!"

Masquerade sighed and wiped away her tears. "Well. It's all over now. All over. Whatever it was..."

"Not completely over!" said Wilderness eagerly. "Remember the seeds!"

"Right," said Smithsonian. "The seeds. The seeds..." His voice trailed off as he became lost in thought.

"And why are we all crying?" shouted Wilderness suddenly, although he was still crying. "We should be happy those crazy rabbits are gone! I don't get it! Just look at us!"

"We'll carry on! We'll carry on without them, as we always have!" cried Lifeboat bravely.

Yes. Yes indeed. As Masquerade said about the rabbits' visit, *Whatever it was*. And what was it? I myself, who am writing all this down, because it all really happened and I'm the only one here to tell the story, I myself couldn't say what it was really all about! What do you think? What do you think about Jefferson and Airplane? What would you say to them if they appeared walking down *your* driveway? Would you be happy to see them? Would you cry when they left? I think I would, but I wouldn't know *why* I cried anymore than the woodrats knew why!

After awhile they all wandered off to special places they knew. Each one wanted to be alone. And when they went to sleep that night, back in their nests, no one said anything, even though they felt very close because they had all been through the same mysterious and terribly annoying experience.

About three weeks went by before a seed sprouted.

During that time, as things returned to normal, the woodrats spent many hours talking it over, trying to figure out what it all meant, although sometimes they got sick and tired of trying to figure out what it all meant and deliberately avoided the subject. "Stop! I don't want to talk about it! Not now!" one of them would cry.

You see, they very much wanted *closure* on the rabbits' visit, a clever word meaning *now it's all over and we can move on* -- although all too often claiming closure, as you will learn, is just a trick, or exhaustion, or a desperate hope.

And anyway, the woodrats knew they couldn't claim closure because of this crazy thing that some mysterious seeds had been planted in their heads, so even though Jefferson and Airplane had grown larger and larger and disappeared into the sky, they couldn't say the disturbing episode was all over and now they could move on.

So they all wrestled with the Rabbit Episode in their own ways, according to their particular *personalities*. Very often, when an episode is being interpreted, someone will say to someone else, because they know all about that one's personality, "Oh we all know what *you* would say!" Everyone interprets episodes from their own point of view: from their own slants, angles, hunches and *vested interests* -- a very important figure of speech which means that often people interpret episodes in ways that would be good for *them*.

So most of the time no one ever agrees on what actually happened, or whether anything happened at all! This is the way it always is with episodes that need to be interpreted, and you will find that there are *always*, practically every day, episodes that need to be interpreted, or that someone *thinks* need to be interpreted, and episodes that *don't* need to be interpreted because, in some people's opinion, there really wasn't any episode at all!

One afternoon, a few days after Jefferson and Airplane disappeared into the sky, Smithsonian and Masquerade were nibbling away at some subterranean fungi they had unearthed

when right in the middle of their peaceful lunch Masquerade suddenly looked up, with an irritated expression on her face and speaking in an irritated tone of voice.

"I just can't figure out why we reacted that way when they left! Why did we all get teary?"

"That's part of the puzzle, of course. And it was embarrassing. Losing control like that, and for no good reason. But the real question, even though that reaction was baffling to all of us, is, from the scientific point of view, why they came here in the first place."

"You know what I think? From the *common sense* point of view? I think it has something to do with Karma."

"Why?"

"Because they gave Joyride that birthday present bracelet made of hearts and the big heart had a closed eye on it. Remember what Karma said when she got back from her interview with Sidd? She said, 'Now I'm looking for glimpses. I'll see them with my Eye of the Heart.' It's not just a coincidence, Smitheroonie!"

"Right. True, all too true. I had forgotten about Karma's Eye of the Heart. *I'll bet Sidd knows those rabbits!* Another link in the chain. I'll bet *they're* best friends!"

"Maybe, maybe not." She shook her head wonderingly. "It's like we have pieces of a puzzle, but we don't know how to put them together. Frustrating!"

She thought to herself for a moment, nodding her head as if she had come to a conclusion about the episode. She looked up.

"I never really trusted those rabbits. Never for a minute. There was just something phony about them! You know how I think nothing is what it appears to be. Everyone knows that's how I think, because I've made it clear. Many times. I look at the world through narrowed eyes, Smitheroonie! A soft heart, but a hard head! Calling us their best friends! Who do they think they were kidding? They weren't straightforward! They had a secret agenda!"

"I agree with you there. Completely agree. When you come down to it, they were about as genuine as a six-dollar bill. I saw through them too, of course. I've trained my mind to a razor's edge by solving problems in my workshop."

"It's a puzzle..." Masquerade repeated, her voice trailing off.

"And we may not even have all the pieces." Smithsonian answered grimly. "But I'll tell you one thing. We have to stay on top of it. Keep chipping away at it, looking for connections. That's exactly what I do when I'm working in my shop. Think it through."

"Right. Think it through. So we'll be prepared, won't be caught off guard, when those seeds sprout. Seeds in our heads! Who do they think they are? The key thing is not to pretend it's all over! The readiness is all!"

And they nodded their heads in agreement, somewhat sadly, and continued nibbling, saying nothing, lost in thought.

Karma and Joyride also chipped away at it.

"Karma, what do you *really* think about Jefferson and Airplane?" Joyride suddenly asked one afternoon when they were

lounging in the orchard eating fallen apples. "I know everyone else was suspicious and didn't trust them, but I never felt that way."

"Neither did I."

"What *did* you feel?"

Karma thought for a moment. "They were never mean to us. They knew all about us, our names, your birthday. They said they were our friends and they said they had big plans for us. And they were *magic*. Even though we can't see where it's all heading, with that seed business, I think it has to be good news for us."

Joyride looked up at Karma with a warm knowing smile.

"Karma! Karma, Karma, my dear Karma! You didn't say anything about the bracelet!"

And she raised her left paw, showing Karma the bracelet made of hearts with one big heart that had a closed eye on it.

"I know this bracelet is the most important thing to you! Don't pretend!"

Karma turned away. "Yes. It is. You'll all figure that out because you'll remember what I said after my interview with Sidd. About the Eye of the Heart. I think the rabbits' visit is part of a plan for my journey. But I *know* that's not the whole story. I *know* it's not only about me."

Karma turned back, staring at Joyride. Joyride stared back, nodding. She had a peaceful expression on her face that Karma had never seen. She was thinking about how she sometimes went off alone into the woods and cried because she felt it was just wonderful to be alive. And neither of them noticed that in that

moment the Eye of the Heart on the bracelet opened briefly, and then closed again. Joyride reached out and patted Karma's cheek.

"I know that too."

And Lifeboat and Wilderness also chipped away at it!

"Mugwort and rosemary!" declared Lifeboat. "Mix them together, stuff your pillow with them, and you'll be able to remember your dreams, or be in *charge* of your dreams, or dream about things that haven't happened yet!"

They were down by the pond, early in the morning about three weeks after the rabbits left, sharing their interest in herbs.

Wilderness squinted across the pond.

"I think that's mugwort over there, on the other side. I can see very far with my excellent vision." He was remembering his ill-fated Vision Quest, when he had been able to see all the way to the top of a very tall fir tree.

"Those leaves look like the pictures in the Complete Medicinal Herbal I saw out in the garden. Which is where we'll get the rosemary, of course. Tons of it there."

He turned to Lifeboat with a questioning glance, because he knew that, although they shared their enthusiasm, and his eyes were sharper than Lifeboat's, Lifeboat had been studying herbs longer than he had and was more knowledgeable.

Lifeboat peered across the motionless water stirred only by an occasional waterbug.

"I think you may be right," he answered cautiously. "Let's go see."

They scampered around to the other side and crouched over the plant. Lifeboat stretched out the leaves and smelled them. Then he carefully licked one. He closed his eyes and concentrated. He turned to Wilderness with a smile and patted him on the back.

"Yes! Good job, Wilder! You do have sharp eyes! This is indeed mugwort! That bitter pungent taste! It expels parasitic worms, you know. Now all we have to do is crush the leaves and mix them with crushed leaves from the rosemary in Carol's garden and we have it! Dream control!"

They sat back against a tree, gazing fondly at the mugwort with satisfied expressions.

"You know, Sailor," said Wilderness thoughtfully, looking at Lifeboat carefully out of the corner of his eye because he knew how easily Lifeboat became upset about anything unusual, "I still can't get that rabbit visit out of my mind. Is it that way with you too?"

"Yes. Yes it is," Lifeboat answered glumly. "I try to put it from my mind, but I know from long and painful experience that that never works with me. And I know it won't work with any of the rest of us, either. The rabbit visit was a shattering invasion in our peaceful rustic lives. A shattering invasion. I'm older than you, Wilder, a mature woodrat rich in experience, and I have gazed deep into the roots of life and death, into the mysteries. I have suffered. I am the woodrat, I suffered, I was there. You see, my friend, we haven't yet witnessed the end of that disturbing episode. And I say that for two reasons: the bracelet and the seeds. That's what worries me. Things will be happening in the wake of their visit, even though they're gone."

Here he paused a moment. "Back to their Boss," he continued, shaking his head in helpless amazement. "Their Boss! Who *is* their Boss? What does he *want* from us? I tell you frankly, Wilder, I am very worried."

Wilderness was about to make a tasteless thoughtless joke about Lifeboat being a "worrywart" hunting for "mugwort," but he caught himself in time, knowing he would giggle and realizing it would be absolutely the most wrong thing he could say. Lifeboat would definitely not giggle. Wilderness, like every outsider type with a wild imagination and a basically screwball approach to life, often had crazy terribly inappropriate remarks zip through his mind.

"Why did I cry when they left?" Wilderness asked in a baffled moaning tone of voice. "I should have cheered! I should have shouted, 'And don't come back, you dharma bums! You bogus pilgrims! Phony drifters!' But instead I cried! And you cried too, Sailor! I saw you!"

"Yes. Yes, we all wept. And you know – don't tell anyone I said this – I could weep again! Again, right now! Isn't that incredible?"

Here Lifeboat groped in the air as if he were trying to grasp something invisible.

"Somehow, somehow I can't get a handle on it! I have a divided mind. Oh, a divided mind! The worst divided mind I have ever had!"

Here Lifeboat groaned out loud. Wilderness put his paw around his back.

"I know how you feel, Sailor old dude. Old suffering shattered mature dude! I have a divided mind too! Those horrible rabbits divided our minds!"

Lifeboat suddenly groaned again.

"We were so happy when we found the mugwort! Planned the dream pillow! Look at us now! Confused. Off center. Miserable!"

Wilderness groaned too. "What can we do? Nothing! What's left of us? Divided minds and seeds in our heads!"

And now Lifeboat put his paw around Wilderness's back.

They sat that way for about five minutes, consoling each other. Temporarily, while they were feeling comforted by their togetherness in the crisis, Lifeboat's anxiety about what lay ahead for the woodrats, and Wilderness's indignation about the way Jefferson and Airplane had messed everything up, faded away. They were simply grateful for each other.

And then it happened.

Lifeboat lifted his head to wipe away a tear -- the whole thing was so emotionally overwhelming for him, such an enormous emotional stress -- and suddenly leapt to his feet.

"Vasuki! Look, Wilder! Vasuki is rising up over the pond!"

"Where?" cried Wilderness, also leaping to his feet, looking around wildly. "I see nothing! I don't see any Vasuki!"

"Are you blind? You saw that little mugwort all the way across the pond and now you can't see a *giant snake* fifty feet tall

right in front of your eyes? It's Vasuki! Vasuki the King of the Snakes! Vasuki, I tell you! And Fall Guy is in trouble! I know it! Terrible trouble! We have to go to the rescue! He wants us to come to his rescue immediately!"

"Where? Where? Where? *I can't see anything!*"

The first seed had sprouted.

Chapter Five

Sidd's Hard Riddles, Fall Guy's Rescue and Peter Pixie Pepper

Did they know it? Did they realize that Lifeboat's seed had sprouted? Not right away. Sometimes something happens so suddenly that it takes a few moments to figure it out, a few moments for it to *sink in*. For example, people might return to their house after a wild shopping spree at the superstore and when they go downstairs they find two feet of water and everything floating around. They just stand there for a moment, amazed and horrified, then suddenly cry out, "A pipe broke!" That's what it was like with Lifeboat and Wilderness down by the pond.

Wilderness whirled around to Lifeboat and demanded, totally baffled and a bit irritated, "How can you be seeing Vasuki and I can't see a thing even with my sharp eyes? You must be imagining things!"

Lifeboat moaned. "Have I gone crazy? Finally been driven mad? I see Vasuki, right out there above the pond, swaying all over the place like he did up in the meadow, and I just *know*, there's no doubt about it, Fall Guy is in some kind of weird trouble and needs our help!"

Wilderness suddenly jumped up and slapped his forehead with his paw.

"It's the seed!" he shouted. "Your seed! Your seed sprouted! That's what happened!"

Lifeboat stared at him, speechless.

"Yes! Your seed! Remember what Airplane said about seeing Vasuki and suddenly *knowing* something? It just happened!"

And then Wilderness shook his head and actually laughed out loud because it was so amazing, so completely far out.

"Your seed, Sailor! Your little old seed!"

"My *seed*? My seed? My *seed*?" said Lifeboat, wide-eyed and stunned, shifting the emphasis back and forth between the two words.

"Correct! *Correctaroony*! That means what you know is really *true*. Fall Guy *is* in some kind of weird trouble and needs our help! Time to get on the move! Oh those rabbits, those rabbits!"

"Those rabbits, those rabbits... my divided mind!" Lifeboat shouted, pressing both paws against his head.

Then suddenly, staring around wildly, he made a great effort and *pulled himself together*. He *collected* himself, which means the same thing as *pulled himself together*, two figures of speech which have nothing to do with *pulling*, like pulling on a sock, and nothing to do with collecting *things*, like nuts or contributions, but here mean *regained control of himself*, recovered from the shock of hearing that his seed had sprouted, accepted the new situation, and was prepared to *deal with it*.

This happens all the time: at first we are overpowered by some powerful *emotion*, an emotional *attack*, and throb inside helplessly, paralyzed and frightened, unable to *look it in the face*. But then, with a great effort, we gather our strength and pull ourselves together and the *mind* takes charge. Very often someone helps us out by shouting, "Pull yourself together!"

"Wilderness! We have to run and find the others!"

And that's exactly what they did. They scampered off around the pond and ran up the road at top speed.

But here, believe it or not, I think it's time not for a quick *review* and *overview* of the story. A quick one. We'll return to the breathless nerve-racking excitement of the adventure that will be unfolding in this chapter as soon as we can.

What's going on here?

A lot has happened, a lot of *water under the mill*, since the escapade in the bathroom and Karma's interview with Sidd that confirmed her suspicion that there's more here than meets the eye. And we learned, in that interview, about the Eye of the Heart, the Eye that can *see*, in *glimpses*, what the eyes of the head *can't* see.

But then the rabbits came, Jefferson and Airplane, bounced right into the little world of the woodrats with all their funny crazy stuff. Were the rabbits the start of a *new* adventure?

No! Because there's one very important connection, one very important *link*, and I'm sure you know what it is. *The bracelet*. We can't tell how yet, but Jefferson and Airplane must have known about Karma's suspicion, and known about the Eye of the Heart, and decided to help Karma – in some crazy rabbit way -- move

further along on the *Great Path* Sidd told her about. Just as Masquerade and Smithsonian suspected! They were right!

And one other thing we should have in mind before we join Lifeboat and Wilderness running up the road to tell the others about rescuing Fall Guy from some kind of weird trouble he got himself into.

Remember what Karma and Joyride found they both knew when they were lounging casually in the orchard? They knew that *all* the woodrats were on the Great Path! And where does the Great Path lead? Well, that's what we're going to find out, we hope! The Great Path is what the Woodrat Adventure is all about! The Great Path is what *life* is all about! The Great Path is for everyone! For the woodrats, and for you and me!

And now back to the adventure.

Lifeboat and Wilderness ran top speed up the road, past the culverts and around the turn into the orchard where the firewood was piled and up into the meadow. It was midmorning and still cool on what was certainly going to be another hot summer day. A mugwort and rosemary dream pillow was definitely on the back burner now!

They didn't have the slightest idea where to find everyone else, but they shouted all their names as loud as they could. They spied Helix lying on the picnic table and felt a blast of terror, but fortunately he didn't seem interested in eating or frisking with anyone just then. He opened his eye that wasn't blind and then closed it again. It flashed through their minds that maybe Helix wasn't as dangerous as they thought he was.

They stopped by the hose stand and looked around, still calling names.

Karma's head popped up from a patch of miner's lettuce she was nibbling away at.

"What's up, guys? What's the big hurry? Where's the fire?"

"Vasuki!" Wilderness shouted. "Lifeboat saw Vasuki down by the pond! It wasn't the *real* Vasuki because I couldn't see anything even with my perfect vision, so we know it was the *magic* Vasuki Airplane said we would see when our seeds sprouted and we would know something! I'm the one who figured it out!"

"Wait wait wait! This just happened?"

"Yes! Just happened! And there's no time to waste! Lifeboat knows by his seed that Fall Guy is in some kind of weird trouble and wants us to come to the rescue! It's an emergency!"

"You saw Vasuki, the King of the Snakes? Down by the pond?"

Lifeboat ran over to her. While they were running up the hill he had quickly realized, to his *consternation* – a long and powerful word which means a *sudden surprise panic* – that everyone might think he had just gone out of his mind, stark crazy, and imagined the whole thing. Wilderness was convinced because he was right there and had been hit by the thrill of it all, and also because he was proud of himself for guessing what had happened. But what about the others? They would just have to *believe* him!

"Yes I did! With my own eyes! *With these eyes!*" And he pointed, over and over again, with a jabbing motion, at his eyes.

"*With those eyes!*" repeated Wilderness, also pointing at Lifeboat's eyes.

Karma stared at them. She turned to Lifeboat.

“Okay. It’s all right, Sailor. I believe you. I believe you because I believed Jefferson and Airplane. I knew what they said would happen would really happen. And now it did.”

“Right,” answered Lifeboat, tremendously relieved. “Right, right, right. It happened, that’s all, just as they said it would. And I had to be the first! Why me? Why me, of all woodrats? We’ll never know. A mystery. A cold-blooded calculated mystery!”

Just then Masquerade and Joyride came running down the driveway.

“Hi, you three rats!” called Joyride. “What’s going on?”

“Get Smithsonian!” shouted Wilderness. “It’s an emergency! Lifeboat saw Vasuki and Fall Guy’s in some kind of weird trouble! We have to rescue him! Magic stuff!”

They both came running up and Masquerade, catching on immediately, narrowed her eyes and frowned.

“Airplane’s prediction about the seeds?”

“Right,” said Karma. “It happened.”

Joyride ran off, shouting over her shoulder. “I saw Smithsonian up by the vineyard! I’ll go get him!”

In a minute they came running back. Smithsonian smiled to himself – which means he didn’t show a smile on his *face*, because he knew Lifeboat would definitely not think the situation was

funny, but smiled *mentally*, in his *mind*, something people do all the time -- when he saw the alarmed expression on Lifeboat's face.

"Don't worry, Sailor! Cheer up! We believe you!"

Joyride did smile. Remember her conversation with Karma? There's more to *her* than meets the eye! A woodrat with concealed depths.

"We *all* believe you! And you got to see Vasuki, Sailor! Lucky guy! I can't wait till *my* seed sprouts and I get to see that snake again! Awesome!"

She knew, of course, that he hardly thought he was a lucky guy, but she wanted to plant the idea.

Lifeboat mumbled, "Yes, yes, it was quite a sight, Joy-Joy. Quite a sight. Lucky me..." He stared into space, his voice trailing off.

Masquerade spoke sharply, taking charge. Masquerade, you remember, is a no-nonsense take-care-of-business type.

"Okay! No time to waste time! We don't know where Fall Guy hangs out. But *Sidd* knows! Down to the pond! And Joyride! I see you have your bracelet! Don't lose it! We're probably going to need it!"

Smithsonian suddenly remembered something and slapped the area over his eyes, the place in a person called the forehead, the place people slap when they suddenly remember something, like an appointment with the dentist or the vet, or why they had come into a room.

“Right! The bracelet! Remember what Airplane – or was it Jefferson? – said about switching the bracelet when there’s a Situation or an Invitation? I think they purposely didn’t tell us the whole deal! I bet every time a seed sprouts in our heads we’re going to run into a Situation or an Invitation! That’s their plan, their secret arrangement! And then we’ll need the bracelet!”

And Smithsonian is right about that, absolutely spot on. Situations and Invitations are not only the rabbits’ plan for the woodrats, they’re a big part of all our lives, yours and mine! And you know something, something to think about? It’s much easier to identify the Situations than the Invitations!

The six of them made a circle and held paws. Then they ran off to the pond. They were so excited they didn’t even notice Helix sleeping on the picnic table.

Down through the apple orchard they ran! Past the firewood pile, around the turn, down past the culverts and across the clearing, around the pond, Karma and Wilderness in the lead, and there was Sidd! In his usual spot, half under the water, his shell smeared with mud and pond glop, bubbles rising up behind him.

Suddenly they screeched to a halt, their paws making scratch marks in the ground, and milled about a bit, whispering. They had remembered that Sidd was a very special turtle, and it would be a big mistake to run up to him shouting things. Even though this was an emergency, they would have to be polite.

“Polite! We have to be *polite*!” Karma whispered urgently. “Our best manners!”

“Right!” whispered Lifeboat. “That turtle is *crazy*! No telling what he may do!”

"But not always!" whispered Masquerade. "He was only crazy with *you*! Let's not forget that. He was very different in his interview with Karma. Very straightforward, very..." And here she searched for a word. "Very... solemn, serious, impressive. I think only one of us should speak to him."

"And it shouldn't be you, Sailor," added Smithsonian gently, "even though you're the one who saw Vasuki, the King of the Snakes, and had a seed sprout in your head, because that turtle just might have a *thing* about you."

Joyride patted Lifeboat on the back.

"Right. A thing. A *friendly* thing, but still a thing."

"Yes. He does have a *thing* about me, as you put it," Lifeboat grumbled. And suddenly he burst out, "And I have a thing about him!"

"Who'll go?" asked Smithsonian.

They all looked at Karma.

"I'll go."

Karma walked down to the edge of the pond.

"Good morning, Sidd," she said, very politely.

"Good morning, Karma! Good to see you again! You're looking fine this fine day!"

He looked over toward the others, huddled together and staring at him with wide eyes.

"And you little rascals look fine too! We *all* look fine, even me!" And suddenly he splashed water at them, laughing and winking rapidly with one of his strange red eyes. "Even me!"

Karma knew immediately that Sidd was in one of his moods and there were surprises in store for them. It wasn't going to be a simple question and answer about where to find Fall Guy. She continued being polite.

"Thank you. You're looking *very* fine!"

He said nothing, staring at her with a fixed smile. There was an *awkward silence*, which is a very common kind of silence that occurs *when everyone is thinking secret thoughts they'd rather die than share with the others*.

Finally Karma *broke* the awkward silence, deciding it was time to stop beating around the bush, saying polite things about everyone looking fine on this fine day, and get to the point, get the ball rolling, find out what tricks Sidd was planning to play on them. She knew there would be tricks.

"Do you know why we're here?"

Sidd smiled enthusiastically. "Of course I do! You want me to tell you where you can find Fall Guy who's in some kind of weird trouble!"

Karma smiled, pretending she didn't suspect there would be tricks.

"I knew you'd know! Can you help us out? Tell us where we can find Fall Guy?"

"Sure I can! Easy as pie! All you have to do is solve a simple little riddle first!" And he began to splash the water wildly, laughing out loud and winking.

By this time the other woodrats had been inching closer. Wilderness thought of splashing back but changed his mind. Masquerade and Smithsonian frowned and exchanged glances, angry at what appeared to be a totally senseless delay in an emergency.

Lifeboat muttered to the others, "What did I tell you? I was right! Crazy!"

Joyride, always ready to see the brighter side of things, ready to swing into life with zest, verve, gusto and zeal, laughed out loud and shouted, completely forgetting to be polite.

"Shoot, Sidd! Shoot with the riddle! We're ready for you!"

"Okay! Okay! Here it comes, ready or not! *What do you get if you cross a snowman with a tiger?*"

Smithsonian blinked. "A snowman with a tiger?"

"Right! A snowman with a tiger! Think hard!"

The woodrats went into a huddle, looking helplessly back and forth at each other. No one had the faintest idea what you'd get if you crossed a snowman with a tiger! Do you?

"A snowman with a tiger," said Karma. "A snowman with a tiger." They all shook their heads.

"Lifeboat? Smithy?" Nothing.

"Masquerade?" Nothing.

She turned to Sidd. "That's a tough one, Sidd, a real head-scratcher. Can you give us an easier one? Remember, this is an emergency! Can't waste too much time playing riddle games! We have to rescue Fall Guy!"

"Frostbite! Frostbite!" Sidd screamed, splashing wildly. "*Frostbite!* Isn't that a clever one? A truly great riddle! A masterpiece! Sheer genius! But okay, now I'll give you an easier one. *Why is it hard for leopards to hide?*"

Again the woodrats went into a huddle. Again they had no idea.

Again Karma turned to Sidd. "That's a real tough one too, Sidd. Another masterpiece! We're trying very hard but we can't figure it out. Give us another chance! Give us one that *isn't* a masterpiece!"

"Because they're always spotted, you fools! *Because they're always spotted!*"

"Always spotted!" marveled Joyride. "Always spotted! Sharp! Why didn't we think of that?"

Smithsonian stepped forward, facing Sidd.

"Look, Sidd. Can we get serious? Can we get *serious* with each other? *Can we get down boogie?* We're all really grateful to have learned about these masterpieces, and we can't thank you enough for sharing them with us, but there are real stakes here! Fall Guy is in some kind of weird trouble, and you know it! Come on, Sidd! Give us a real easy one so we can get this show on the road!"

Sidd smiled a huge ecstatic smile. A huge bubble rose up behind him.

“Smitheroonie! My woodrat! You spoke to me at last! Yes! I *can* get down boogie! Here’s an *easy* riddle! Are you ready?”

“Ready!” shouted Wilderness. “And this better be *easy*! We’re sick and tired of masterpieces!”

“Here it is! Here it is! *Why don’t ducks tell jokes when they’re flying?*”

Smithsonian whirled around and spoke very sternly, pointing his paw.

“Sidd! You know as well as I do that that’s a masterpiece again. I want you to think about Fall Guy and what a terrible thing you’re probably doing here, causing all this totally senseless delay when a life may be at stake. Think about it *hard*. Our patience has run out! The ball’s in your court!”

“Okay. Okay, I get it, I give up. If you’re all so absolutely terrible at riddles, all so absolutely *hopeless*, such complete *losers* with riddles, I’m going to tell you where you can get the answer to this one. I have a heart! I *do* have a heart! I *do* want you to rescue Fall Guy! So here’s a delightful little poem I just made up that will tell you where to go to find the answer!”

And then, throwing his head back on his long neck, he actually *sang* the poem.

“Find the spider on the box,
She is very wise,
But find her quickly, hurry up,
Quick, before she dies!”

Sidd stared at them. "Great little piece of poetry, no? Do you get it? *Can you guess where that box is?*"

Karma looked him straight in the eye.

"No! We can't guess and we're not even going to try!"

Masquerade strode forward to the very edge of the pond, almost standing on Sidd's feet. She spoke in a very threatening tone.

"Where is it? *Tell us now!*"

"Well," Sidd answered, in a very sarcastic tone of voice, "how many boxes do woodrats like you know about anyway? I thought you'd guess right away! I'm trying to make this *easy* for you, just like I promised. It's the *springbox*! What else could it be? Go out to the *springbox*!"

"Of course!" shouted Wilderness. "The springbox! Another second and I would have figured it out! Let's go! I always see spiders there!"

They ran off. Around the pond, across the clearing, up the road past the culverts, past the big pile of firewood, through the orchard, across the meadow and down the path to the springbox.

And while they were running, all *this* happened!

"Kenneth Grahame!" shouted Sidd. Immediately a badger popped his head out from behind a tree.

“Kenneth! Sprint as fast as you can over to the springbox and give Charlotte this note! It’s the answer to a riddle of medium difficulty and I want Charlotte to spin it into her web!”

Kenneth snatched the note. He dashed off at lightning speed, taking a secret short cut he knew about. On the way, in his excitement he ran into a tree and knocked himself unconscious for a few seconds, dropping the note. But those few seconds were enough! Count Genepool, the dragonfly, had been spying on the whole riddle business, and before Kenneth Grahame regained consciousness *he substituted a note with the wrong answer to the riddle!*

Kenneth rubbed his head for a moment, moaning “Oh my poor head!” And then he dashed off again, getting to the springbox in plenty of time for Charlotte to spin the wrong answer into her web.

All that happened while the woodrats were running as fast as they could!

The woodrats ran up to the springbox, panting for breath, Wilderness in the lead. They saw the web right away, with the answer – the *wrong* answer, of course, but they didn’t know that – woven into it in beautiful elegant writing.

It said, “*An elephant’s shadow.*”

“An elephant’s shadow!” cried Lifeboat, who had gotten so excited he had forgotten that he hated adventures. “An elephant’s shadow!”

“Look!” said Joyride suddenly. “The spider’s falling out of the web!”

They all looked. Karma said, sadly, "Remember the poem? It said, 'Quick, before she dies.' She's dying."

And she was. And she did die. Her name is Charlotte. She appears in a great book called *Charlotte's Web*, and once, just like Sidd, I wrote a poem about her after I read the book a second time. Here is that poem.

Oh Wilbur, Templeton and Fern,
I'm back!
How could I not return?
And once again I cried,
When Charlotte died.

I really cried. *Everyone* cries when Charlotte dies in that great book! And all the woodrats cried too.

And back they ran to the pond.

"An elephant's shadow!" shouted Joyride as they ran up to Sidd. "An elephant's shadow!"

Sidd immediately guessed what had happened, and he smiled to himself.

"Those silly sneaky dragonflies! They never give up!"

"An elephant's shadow, eh? *That's why ducks don't tell jokes when they're flying?*"

The woodrats were stunned. They had been so happy to find the answer that they had completely forgotten the riddle! They just hung their heads. For the first time they felt like giving up. They felt defeated. Kenneth Grahame, rubbing the bump on his head and

peering out from behind his tree, opened his eyes wide, completely baffled.

Sidd smiled. He felt sorry for the woodrats now, and he wasn't going to delay any longer because he was a little bit annoyed at the sneaky trick of that dragonfly.

"Cheer up! Cheer up, everyone! It's okay! We were *tricked!* 'An elephant's shadow' is the answer to 'What is as big as an elephant but doesn't weigh anything?' Pretty easy, that one. And ducks don't tell jokes when they're flying because they would *quack up!* A *great* riddle, in my opinion! You see? Someone mixed up the answers! And because you've tried so hard I'm going to tell you right now where to find Fall Guy! No more riddles!"

And he told them.

"Thanks!" cried Karma and Smithsonian together.

Following his directions they ran off down the road to where the road curved around and ended, and then even further down, following a gully filled with fallen branches, all calling out "Fall Guy! Fall Guy!"

"Right here! Right here! Just on the other side of the big fallen fir tree! And stop that *shouting*, please!"

"It's him!" cried Joyride. "To the rescue!"

They scrambled over the fallen fir tree, Wilderness waving his leatheman tool, Lifeboat reaching with reluctant determination for his emergency pack, and Joyride ready to switch the magic bracelet from her left paw to her right paw, all grimly prepared to face what might be a very dangerous Situation.

But there wasn't any Situation at all! Fall Guy was sitting peacefully at a small flat stone he was using as a table, looking up, with a welcoming smile, from a book he was reading!

They stopped dead in their tracks.

"Hi everyone! What's all the ruckus about, all the hullabaloo, all the tumult and the shouting? You look like you're ready to go to war! And how did you find me? Are you my friends?"

They all looked at Lifeboat. Masquerade was the first to speak.

"We heard you were in some kind of weird trouble. Some weird trouble business. A Situation. So we came to the rescue. Sidd told us where to find you."

"Do I look like I'm in weird trouble? I ask you!"

Again they looked at Lifeboat, who had flopped down on the ground and buried his face in his paws.

"This is a nightmare. I'm going to wake up. This is a nightmare. I'm going to wake up."

"Where did you ever get the idea that I was in weird trouble? Everything here is cool!"

Masquerade was thinking to herself, as they all were except Lifeboat, that it would be ridiculous, just pointless, to try to explain to Fall Guy about Jefferson and Airplane, Vasuki, the King of the Snakes, the seeds planted in their heads, the infuriating possibility that there *were* no seeds and the whole thing was a really tasteless joke played on them by the rabbits, and the sad possibility that one

of them had gone crazy. These thoughts were whirling through their minds as they looked down at poor Lifeboat with puzzled expressions on their faces.

Fall Guy smiled. "There's no weird trouble here, my friends! None at all!"

His eye caught Joyride's bracelet.

"Hey, honey! That's a really neat bracelet you got there! How much you want for it?"

Joyride looked at him coldly. "It's not for sale."

"Oh I get it! You're still in the *barter* stage! Primitive, no currency, no medium of exchange! So what'll you *take* for it? Some pretty semi-precious stones? Pretty shells? I can get some *really* pretty shells! Or how about some dynamite? Some neat sticks of dynamite with tremendous explosive power!"

Masquerade narrowed her eyes. She had a sudden suspicion.

"Fall Guy!" she exclaimed. "Looks like you've recovered from your fall yesterday!"

"Oh yes, I'm feeling much better, totally back to normal! Like it never happened!"

"Still," Masquerade continued, "it's a long way down from the woodshed roof!"

"Like it never happened, I said!"

"It never *did* happen!" shouted Wilderness. "You fell from a tall fir tree a year ago!"

Karma turned to the others and said calmly, "He's a fake. He's not really Fall Guy. This is the kind of Situation Jefferson or Airplane wanted to prepare us for. Lifeboat was right. Joyride: move the bracelet to your right paw."

Without a word Joyride did just that.

Immediately another woodrat emerged from a nest they hadn't noticed, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"Wow! How long have I been asleep? And what are all of you doing here? And who's this new guy reading my book?"

"The *real* Fall Guy, I bet!" shouted Wilderness. "The rat who rescued me when I was hanging upside down!"

"Right!" shouted Joyride. "He's the *true* Fall Guy, that one who's yawning, and *this* Fall Guy is fake! He's just *pretending* to be Fall Guy! A *phony* Fall Guy!"

And she turned and nodded to the others, pointing back and forth between the true and the fake.

"A fake *me*?"

"Yes," said Masquerade sternly. "A fake *you*!"

She turned to the fake Fall Guy, who was whimpering and covering his face with his paws.

"Okay, mister! Who are you? And why are you pretending to be Fall Guy?"

The fake Fall Guy lifted his head and stared at all of them for a moment.

“Well... you see...I was just...” he said, with a frightened look on his face. And then suddenly he burst into tears! “I was just so lonely!” he wailed.

“Some lonely dude pretending to be me? Hey, I’m pretty lonely too, but I don’t go around pretending to be me... I mean, pretending to be someone *else*.”

Smithsonian walked forward and put his paw around the weeping lonely fake Fall Guy.

“What’s your story, buddy? You can tell us. No harm done here that I can see, and we’re not angry anymore.”

“Not angry at all!” they all said at about the same time.

“What’s your name, your *real* name?” asked Karma with an encouraging friendly smile.

He looked up, wiping his tears. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

“Promise! Promise! Promise! Promise! Promise! Promise! Promise!” all seven of them shouted at about the same time, smiling brightly.

“Peter Pixie Pepper. That’s my name.”

He looked at them timidly and hopefully, relieved to see that no one laughed. Wilderness *was* laughing, but he had turned his back and was pretending to be sneezing.

"Peter Pixie Pepper!" said Smithsonian. "Why that's a *terrific* name! One of the best names I ever heard! A blue ribbon name! What's your story, Peter? How did all this peculiar bizarre drama come about?"

"It's very sad. My story is very sad. A sad story."

Lifeboat spoke for the first time since they had all arrived to the rescue. He had been silent and wretched, of course, as anyone would be, because it had appeared, at first, that there was no *need* for a rescue and therefore he must have *imagined* the whole thing down at the pond about Vasuki, King of the Snakes, and the weird trouble his seed told him Fall Guy had gotten into. Naturally, he had been *horrified* at the thought that he had gone mad and *embarrassed* that all the others must be thinking just that! But now that everyone knew that he *hadn't* gone mad and there really *was* trouble, and it really *was* weird, he felt much better, ready to speak for the first time.

Lifeboat spoke in the warm tone of voice we use when we're trying to make someone *feel* better, *comfort* someone, the way we might speak, for example, to a kid in the schoolyard who's crying because he thinks everyone is *picking* on him.

"It's all right, Peter, all right. It won't be the first sad story we've heard, and certainly won't be the last, I can assure you of that. I sometimes think that even I myself have... but no reason to go into that now. Just tell it your own way, no hurry, nothing to be ashamed of. As I said, I myself... but no reason to go into that now."

Peter dried a final tear, pulled himself together -- remember that figure of speech? -- and began his story, occasionally sighing and now and then shedding a few tears again.

"Well. I was living, not far from here, with my family, all of us happy and doing well, all above average, mountains of self-esteem, when about six, no, I think it was seven, months ago a huge tree fell on our nest during a storm and wiped out the whole family except me, because I just happened to be outside the nest responding to a call of nature. I was grief-stricken, and I suppose I still am, but I made the best of it, I guess, squared my shoulders, and I have just been moping around, terribly lonely, ever since. Terribly lonely!"

And here he burst into tears again.

"Sad," blubbered Wilderness with tears in his eyes. "Very sad, like you said. I can imagine it!"

"And then what?" asked Karma.

"You won't be angry?"

"Of course not," said Smithsonian. "We know something of life, the pressures, the constraints. As a matter of fact we ourselves have been under *great* pressure lately! An extremely strange situation has taken up all our time and prevented me from working in my shop on some important projects. No, we won't be angry. We are reasonable woodrats, understanding types, sympathetic ears, good listeners."

"Well. You recall my name? Pixie Pepper? Years ago I stumbled across a stash of pixie pepper down here that must have been left by accident when all the Pixies left. There were also magic pixie shoes and even sets of pixie wings, but I was afraid to try them out. The pixie pepper puts you to sleep. A deep dreamless sleep. I got the idea – perhaps you will think it was silly – to put someone to sleep and pretend to be them, pretend to be someone else, someone who wasn't lonely!"

"But I *am* lonely!" shouted Fall Guy, interrupting angrily.

"Let him finish, let him finish," Karma said in a calming tone of voice.

"So I scouted around and came across Fall Guy's nest and sprinkled some pixie pepper on his subterranean fungi."

"I thought it tasted funny!" muttered Fall Guy, interrupting again.

"He fell asleep, and I just sat here reading his book, trying very hard to feel like someone else who wasn't lonely."

"I just *told* you, I *am* lonely!"

"I didn't even know his name until I heard all of you shouting it!"

And here Peter looked up shyly at the others.

"I guess I should apologize."

Masquerade, who had wept a bit during Peter's sad tale even though she prided herself on being very hard-headed, turned to the others and spoke, as she did so often, in a bossy businesslike manner.

"Okay. As Smithy pointed out, there's been no real harm done here. What seems obvious to me, clear as day, is that Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper should be *friends*! Right? Both lonely guys, but now they've found each other!"

She looked at the others with an expression both questioning and challenging, as she did so often.

Fall Guy and Peter, however, were already talking earnestly to each other, smiling and nodding, apparently agreeing on many things. And learning many surprising things about each other!

Lifeboat spoke with great emotion, quoting a famous passage by William Wordsworth, a famous poet he loved.

“Right! Right! No longer will they wander lonely as a cloud that floats on high o’er vales and hills! They’ve found each other! Friends! Oh Friendship, that rare jewel!”

“So true, Sailor! And beautifully expressed!” exclaimed Smithsonian.

He turned to the others with a satisfied smile on his face, as if he felt that they could all congratulate themselves for having taken care of a challenging Situation.

“So should we leave? It’s all settled? All’s well that ends well?”

Karma turned to the others with a cryptic expression on her face – the fine word *cryptic* meaning *hard to interpret*, and as used here meaning *she had thought of something she knew the others hadn’t thought of* and was about to *give them a hint*. She waited until they were all listening.

“No. Not yet. There’s one important piece of unfinished business.”

“What is it?” asked Joyride curiously.

“Who gets the bracelet next.”

And I think I’m going to end this chapter right here. It has been a very full chapter, Chapter Five, very full indeed, starting with Lifeboat’s seed sprouting down by the pond, running with Wilderness to tell the others, all of them running down to Sidd, Sidd’s challenging masterpiece riddles, Kenneth Grahame’s accident on his race to the springbox, the “Elephant’s Shadow” wrong answer substituted by Count Genepool, Charlotte’s heartbreaking death, and finally the rescue from weird trouble, Peter Pixie Pepper’s sad story, and his new friendship with Fall Guy. We’re going to learn a lot more about Peter Pixie Pepper, and about the magic pixie shoes and pixie wings. There’s more to his story than he told us, and he too will play a role in the Great Woodrat Adventure.

And believe it or not, Karma’s simple question about who gets the bracelet next is going to cause some surprising trouble, a big loud argument that only Fall Guy can settle by warning them about the *Invisible Trouble Maker* who causes all the trouble in the world! *Your trouble, my trouble, everybody’s trouble!*

All you know about Fall Guy so far is that he saved Wilderness when he was hanging by dental floss upside-down from the branch. I haven’t told you yet about the very important decision he made after his big fall from the very high tree, when he realized how close he had come to *cashing in his chips*, a neat figure of speech which means *dying*.

Because of that narrow escape he decided to stay down there in the woods and think about life and death, and even though he became lonely while he was thinking, now he knows all about glimpses with the Eye of the Heart! He knows, just as *we* know, that

there's more here than meets the eye! Fall Guy has been *having* glimpses -- something that Karma, of course, will be very eager to discuss with him.

I know what you're thinking. It's pretty obvious, right? We suspected it long ago when we read how Fall Guy learned that Wilderness was hanging upside down by dental floss and needed to be rescued. *Sidd* told him! *Fall Guy has been hanging around with Sidd.*

So let's save all this for Chapter Six.

And are you wondering whether a seed is going to sprout in Chapter Six? It will! *Whose* seed? Here's a clue: I'll tell you the *markings*. It's going to be the one who's brown with streaks and spots of black and white all over! Remember which woodrat that is?

And one last thought that just occurred to me, something for you to think about. *Books* have chapters, but do people's *lives* have chapters? Does *your* life have chapters? Very often people say, with a deep sigh of relief, because it was a really rotten time, a long unattractive disaster area getting worse and worse, "I'm sure grateful *that* chapter in my life is over!" In a book, the author simply *decides* when the chapter is over, as I just did. Usually he or she ends a chapter at a *moment of suspense or mystery*, when we all can't wait to find out what's going to happen next, which is what I try to do sometimes. But what about our *lives*?

I'll ask the question again. Does *your* life have chapters?

Chapter Six

The Invisible Trouble Maker and the Big Fight

Everyone turned to look at Karma.

“Who gets the bracelet next?” asked Wilderness, suddenly staring suspiciously at Smithsonian, with whom, you remember, he had a rivalry.

“Right,” answered Karma. “Remember what Airplane said? Everyone gets to use it only once. Then it gets passed on to someone else. That was the bracelet rule. We’re supposed to *share* it.”

There was a brief silence while each of them exchanged quick suspicious glances with the other five. Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper stared curiously at the group, wondering what was going on.

Lifeboat cleared his throat and spoke first.

“Well, now that you mention it, I *do* remember that. Very clearly. And it seems to me that I, being the oldest, and most responsible, the most mature, the most *prudent*, should get it next.”

And he started walking rapidly towards Joyride, his eyes fixed on her right paw, reaching out for the bracelet.

Joyride, alarmed, quickly jumped away and put her paw behind her back.

"Wait! Wait a minute there! Stop!" interrupted Masquerade. "Who said the oldest gets it? Airplane never said that!"

"Right!" shouted Smithsonian angrily. "Airplane never said *anything* about who gets it next!"

And he stared belligerently at Lifeboat, who stopped walking towards Joyride and quickly turned toward Smithsonian with an outraged expression on his face.

Joyride whirled to face all the others and shouted, still holding her right paw behind her back.

"I'm the Birthday Girl! Remember? Remember who I am? The super-special Birthday Girl Woodrat! Who cares what Airplane said? It's mine! They gave it to *me* and it's *mine*! It's precious! *My* precious!"

Wilderness whipped out his leatherman tool and pointed it threateningly at Joyride.

"None of that, Joy-Joy! None of that! We play by the *rules* here! A rule is a rule!"

"Right!" said Masquerade fiercely. "Wilder is right, Joy-Joy. You have to give up your precious. The only question here is who gets the precious next!"

She stared wildly at the others for a moment and then suddenly screamed, "And it should be *me* because I'm the smartest!" And she rushed at Joyride, grappling for her paw.

"Oh no you don't!" shouted Smithsonian, also rushing for Joyride's paw.

"Give me that precious!" growled Lifeboat and Wilderness at the same time, joining in the wild scuffle.

It was a terrible sight! A terribly *disappointing* sight, to see these little woodrat friends of ours behaving this way! I can hardly bear to tell you about it! It breaks my heart! But it really happened. I warned you it would happen at the end of the last chapter. They rolled around on the ground, kicking and pushing, violently snatching at the bracelet, yanking each other's paws away, while Joyride fought as hard as she could to keep it out of their clutches, all of them crying "*Mine!*"

And even Karma couldn't resist! She watched the scuffle for a minute, wavering, undecided, then suddenly jumped in, screeching and snatching.

"Give me that precious, you fools! I should get it because I'm the most important! *I'm the important woodrat! I'm the one with the suspicion!* That precious should be *mine!*"

"*Pixie Pepper!*" shouted Fall Guy. "*Run! Get one of your dynamite sticks!*"

Peter Pixie Pepper raced off to his remodeled nest and raced back with the dynamite.

"Set it off!" cried Fall Guy. "Set it off! Explode it!"

"I have no matches! I have dynamite but no matches!" wailed Fall Guy.

"Grab one from my cell! I use them to light the candles at my altar! Hurry!"

Peter ran into Fall Guy's nest, wondering why he had called it a "cell" and what an altar was, and raced back waving a match.

"Light it! Then throw it into the air!"

And Peter did that! He lit the dynamite stick and threw it into the air! It exploded over their heads with a huge tremendous deafening bang!

BANG!

It had the effect Fall Guy intended. Immediately they all stopped scuffling for the bracelet and leapt to their feet, looking around wildly, startled out of their wits and breathing heavily from having fought so hard to get the magic bracelet.

Did they feel ashamed? *Abashed?* – which is a great word on page one of most dictionaries and rarely used, meaning *very* ashamed, very *embarrassed*. Did they look at each other miserably and mumble, wringing their paws, "What got into us? How could we have behaved so shamefully?"

Not yet! But they will!

Here's what happened.

Fall Guy stepped forward and said, very calmly, "*Well, well, well.*"

Although he didn't *say* it, you could tell from his tone of voice that he was thinking, "What a pitiful sight I see before me!"

They stared at him, covered with dirt and vegetable matter, still breathing heavily, starting to feel a little confused, but not yet ashamed.

Then he said, also calmly, shaking his head slowly from side to side, "*My, my, my.*"

You could tell from his tone of voice that he was thinking, "I am just amazed, and very saddened, by your terrible pitiful behavior!"

They stared at him sheepishly – a fine word which really means "feeling ashamed" -- and then looked down at the ground, and out of the corner of their eyes at each other but quickly turning away if the other one looked back, starting to feel ashamed but not yet abashed.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves!" Fall Guy said sternly, sounding like a teacher when the kids have been very bad, like picking on someone or throwing food in the cafeteria.

"Sit down!" he ordered.

They all sat down immediately.

"Apologize to each other!"

"Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!"

"That's better."

They all smiled weakly, blubbering a little, wiping away tears because they were abashed about the way they had behaved.

Fall Guy cleared his throat.

"Now I'm going to explain to you what just happened here, and if you listen carefully and try to understand, it will never happen again."

"Oh, we're listening," groaned Lifeboat, "we're all listening as hard as anyone can listen. We feel horrible!"

"As you should! As you should! What I just witnessed was disgraceful!"

"Disgraceful!" wailed Joyride.

"Right! So listen now. Here's what happened. All of you were just possessed by the *Invisible Trouble Maker*! It took control of you! It makes everyone think only of *themselves*, it makes everyone *selfish*! It has very great power, it's your worst enemy, and it's everywhere!"

"Everywhere," moaned Karma.

"The worst of all my enemies!" shouted Wilderness, squeezing his leatherman tool.

"Very great power," muttered Masquerade. "Great power. *And it's inside us!*"

"Okay!" said Smithsonian, rising to his feet and using a figure of speech I'm sure you remember.

"Let's pull ourselves together here! We were caught off guard. We were tricked. The Trouble Maker took over. But now we know what happened and what to watch out for in the future!"

He pointed toward Fall Guy.

"We should all thank him!"

"Thanks, Fall Guy!" they all cried, running up to him, suddenly feeling a little ashamed again, and patting him on the back.

"It's not over yet!" he said sharply. "Sit down again. You still have to decide who gets the bracelet!"

But before we see how they decide, I have to insert a digression about the Invisible Trouble Maker, because Fall Guy was teaching a very important lesson.

Grownups don't call the Invisible Trouble Maker by that name, the name *we* use, but they very often say things that show they do know about it. They will say, "Oh, he's all wrapped up in himself!" Or, "Wow, he's really on an *ego trip*!" Or, "Never think of anybody but yourself!" Or, "All you care about is Number One!" Or, "You're the most self-centered person I've ever known!" Or they will *think* all those things but never *say* them because they know it would be useless.

Most often, however – and this is what just happened with the woodrats -- the Invisible Trouble maker is chewing away inside their minds and they don't know it! They don't *know* they're on an ego trip, they don't *know* they're all wrapped up in themselves! Everyone tries their best to be thoughtful and considerate and not be selfish, because we know that's the *right* way to be, but it's very hard to know when the Invisible Trouble Maker has taken charge,

very hard indeed – unless someone like Fall Guy comes along to tell you. And now you know one big reason why grownups have so much trouble!

Okay. Fall Guy just said, “You still have to decide who gets the bracelet!”

“The bracelet!” said Masquerade, looking around her, astounded, as they all were, that they had actually forgotten what the big fight had been all about!

“The bracelet!” muttered Smithsonian, frowning.

“My bracelet!” said Joyride, suddenly bursting into tears.

“Yes,” said Fall Guy pointedly. “Who gets it? You have to decide.”

“Who do *you* think should get it?” Masquerade blurted out. “*You* decide!”

“That’s not my place. I have nothing to do with that miserable bracelet! The challenge is to *you*, all of you. But if you ask for my opinion, I’d have to say it should go to the one who wants it the *least*. The one who really doesn’t want it at all. *It’s the wanting that causes all the trouble!*”

And then they all, *except for Smithsonian*, started to say that they had never really wanted it very much! Can you believe it? Can you believe this? After what just happened? Give me a break!

Did they want the bracelet?

“Just a *little*, maybe,” one of them said, or “Not really *that* much, when I think about it now,” another said thoughtfully, or

"At *first* I did," one of them explained, or "Not until I saw everyone else going for it," someone claimed, or "I never really wanted it because it was already *mine*!" said you-know-who.

But only Smithsonian confessed. Only Smithsonian told the truth. He looked down at the ground, speaking very quietly, his paws folded in front of him.

"I did want it. I wanted the bracelet."

Fall Guy nodded his head and smiled with his eyes closed. They all thought about the Invisible Trouble Maker. They all turned to look at Smithsonian.

Joyride walked over and handed him the bracelet.

And then they all calmed down and began mingling with each other, exchanging pawshakes and chatting pleasantly. Nothing more was said about the bracelet and the Big Fight. It had been a terribly embarrassing episode, one they would all like to forget (although they never would), they had learned their lesson, thanks to Fall Guy, and it was time to move on. "Let bygones be bygones," as people announce when they feel it's time to turn a new page in life!

And although no one actually *said*, "Time to move on!" because that would have sounded silly, and the one who said it would have immediately felt embarrassed, they all knew it was time to move on. Sometimes grownups disagree about whether it's time to move on, and then there's more trouble. But the woodrats did agree, and I believe they were right, that it was time to move on.

Wilderness approached Fall Guy, holding out his right paw for a pawshake.

"I'm Wilderness, Fall Guy! Thanks for rescuing me! I owe you one! I might still be hanging there if not for you!"

Fall Guy shook his paw, a little stiffly, as if he didn't want to get too emotional about the whole thing.

"Forget it, young fellow. I know you would have done the same for me."

"I sure would!"

Wilderness then quickly turned to Peter Pixie Pepper, who had been watching the whole shameful episode wide-eyed without the faintest idea what was going on, to ask him about dynamite, something he had heard of and was eager to learn more about.

Smithsonian also approached Peter Pixie Pepper to ask him about his semi-precious stones, thinking maybe he could borrow some and experiment with them in his workshop.

Lifboat too approached their new acquaintance, patiently waiting his turn, because he was curious about pixie pepper. As you will remember from Chapter Four, he was interested in herbs, an interest he shared with Wilderness.

Peter, overwhelmed and flattered by the attention he was receiving from his newfound friends, did his best to answer their questions, overjoyed that maybe his terrible loneliness was now a thing of the past.

Masquerade and Joyride felt really exhausted and decided to go back to their nests. They began trudging back up the road,

waving goodbye to the others hanging around in front of Fall Guy's nest – or “cell,” as he had called it when he told Peter Pixie Pepper to run in for the match to light the dynamite stick and put an end to the shameful Big Fight over the bracelet.

“It's been a long day!” said Masquerade, drawing a deep breath and shaking her head. “All that riddle nonsense, the mad run out to the springbox, Charlotte's Web and death, Peter's sad tale...”

She was about to say “and the Big Fight,” but quickly chose not to mention it.

“Yes, a long day,” said Joyride thoughtfully, reviewing those events in her mind as Masquerade listed them.

They arrived at the pond and walked over to the edge. Water beetles were scurrying over the surface of the water, making little ripples. There was no sign of Sidd.

“No Sidd,” said Joyride, looking out over the pond, thinking he might have moved from his usual spot.

Masquerade narrowed her eyes.

“Sidd knows Fall Guy, that's for sure. They may even be best friends. At least cronies. I bet Fall Guy learned all that about the Invisible Trouble Maker from Sidd. They probably met long ago when Fall Guy fell.”

“Probably.”

“Right. And you know what? When we figured out that Peter Pixie Pepper wasn't really Fall Guy, that he was *pretending* to

be Fall Guy, that was one of those Situations that Airplane told us about, when it was time to use the bracelet.”

“Right. A Situation. And there are also Invitations. I wonder if we’ll get an Invitation.”

They stared out over the water a few minutes, half hoping and half fearing that Sidd would appear. They felt odd, an uncomfortable mixture of weariness and excitement, with a dash of confusion. Sort of completely mixed up inside, just shredded, a condition, believe it or not, many grownups are in *all* the time! They turned from the pond and continued walking up the road.

“You know what I think?” said Masquerade as they trudged up the hill, both staring down at their front paws.

“What?”

“I think the rabbits put a spell on the bracelet. I think they put a spell on it to test us.”

“Spell or not, we were tested! And failed.”

“True, but we learned our lesson. Maybe they *meant* us to learn the lesson. They were crazy, but they were also very sly.”

She paused and muttered darkly, “Sly cunning weird egotistical rabbits.”

They continued trudging along, remembering things about the rabbits.

“Look!” said Joyride. “Miner’s lettuce over there.”

Realizing that they were hungry as well as tired, they flopped down and began nibbling.

Joyride turned to Masquerade.

"Masquerade. Do you believe there's more here than meets the eye?"

"No. I do not."

"Even though Sidd said Karma was right about that? That her suspicion was true?"

"Even though."

"I believe it."

"I knew you would."

"I knew you wouldn't!"

Masquerade chuckled. "Different strokes for different folks, Joy-Joy!"

They munched for a while, each lost in her own thoughts.

Often grownups who are comfortable with each other can eat together, or just *be* together, without feeling they have to talk, without saying a word, in peaceful silence. Sometimes, however, only *one* of the two is comfortable with silence, and then the other one, after a few seconds, will feel *uncomfortable*, suspicious and almost panicky, and will say something, say *anything*, just to *break* the silence, and then the first one, although they were quite content with the silence, will have to answer because we have to be polite.

Most of the time *no* one is comfortable with silence, and then people will keep trying, sometimes desperately, to think of something to say, no matter how pointless. Masquerade and Joyride, who really loved each other, although each in her own way, in her own way of *loving*, because there are many ways, were comfortable with silence.

Joyride looked up, sharing a sudden thought.

"Peter Pixie Pepper seems like a very interesting woodrat! Don't you think?"

"There I agree with you. Fascinating, in a way. Such shiny fur and sharp pointy teeth!"

"And what markings!"

"*Great* markings!" And he has a lot of strange fascinating *stuff*. Remember he talked about pixie shoes and pixie wings? I'd like to see them some day."

"Me too. I was wondering about them. Maybe you can put them on and run very fast or fly!"

"Maybe. And maybe not!" said Masquerade, abruptly wiping her muzzle with the back of her paw and heaving herself to her feet. "Let's move on! I want to sleep!"

Joyride joined her. "And there's one other thing I'm wondering about."

"What's that?"

"Whose seed is going to sprout next."

“Well I hope it’s not me!”

But it will be.

Back down the road at Fall Guy’s nest, or “cell,” Karma had approached him. As I bet you knew she would! The others, following Peter’s eager suggestion, had strolled down to his nest to see his stuff, the semi-precious stones, the pixie shoes and pixie wings, and the dynamite.

“Would you like to see my cell?” asked Fall Guy, not very enthusiastically but because it seemed the polite thing to say.

“Why do you call it a cell?” asked Karma, as they entered. “It looks just like a nest to me.”

“Well,” answered Fall Guy, “after I took my terrible fall when I had been released from the Have-a-Heart trap that tricked me in the wine cellar where I had been messing around with the kindling, I really began to think about things, because I could have been killed, things most woodrats don’t think about. I could have died, you know.”

Here he paused and stared at Karma.

“What things?”

“Well, actually, it would be truer to say that I *wanted* to think about things but I didn’t know what to think. Drew a complete blank.”

Again he paused, this time with his back to Karma.

"So what did you do? How did you learn what to think about?"

Karma was getting a little impatient with the stumbling way Fall Guy was telling his story, but she knew everyone had their style.

"Well, I wandered one day over to the pond and ran into Sidd. He told me what to think about. He told me a lot."

Again he paused. It was becoming clearer and clearer to Karma that Fall Guy didn't really want to talk about himself, but was forcing himself in order not to be rude and cold.

"The main thing he told me was to stay down there in the woods, by myself, so I would have peace and quiet. Some woodrats need peace and quiet if they want to do good thinking. He told me I was that kind of woodrat."

"But you were lonely. That's what you said."

Fall Guy became both irritated and talkative at the same time. When Karma reminded him that he had said he was lonely she had *pushed his buttons*, a frequently used and frequently accurate figure of speech which means something like *poking your finger, or a needle, into a secret sensitive place*.

"I did get lonely after a while! That's true. Sidd's a great turtle, of course, one of the best, but he has no patience with small talk. So I am *very* happy to have made the acquaintance of Peter Pixie Pepper!"

Fall Guy became enthusiastic here.

"He's a gem, a prince! A real brick. The perfect friend. We're going to get together once a week and forage. He's going to show me a place where there are *thousands* of mushrooms! We'll forage together, then I'll sit by my altar! I've been alone down here for almost a year, and I know I don't have to be alone anymore."

He paused, his voice trailing off, his enthusiasm suddenly draining away.

"You can still walk the Path."

Karma knew that, but said nothing. She noticed a large stone with a candle on it.

"What's that?"

"That's my altar, where I think. What I was just talking about."

Karma turned away from Fall Guy and spoke casually over her shoulder.

"I had an interview with Sidd. Did he tell you?"

"Why no!" answered Fall Guy, and then added, turning his head so Karma couldn't see he was actually *giggling*, "But if you had an interview with Sidd, you must be *especially* ashamed of the way you behaved today!"

"I am. It won't happen again."

"I'm sure it won't."

He paused to let that remark sink in, giving Karma a significant, somewhat stern look.

"So how did the interview go? What did he tell you?"

"He told me that there is more here than meets the eye -- which I suspected, and why I wanted to talk to him -- and that you can see it with the Eye of the Heart. In glimpses."

She turned back and stared at him.

"That's true," Fall Guy answered cautiously. "He told me the same thing."

"Have you had glimpses?"

Fall Guy turned his back. "That's a dangerous question!"

"Okay. Forget I asked."

Fall Guy said nothing, so Karma continued.

"He told you about the Invisible Trouble Maker, right?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you his real name?"

"Yes."

Karma felt that at this point she had learned everything from Fall Guy that he was about to reveal. He was definitely one of those *tight-lipped* woodrats we come across, *cagey*, keeping his cards close to his throat fur.

"Well, I had better be moving along. I hear the others coming back from Peter's nest. Perhaps we can talk again some day?"

"Perhaps!" Fall Guy answered brightly, immediately turning away, but Karma could tell from his tone of voice and expression that he didn't really mean it, that he was just being polite, that after being alone for so long one friend might be all he wanted for a while. Or maybe he had other reasons. Maybe Sidd was the only one he wanted to talk to about the Path.

Okay! I just decided this chapter is almost over. There's already a lot in it to think about. The Invisible Trouble Maker, for example. And that conversation between Karma and Fall Guy was rather strange, don't you think? It was *stilted*, I thought, a fine word meaning here that they were both being very careful about what they were saying, as if they were a little *suspicious* of each other. And I think I know why. Do you?

And do you believe Jefferson and Airplane put a spell on the bracelet? In my opinion, they did, because that's just the kind of thing those absolutely crazy rabbits would do. And it should be clear by now that they have some kind of plan for the woodrats.

And the new friends, Peter Pixie Pepper and Fall Guy, are also new characters in the adventure. Will we be seeing them again? I think we will. I *hope* we will!

But here's something else, something I didn't tell you. I've been saving it.

Remember when Joyride handed the bracelet to Smithsonian? Well, just at that moment the eye on the big heart of the bracelet, the Eye of the Heart, suddenly opened. Something *appeared* then that could not be seen by the eyes in our heads and

was only visible to the Eye of the Heart! Don't try to say what it was! You can only *feel* it. In your heart.

And now the long day, and this chapter, ends.

Karma waited in front of Fall Guy's nest or cell while the others came straggling up the hill from Peter's nest. They had been very impressed by Peter's collection of fascinating stuff. He had given some semi-precious stones to Smithsonian, for keeps, given some pixie pepper to a very grateful Lifeboat, and promised to explode some dynamite with Wilderness some day.

They joined up with Karma, waved goodbye to Fall Guy, thanking him for having put a stop to the Big Fight with dynamite and taught them the very important lesson about the Invisible Trouble Maker, and continued, the four of them, on their way up the road. They didn't walk over to the pond to see if Sidd was there, as Masquerade and Joyride had. They were just too exhausted after such an eventful day. Anyone would be! They trudged in silence, too tired to speak. They didn't even look up or say anything when the silence was broken.

A new kitchen appliance we're excited to try! Inside Brooke Burke's Baby Shower! Now in two locations! A convex lens is thicker at the center than the edges! Our Star-studded Year-end Movie Extravaganza! 0.0007 microns! Venice repels Hungarian Invasion! HP LaserJet All-in-One for \$519.99! Gift Certificates! Electro Travel Mug! \$49.99! \$29.99! \$19.99! \$52.99! New!

Are you listening? Are you listening?

The Hussite Leader, George of Podebrad, becomes King of Bohemia! Military Junta Seizes Control! 49ers Eliminate Broncos From Playoffs! Total destruction! Objects thrown upward into the air! 33,171

Inch-Pounds of Torque! Choose Chocolate! The conflict shows no sign of ending! Bjork talks about her globe-trotting tour! China defends battered image! Space probes have been sent to gather data! 21,000 job cuts this month!

Are you listening?

Frank Zappa releases Freak-Out! Add an elegant accent! \$189.99!

The Information faded away as they arrived in the meadow. The Evening Star was just beginning to shine in the west. They paused to gaze at it as it became brighter and brighter against the darkening sky, lost in their own thoughts, then returned to their nests and fell immediately to sleep.

Chapter Seven

A Fish Mask in the Firewood and Saving Jane April from Rebar the Cat

A week had gone by since Karma, Smithsonian, Lifeboat and Wilderness had trudged back, silent, exhausted and embarrassed, even abashed – remember that word? -- from Fall Guy's nest or cell. They had tried very hard not to hear the barrage of information that hit them on the way and had fallen immediately asleep in their nests.

That's how the last chapter ended, Chapter Six, where they were attacked and taken over by the Invisible Trouble Maker and behaved so disgracefully, so selfishly, actually rolling around on the ground fighting over the magic bracelet Joyride had called her "precious," now worn by Smithsonian who was the only one who told the truth.

There will be a surprising new kind of magic in this new chapter. Very far out! I can see it coming as I look ahead and at the same time remember what happened. I do both at the same time. I know that sounds a little strange, but it's because I'm the one who is telling the story. I'm the author.

As I said, a week had gone by. Gradually the old normal comfortable woodrat patterns and routines took over. Foraging, dozing, chatting, Smithsonian puttering in his workshop, Joyride enjoying happy quiet hours alone in the woods, Lifeboat struggling to put disturbing thoughts from his mind, Masquerade suspiciously reviewing things that had happened, some of them quite long ago, to be sure she hadn't overlooked some secret behind the scenes. Karma mulled over the awkward conversation with Fall Guy, and Wilderness occasionally recalled Peter's promise to explode some dynamite with him, but they had all been so shaken up by the Big Fight that no one felt like going down to visit with Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper.

The painful memory of their shameful behavior was still too fresh. Grownups, as you will learn, accumulate *many* painful memories, often of silly mistakes they made, some of which stay fresh for a very long time. They *thought* about the pair of new friends, who were also *their* new friends, what an unusual woodrat Fall Guy was, all the interesting stuff Peter had found or collected, but no one thought of making a visit.

We pick up the story on a cool sunny morning in September. Lifeboat was down in the apple orchard, collecting mugwort for making dream pillows, when he heard a strange wailing coming from the big pile of firewood. It sounded like someone was calling his name.

"Lifeboat! Lifeboat!"

He turned, tilting his head and listening.

"Lifeboat! *Sailor!*"

There! Someone who knew his nickname! He was alarmed and curious at the same time, as people often are when something happens that they can't explain and might mean trouble.

He stared in the direction of the sound, but didn't move.

"What?" he called out. "What?"

"What what what!" the voice answered, in a mocking tone.

He was sure it had to be one of the others teasing him. Who else could it be? So he trotted over to the woodpile.

"Who is it? Wilderness?" he shouted.

"Here I am! Over here!" came the voice.

"I'll find you, whoever you are!" Lifeboat called out excitedly, and he ran to where the voice was coming from.

And what do you think he saw, staring out at him from between two logs? A big grinning orange fish head!

"Oh Masquerade!" he cried. "Another one of your masks!"

He was right. It was Masquerade. Remember when we learned, way back at the beginning of Part One, that Masquerade was fond of disguises? That she even thought *everyone* was pretending to be someone else? She wore that rhinoceros mask in the bathroom escapade.

Masquerade is, on the *one* hand, very shrewd and worldly, *sophisticated* – a tremendously important and useful word you should learn to use, meaning she's a woodrat who has *examined life and seen through its tricks* – quite convinced from bitter experience

that nothing is what it appears to be, and, on the *other* hand, Masquerade is sort of *childlike* because she likes to wear masks, which is mostly what children do, like on Halloween. This is called a *contradiction in character*, and many grownups, you will discover, have contradictions in character all over the place. Everyone, as thoughtful grownups agree, is a *mixed bag*.

“Right, Sailor! You guessed it! One of my best!” she said cheerily as she clambered out of the woodpile and took off the fish mask.

“Had you worried there for a minute, didn’t I?”

“Not really,” answered Lifeboat dryly. “But it is a fine mask. Did Smithy help you make it?”

“Well, I sort of helped him. We did it together.”

She took off the mask and showed it to him.

Lifeboat turned it over in his paws, examining the skilled work. He had a sudden impulse, something very rare for him because, as we know very well by now after examining his *character*, he is one of those woodrats who thinks very carefully before doing anything that isn’t part of his routine. If there was one saying he hated it was, “*Follow That Impulse!*”

“Let me try it on!”

“Go for it!” Masquerade shouted, surprised and delighted by Lifeboat’s impulse.

And then he suddenly had *another* impulse, *very* rare for him.

"I know! I'll hide in the woodpile like you did and you come down with someone else and I'll play a trick on them like you did on me!"

And he tied on the mask and ran to the woodpile.

"Great idea, Sailor! You're sure full of surprises today!"

She followed him to the woodpile and helped him wedge himself between two logs with the fish mask facing out.

Did they notice that the string on the mask was caught on one of the logs? NO!

Masquerade laughed. "You look great, Sailor! I'll run and get someone you can surprise!"

Masquerade turned to run up to the meadow.

But she stopped dead in her tracks. Why?

Because there, right in front of her, a giant snake was uncoiling toward the sky! It was Vasuki! Her seed had sprouted!

"Vasuki!" she shrieked. "Vasuki!" she shrieked again. "It's Vasuki! We have to rescue Jane April! Up on the deck! *In just ten minutes Rebar is going to catch her and eat her!*"

"What?" screamed Lifeboat from the woodpile. "What? Vasuki? The big snake? He's here? Seed sprouted? Vasuki?"

Vasuki was getting bigger and bigger, gigantic, reaching up to the clouds, swirling and swaying. Masquerade heard the flute music again. She was paralyzed with fascination, motionless, gaping up at the immense snake.

And just then Lifeboat discovered he was caught! He tried to get out from between the two logs right away, of course, but he couldn't budge an inch!

"Help! Help! Get me out!" he cried. "I'm stuck!"

And also just then Wilderness came strolling down, foraging and humming to himself. And what did he see and hear?

First he saw Masquerade, frozen motionless, staring up at the sky.

"What's up, Masquerade? What's up *there*?" he asked, chuckling at the clever way he had mixed the two questions.

Then he saw and heard an orange fish looking out from the woodpile screaming, "Get me out! Get me out!"

"A *fish*, in the *woodpile*?" he thought to himself, puzzled and intrigued, looking back and forth from Masquerade to the fish.

He chuckled again. "Masquerade: Have you noticed there's a *fish* in the *woodpile*?"

Masquerade whirled.

"Wilder! We have to rescue Jane April! Rebar is going to eat her!"

"Get me out of here! I'm *stuck*, I tell you!"

"And it's shouting that it's *stuck*!"

"We *only* have ten minutes!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Vasuki! I see Vasuki!"

"She sees Vasuki!" the fish screamed. "Just like I did down at the pond! Her seed sprouted!"

Lifeboat had recognized Wilderness's voice.

"And I'm *stuck*! I'm not a fish! This is a mask! I'm Lifeboat! Get me out!"

Wilderness whirled, staring at the sky, seeing nothing.

"You see Vasuki? Just like Lifeboat did down at the pond?"

He stamped his paw. "How come everybody gets to see Vasuki but me?" he demanded angrily.

"Get me out of here!"

"Ten minutes!"

"It's one of your masks!"

Suddenly Masquerade and Wilderness were *on the same page*, a neat modern figure of speech which means here that *they both realized what was going on in this crazy moment and what had to be done immediately*.

Masquerade started to race up to the meadow.

"Pull him out! I'll get the others! We meet on the deck!"

“Get *Smithsonian!*” Wilderness shouted, remembering that Smithsonian was wearing the magic bracelet.

“This is a Situation! We’ll need the bracelet!”

Wilderness charged over to the woodpile. Lifeboat, through the fish mask, was shouting, “Get me out!” over and over again. For an instant Wilderness felt like bursting out laughing because it looked so funny: a desperate shouting voice coming from a smiling fish face. But he knew this was an emergency so he didn’t laugh. He started tugging on the mask.

“Is that you, Wilder? I can’t see a thing!”

“It’s me, Sailor,” Wilderness answered, “Wilder to the rescue!”

He tugged and tugged. Finally the string snapped, he fell backward on his tiny hindquarters, and Lifeboat’s startled face popped into view just as he shouted, for the last time, “Get me out!” and scrambled down to the ground.

“You’re out! What a grip I have!”

Lifeboat was gasping and jumping up and down, hugging his sides. He had gotten into a terrible panic when he was trapped in the woodpile, imagining, in his desperation, that he might *never* get out and just waste away there till he died, wearing a fish mask.

“What happened? What did she learn? I know she saw Vasuki!”

“Run with me! I’ll tell you on the way!”

And they charged up to the meadow with Wilderness explaining that unless they came to the rescue right away Rebar was going to eat the beautiful hummingbird, Jane April, who had helped them get the dental floss during the bathroom escapade.

“Jane April! Jane April and Maria Tallchief, the hummingbirds!” Lifeboat exclaimed.

They found Karma, Masquerade, Smithsonian and Joyride in the meadow, looking up at the deck and pointing. They could see Jane April hovering over the hummingbird feeder on the corner of the railing.

“How will we get up there?” cried Joyride, thrilled and eager.

“Climb the middle four-by-four!” shouted Smithsonian. “It’s the roughest!”

They dashed to the roughest four-by-four and scampered up, Wilderness in the lead. They scrambled over the railing and flumped down onto the deck. They could see Rebar, staring up at Jane April hovering over the hummingbird feeder, poised to leap! There were only a few seconds to go! Rebar was in the air!

Quick as a flash, Smithsonian switched the bracelet to his right paw!

You’ll never guess what happened. Never in a million years.

Suddenly there was a beautiful Frenchwoman, dressed in a billowing orange skirt, wearing black stockings and a huge black and orange hat, dancing on the railing! Who was she? She was the *original* Jane April, the famous French dancer! Yes! I never told you,

but Jane April, the *hummingbird*, was named after Jane April, the famous French *dancer*!

Rebar landed on the railing, looked puzzled for a moment, and then just jumped down and licked her paw as if nothing had happened at all. You know how strange cats are.

The amazed woodrats stared at Jane April, smiling as she danced along the railing, kicking out her feet and twirling around.

And suddenly they heard music! Music coming from nowhere, filling the air!

One by one they started to laugh, clapping their front paws to the music and tapping their hind paws on the deck. It was a very magic moment, and they knew it.

"That's one fine magic bracelet the rabbits gave us!" laughed Masquerade.

"Best bracelet we ever had!" said Karma, smiling from ear to ear, *really* from ear to ear, because for woodrats "smiling from ear to ear" is not just a figure of speech, as it is for people!

Suddenly Wilderness shouted, pointing to the other side of the deck.

"Look! Look over there, in that chair!"

They whirled. And what did they see? Sitting in one of the deck chairs was a man with a black beard and a black hat and coat. His legs were too short to reach the deck, but other than that he was a full-sized man. Who was he? I'll tell you. He was the famous French painter who painted many pictures of Jane April over a hundred years ago in France! And she was also his *friend* who used

to help him serve wine and French pastry in his painting studio! His French name is very hard to say, so we'll just call him Henry.

And he was painting! Right there on the deck, painting pictures of Jane April dancing, just as he used to do a hundred years ago in France! She looked down at him while he was painting and called his name! She spoke in French, of course, but I'll say it for you in English.

"Oh, Henry! My Henry! It's so good to see you again after all the years! So good, so wonderful!"

"I never thought I'd see the day when I could paint you dancing again, my dear."

And Masquerade noticed that he was crying. He didn't stop painting, but he was crying. Tears were running down his cheeks.

The woodrats kept turning their heads back and forth from Jane April to Henry. Wilderness scampered up onto the back of Henry's chair to see the painting.

"It looks just like her!" he cried. "Just like her!"

And then all at once, while she was dancing and he was painting and they were smiling at each other, they started to fade away, until you could see right through them. The music faded away too.

"Goodbye!" they called out. "Goodbye! Goodbye!"

They waved and threw kisses at each other.

And they were gone. Jane April the hummingbird appeared over the deck for a moment and then darted away.

The woodrats stared at where they had been, and at each other. They felt something deep had happened in those few minutes, something important, but they had no words for it. And I can tell you right now that there are *never* any words for the truly deep things that happen! We just *feel* them.

Karma said to Smithsonian quickly, "Look at the bracelet. Look at the eye."

"It's open," said Smithsonian. "The Eye of the Heart is open."

Wilderness looked out over the meadow.

"I think they were ghosts. That's what I think. I think they were ghosts."

"And I think they probably loved each other very much when they were alive," said Joyride.

"He was her brother," said Smithsonian sadly.

Masquerade nodded her head. "And she was his sister."

"Yes," answered Lifeboat, with an expression on his face half serious and half dreamy. "And he painted pictures of her then, when they loved each other. A long time ago."

"A long time ago," repeated Smithsonian, nodding his head. "Somewhere far away."

"That must be why the Eye of the Heart was open," said Karma, looking at the others with a faraway smile on her face. "The Eye of the Heart has something to do with love."

They clambered down the roughest four-by-four and gathered in the meadow for a moment. They all felt very much like being alone to reflect upon what had happened up on the deck.

“Reflect upon” is another of the important figures of speech we have come across in this story, meaning something like *think about alone and try to understand*. Grownups do a great deal of “reflecting upon,” often angrily, but most of the time, sadly enough, only succeed with the *first* part, *think about alone*, and never get to the *second* part, *understand*.

Lifeboat, Joyride, Masquerade and Smithsonian wandered off to forage and reflect. But Wilderness approached Karma.

“Karma. I have something I want to talk to you about.”

“Sure, Wilder! Let’s go down by the firewood pile.”

Do you remember what Wilderness was thinking to himself when they were returning from Karma’s interview with Sidd?

Wilderness was traveling in the Helix robot’s eye, admiring the beauty of the sun slanting down through the branches, remembering that Karma had told them that Sidd said, “What we see with the Eye of the Heart is always seen first in glimpses.” He was thinking to himself, “Am I glimpsing something? Have to talk about this with Karma.”

Karma plodded down through the orchard, reflecting upon the magical scene on the deck which had opened the Eye of the Heart: the beautiful dancing woman and the bearded man painting

her with tears in his eyes. (She didn't know, of course, as you do, that the woman was French and the man, also French, was named Henry.) Wilderness was running in circles around her and doing somersaults, "keeping in shape," as he would have explained.

They arrived at the firewood pile where Lifeboat had gotten stuck wearing a fish mask.

"Sit down and tell me what's on your mind!"

Wilderness flopped down and looked up at Karma perched on a piece of firewood.

"Well, it's like this. I sometimes see real pretty things in the woods around here when I'm foraging or exploring, especially at the end of day when the sun is low and makes rays of light and strange shadows. And in the morning too, when the light is pink. I always feel that when I see those things it's the best part of the day."

"So?"

"Well, I was just wondering. Was I having glimpses? The glimpses you get when you see with the Eye of the Heart?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Don't."

"Can't be any help there."

"No. No help." Karma paused. "But I'll tell you this. I believe you're on the right track."

"The right track?"

"The right track."

Wilderness looked away and then back.

"That's all?"

"That's all!"

"You're teasing me!"

"No, I'm not!"

They looked at each other for a long moment and then suddenly burst out laughing, looking straight into each other's eyes. Laughing, they hugged each other, one of those clumsy woodrat hugs because woodrat paws are too short to reach around each other, no matter how hard they try.

In that moment they *made contact*, they were *on the same page*, they *understood each other*, they *found each other in the magic place where there are no words*. They found themselves by finding each other. It felt to themselves, in that moment, that there was only one person there. And there really *was* only one person there! These moments are rare, *but they can happen*. I hope *you* find someone in that magic place! If the bracelet were there, the Eye of the Heart would have opened!

Later in the afternoon they got together again at Smithsonian's nest by the driveway. They knew, as I bet *you* do,

that there was one piece of business they had to take care of. Right?
Who gets the bracelet next?

“Okay,” Masquerade said in her business-like way. “We’re not going to be made fools of twice! Smithy! You have the bracelet now. Joyride already had it. Think of a number from one to four, whisper it to Joyride so we’ll know you’re not playing games with us, and then Lifeboat, Wilderness, Karma and I will guess the number.”

“Make it one to ten!” shouted Wilderness. “It’ll be more exciting! More tension!”

“Why not make it one to a thousand!” said Lifeboat sarcastically. “*Much* more tension!”

“Okay, Okay!” said Smithsonian. “No nonsense. One to ten is fine.”

He whispered a number to Joyride.

Joyride whispered back, “I don’t like that number.”

“You don’t *like* that number?”

“It’s too easy.”

Smithsonian was about to say something quite sharp, but managed to restrain himself.

“Okay: *you* pick the number!”

Joyride whispered a number to him.

“I want to guess first!” shouted Wilderness.

They all whirled toward him.

“Sounds like the Invisible Trouble Maker is back again!” Karma warned, looking sternly at Wilderness. And all the others looked sternly at him too.

He couldn’t speak. He looked down at his front paws and mumbled something to himself. Then, with great effort pulling himself together – there’s that figure of speech again! – he looked up at the others standing in a circle around him.

“I won’t guess!” he said proudly.

They nodded their heads, knowing he had done the right thing, the *only* thing he could have done to prove himself a real woodrat.

Lifeboat, Masquerade and Karma stood facing Smithsonian and Joyride.

“Go first, Sailor, said Smithsonian.

“Seven!”

“Wrong!” said Smithsonian.

“Masquerade!” shouted Joyride.

“Two!”

“Wrong!” shouted Joyride.

“Karma?” said Smithsonian.

"Five!"

"I'm afraid that's wrong, Karma. It's not five."

"Sailor?" said Joyride.

"Six?"

"My woodrat!" shouted Smithsonian. "You got it! Give me a high four!"

"I knew he would get it!" shouted Wilderness. "And I thought it would be six! Six for the six of us!"

Lifeboat smiled shyly. "Just luck," he said.

Smithsonian walked over to Lifeboat, removed the magic bracelet, and solemnly handed it over to him.

Lifeboat put it on his left paw and smiled weakly. "Thanks."

He was thinking to himself, "Why did I have to say six? I should have said nine, or ten! Or eight! Anything but six!"

Chapter Eight

The Greatest Star Show in the World

In the first part of this chapter *nothing happens*.

All right? Nothing! Nothing happens. No *action*. It's just *talking*.

But that doesn't mean it's boring or unimportant! It's *very* important. It's where some of the woodrats try to figure out what's going on, try to make sense out of all the strange stuff that's happening in their lives! The same thing *we* would do if a rude turtle made us try to solve very difficult masterpiece riddles and told us we could get glimpses of something with our Eye of the Heart and crazy rabbits came to see us and knew all our names and said they were our best friends and gave us a magic bracelet and planted seeds in our heads that sprouted when we saw a giant snake named Vasuki! We'd try to figure it out, right? Try *hard*! So don't skip this part!

And most important of all, keep this in mind! We don't have interviews with rude turtles who give us hard riddles, we don't get visited by crazy rabbits carrying a giant snake in a backpack, we don't have a magic bracelet, and we don't have seeds sprouting in our heads, *but there is more here than meets the eye, and we have an Eye of the Heart, and when that Eye is open we can catch glimpses of that*

more, and we certainly get in Situations and receive Invitations, and we're all on a Journey! The Great Woodrat Adventure is our adventure too!

Keep *that* in mind!

Three days have gone by since the magic bracelet passed to Lifeboat who guessed correctly, and to his dismay, that the number Masquerade had chosen was six. (I wonder what that other number was, the one she thought was “too easy”?) So far, Lifeboat and Masquerade’s seeds have already sprouted and Joyride and Smithsonian have worn the bracelet. Lifeboat now wears the bracelet, and often glances at it with alarm, even with horror, hoping that maybe there was some glitch in the rabbits’ scheme and no other seeds will sprout.

But he knows that hope won’t come true. He knows he’s trapped, and he only wishes the next seed will sprout soon so the whole horrible upsetting business will be over with. Sometimes he wishes it will never sprout and sometimes he wishes it will sprout soon. Sometimes he wishes he could rip the bracelet off!

We pick up the story on a clear cool morning in early October.

Yesterday had been the first real rain of autumn, and leaves were still glistening in the bright sun. Karma and Joyride were foraging in the orchard. Wilderness and Lifeboat were wandering down to the pond, foraging on the way.

Masquerade had trotted up to Smithsonian’s nest. She had something she wanted to talk about. Smithsonian was the one she most often wanted to talk with when there was something on her mind. She felt the two of them were less *emotional* than the other four, more able to be *detached*, more able to discuss things without

having *feelings* slobber out all over the place, more able to *see things as they really are*. Some grownups, but not many, are like that. Precious few!

She strolled into his workshop-nest, littered with all the stuff he'd picked up here and there, without knocking or calling out, which usually annoyed him but he knew there was no use in making an issue of it. Masquerade was quite convinced that everything she thought was important. Remember the Big Fight about who gets the bracelet next? Masquerade had shouted, "And it should be *me* because I'm the smartest!"

"Smithy? It's me. Something I want to talk about."

Smithsonian looked up from his workbench where he was still working on his project to build a stove in his nest so he could make mushroom soup instead of gnawing on cold stringy subterranean fungi.

He breathed a sigh, put down a bent Phillips head screw, and turned to her.

"What is it? You've interrupted me once again."

Masquerade wasted no time in getting to the point.

"I've been trying to figure out what's going on around here. The seeds, the bracelet. Glimpses. This whole thing."

Smithsonian slowly looked down at his work, thought for a minute, and then looked up again.

"Okay. I'm listening."

"It all began, I hope you realize, with Karma's suspicion."

“True. What are you driving at?”

Masquerade spoke excitedly. You could tell she had been thinking about the whole mysterious rabbit business, the bracelet and the seeds, and had seen that it was connected to Karma’s suspicion and Sidd’s interview with her. *She saw it was all one big picture.*

“The rabbits didn’t just *happen* to wander by! Isn’t that obvious? And they didn’t just *happen* to stage that crazy birthday party for Joyride because they like partying. The magic bracelet they gave Joyride as a birthday present has a *heart* with an *eye* on it! The Eye of the Heart is what Karma learned about from Sidd when she told him about her suspicion that there’s more here than meets the eye!”

“Keep going.”

“Sidd also told her about *glimpses*.” She jumped impatiently. “I can’t believe you haven’t thought about this, Smithy!”

“I *have* thought about it. I just want to hear what *you* thought.”

She stared at him defiantly, prepared to argue with him if he disagreed.

“I think the whole thing is a set-up for glimpses! When the Eye of the Heart on the bracelet opens it’s a signal that there’s something to glimpse!”

Smithsonian looked down at his workbench for a moment, fiddling with some sixteen- penny sinkers, then looked up again.

"I agree. When that beautiful dancing lady in the orange hat and the man with the beard who was painting her disappeared, and the music faded away, and we all felt something deep had happened, Karma told me to look at the bracelet, to look at the eye. It was open."

"Right! And that means there was something to *glimpse*! That's what it meant! When the Eye of the Heart opens there's something to glimpse! Like I said!"

Smithsonian looked at Masquerade with narrowed eyes.

"What to glimpse? Glimpse *what*?"

Masquerade scratched her head with one paw and her tail with the other, which is something woodrats do when they're puzzled, but we can't do for an obvious reason.

"We don't know that yet. Something deep? Must be something *deep*. Like you just said: *deep*. Why would the Eye of the Heart open for something that wasn't *deep*? You know? *Deep*."

Smithsonian nodded, still fiddling thoughtfully with the sixteen-penny sinkers. He suddenly looked up.

"Right. Deep. Don't know for sure yet, could be wrong, don't even really know for sure what deep *means*, but Yes. Maybe something *deep*. Like *unusual*."

He paused a moment, puzzling about what he had just said.

"But you're leaving something out, Masquerade."

"What?"

“When we switch the bracelet. Bracelet switching. Jefferson or Airplane said we switch the bracelet when there’s a *Situation* or an *Invitation*.”

“Right! I forgot that.”

She thought a moment, staring at Smithsonian through narrowed eyes, while Smithsonian, who was slightly amused by how hard she was staring at him, also narrowed his eyes, imitating her in a friendly joking way.

“But that’s easy! Here’s how it goes: *Seed sprouts, we learn about a Situation or Invitation, it’s too big for us to handle by ourselves so we switch the bracelet, something magic happens to save the day, and then sooner or later the Eye of the Heart on the bracelet opens, meaning there’s a chance for us to get a glimpse!* It went that way every time. In that exact order!”

“Sounds right. Sounds right so far. Can’t argue with that. Fall Guy’s weird trouble with Peter Pixie Pepper, and Rebar going to eat Jane April, were real *Situations*. And you know what? When I told the truth down at Fall Guy’s nest or cell, after the Big Fight, and everyone suddenly got very quiet, I bet *that* was a glimpse chance and I bet that if we had looked we would have seen that the Eye on the bracelet opened. Had to be! It was a *deep moment*, at least for me!”

“For me too! I thought it was deep! One of those deep moments in life!”

“And when we figured out that the dancing lady and the painting man were sister and brother and loved each other a long time ago, the Eye of the Heart on the bracelet *did* open, that was a *glimpse chance*, and Karma said the Eye of the Heart has something to do with *love*. So each time the Eye of the Heart on the bracelet

opened was a chance for us to get a glimpse with *our* Eye of the Heart! I've been thinking along those lines."

Smithsonian inspected a washer and then flipped it across the workbench and watched it roll into a corner of his crowded workshop.

"A *glimpse*! Whatever *that* means!"

"A *chance* for a glimpse!" Masquerade repeated triumphantly. "Just a *chance*, Smitheroonie! That's the main thing! A *chance* for a *glimpse*! A chance for *us* to have a glimpse with *our* Eye of the Heart, the Eye of the Heart within *us*!"

They stared at each other, convinced that they had figured it out, overwhelmed by the crazy far-out thing that was happening to all of them.

"Amazing," murmured Masquerade, playing around with some size eight finishing nails. "Just an amazing business going on here!"

"Okay. And don't lose those nails! I'll tell you something, Masquerade, my soul mate. I've kept it a secret. When I told the truth about wanting the bracelet, and all the rest of you *lied*, lied right out loud, and Joyride handed it over to me, I *did* feel something then, in my heart. Like I just said: I bet if I'd thought to look at the bracelet, I'd have seen that the Eye of the Heart on the bracelet was open."

"I felt it too, Smithy. I felt it too. In my heart."

And just at that moment, when they were remembering the feeling, Karma strode into the nest!

"So did I."

Masquerade and Smithsonian whirled and stared at her.

"What are *you* doing here?" Masquerade asked, surprised, of course, but also immediately delighted.

"Were you listening outside? Spying?"

"Yes I was," she answered calmly. "I came up here to chat with Smithy and I heard what you two were talking about. I agree with it all. And I'll tell you a little more. I had a talk with Wilderness a few days ago. He asked me about *glimpses*, if you can believe it! That little rat! We talked awhile and then suddenly we burst out laughing and hugged each other! And I *know* the Eye of the Heart on the bracelet would have opened then!"

"How do you know?" challenged Smithsonian.

"I felt it in my heart. It was a moment. A heart moment. A *glimpse* moment."

Smithsonian pounded his paw on the workbench, making all his stuff bounce around and some of it fall on the floor.

"So how does it all hang together?" he demanded. "What's the Big Picture?"

Karma started to answer but Masquerade interrupted.

"Let me take a stab at it. The one thing we haven't mentioned yet is the *Journey*, Karma's Journey, or Path, or whatever it is."

"I think we're *all* on that Journey," chuckled Smithsonian.
"Certainly feels like it to *me*!"

"You're right about that," said Karma. "It's not just me."

"Let me continue!" protested Masquerade. "So many interruptions! We've got the *bracelet's* Eye of the Heart and *our* Eyes of the Heart, we've got Situations and Invitations, we've got *glimpses*, and we have a *Journey*, a *Path*. The bracelet *always* knows when there's a glimpse chance, and we have to get as sharp as the bracelet! And I can say it all now in one sentence!"

"Do it, Masquerade, you shrewd little woodrat with cute markings! Do it!" shouted Smithsonian wildly, hurling a rusty hose clamp across the nest.

"Do it for us!"

"Okay! Here goes! *There's more here than meets the eye, a seed sprouts and we learn about a Situation or Invitation, then we have to switch the bracelet to deal with it, we get a chance to glimpse that 'more,' whatever it is, with our Eye of the Heart, and the glimpses carry us along on a Journey! On a Path! Glimpse after glimpse! Like footsteps!*"

Smithsonian added forcefully, "And that was the rabbits' plan for us! Right? Don't forget those rabbits... as if anyone could forget those rabbits!"

Suddenly a thought struck him.

"And Sidd also! Sidd was in on the plan! They were in cahoots! He knew those rabbits! They were secret friends!"

"Sidd. Right. Sidd and the rabbits!"

Masquerade paused, feeling suddenly confused.

“But what kind of journey is this? We’re all still right here! What kind of journey is it? Where does it go?” she asked, suddenly baffled and a little annoyed because she realized she hadn’t actually figured it all out.

“And I don’t *want* to go anywhere! I like it here!”

For a moment the three of them looked at each other in silence, struggling to keep a grasp on what they had been trying to figure out, trying to piece together.

“You know what?” Smithsonian suddenly burst out. “It’s *still* all a great big mish-mash! We really don’t know what it’s all about! That weird rude turtle and those insane rabbits! It’s over our heads! *A mish-mash over our heads!* And I don’t want to go anywhere either! I like it here too!”

“Right,” moaned Masquerade, having a sudden *mood swing* (remember them?) away from her *earlier* mood, when she was proud that she had figured it all out, into a *new* mood on the opposite end, a mood of *hopelessness*.

“We’re having a great adventure, a *really* great adventure, a *great woodrat adventure*, and we don’t know what it’s all about! Haven’t a clue!”

Suddenly she looked up, wild-eyed.

“Leaves in the wind we are! Leaves in the wind!” she cried out dramatically, waving her paws.

“Woodrats in the wind!”

"You did your best, Masquerade," said Smithsonian generously, striding around his workbench and patting her on the shoulder. "Did your best. No reason to blame yourself. No one in the world could make sense of all this!"

And then suddenly a broad smile brightened his face.

"Actually, all this is quite a trip! No one can accuse us of living dull lives!" He smacked a piece of roofing felt onto the workbench. "Not us!"

"Good point, Smithy!" said Karma. "So let's forget all this figuring! It's a dead end. We have pieces of the puzzle but we really haven't put them together yet. Probably never will. Let's just live and take things one day at a time! Okay? Easy does it, one day at a time. *Let it all happen. Go with the flow. Stop trying to figure it out.* Maybe it's a different kind of journey. We've never gone anywhere anyway! We've always been here! Who knows how to *travel*? We're *woodrats*!"

"It's probably a journey in our *minds*," said Smithsonian, glancing at the others with a strange glint in his eyes. "A head trip."

"A *mind* journey," said Masquerade excitedly, having *another* mood swing, looking back and forth at the other two, unconsciously translating 'head trip' and eagerly nodding her head.

"A great *adventure* and a *mind* journey at the same time!"

Suddenly Joyride burst into the crowded nest, thrilled and breathless.

"*Vasuki! Wilderness saw Vasuki!*"

Here's how it happened.

While this heated and very important conference in Smithsonian's nest was going on, Lifeboat and Wilderness had made their way down to the pond and were gathering more mugwort to make dream pillows. They were actually in the same spot where they had been when Lifeboat's seed sprouted.

"Careful, Wilder, careful. We'll want the roots too."

"The roots too?"

"Right. It makes it more powerful. There's a lot of energy in the roots."

"When are we going to make the pillows?"

"We can start tomorrow. We have all the rosemary we need."

"Tomorrow! Great! I'll sleep on one of the pillows tomorrow night!"

"You can be the guinea pig!" Lifeboat laughed. "We'll test them out on you! Watch it there! The roots!"

They stacked the stalks carefully at the foot of a tree until they had enough to fill the *New Yorker* tote sack they had found in the driveway. Then they sat back and gazed out over the pond.

Lifeboat cleared his throat. "Wilderness."

“What? Are you going to lecture me some more?”

Wilderness knew that Lifeboat liked to share what he called his “hard-won wisdom” with him, “the fruit of his rich experience,” when they worked together gathering herbs. He enjoyed the lectures, although sometimes it seemed they would never end and he had to fight to be polite and not fall asleep.

But this time the lecture was cut off before Lifeboat could finish the first sentence.

“Wilderness, I think I have never explained to you...”

“Hey! *Look!* Out over the pond! *It’s Vasuki!*”

“Never explained to you...”

“*Vasuki! It’s Vasuki!*”

“What?” Lifeboat’s head jerked up.

“Vasuki? The snake?” He jumped to his feet. “Where?” he asked, looking around wildly.

“Right there!” Wilderness shouted, pointing. “Are you blind?”

“I see nothing! Nothing!”

Suddenly Wilderness remembered how the whole crazy seed sprouting business worked. It came back to him in a flash.

"Of course you can't! *The only one who sees Vasuki is the one whose seed sprouted!* My seed sprouted! At last! My seed, my great seed!"

He danced around in circles, clapping his paws over his head, chanting, "Seed! Seed! My wonderful seed! Seed! Seed! My wonderful seed!"

"Are you sure?" asked Lifeboat, looking around with a dazed expression on his face.

"Of course I am! Just look at it! I thought I'd *never* get my turn! Oh just look at that incredible snake! Just *look* at it! So *huge!* So *beautiful!*"

"Did you forget what you just said? I *can't* see it!"

He whirled to Lifeboat, realizing that he had just explained to Lifeboat why he couldn't see the snake but was shouting at him to look anyway.

"Sorry, Sailor! But listen! It's the same thing that happened the last time we were down here, only the other way around! Your seed *then*, my seed *now!* Oh just look at that great big *snake!*"

"Stop telling me to look at it!" shrieked Lifeboat, enraged.

"And I'm getting the message!" Wilderness suddenly shouted.

"The seed message! My special important seed message! It's sprouting in my head! *We all have to gather in the upper meadow tonight at midnight!*"

"Tonight! At midnight" repeated Lifeboat, stunned and alarmed. "Midnight! In the dark! In the dead of night!"

"Oh! It's fading! My precious snake! Vasuki! Don't go!"

Wilderness's voice also got fainter and fainter, fading away. "Don't go... don't go..."

He turned to Lifeboat, tears in his eyes.

"Gone. Vasuki's gone, Sailor. Gone."

He fell on Lifeboat and buried his muzzle in Lifeboat's throat fur, blubbing.

"There, there," Lifeboat said, hugging him the best he could with his short woodrat paws. "There, there, Wilder."

"I'll never see him again!" Wilderness wailed. "Never, never, never, never, never!"

"But the important thing is the *message*, Wilder! You have an important *message* to deliver!"

Wilderness quickly looked up, recovering.

"Right! That's right, Sailor! The message! The important message! Let's go!"

They raced up the road. They saw Joyride up ahead of them.

"I saw Vasuki!" Wilderness shouted. "My seed sprouted! My seed sprouted! I saw Vasuki! I have a message! Tell Smithsonian! Tell everyone! *I saw Vasuki!*"

Joyride took off like a shot for Smithsonian's nest.

They met that night about eleven o'clock on the driveway by the upper gate to the vineyard. There was a full moon.

Masquerade turned to Wilderness.

"We're supposed to assemble in the upper meadow at midnight, right? Do I have that straight?"

"Right! Upper meadow! Midnight! That was the message I got in my head!"

Smithsonian asked, "No mention about anyone we're supposed to *rescue*, or anything like that?"

"No. No rescue mention. Just meet there at midnight. I saw Vasuki!"

"You already *told* them you saw Vasuki!" said Lifeboat angrily. "No need to repeat it a thousand times!"

"Well," said Joyride, smiling at the others, "let's just go out there and sit and wait! Lie on our backs and look up at the stars! And the moon!"

Joyride, you remember, often went off into the woods by herself and fell into a kind of delicious trance, sometimes with tears in her eyes, feeling how wonderful it was to simply be alive. She was what is called a "nature mystic." Lately, after Karma's interview at a convenient time with Sidd and all the talk about *glimpses*, she had been wondering if maybe *she* had had glimpses,

out there in the woods. But she wasn't sure, and, as a matter of fact, didn't care!

Karma smiled back. "Sounds right, Joy-Joy! Lead the way!"

They trooped out in the bright moonlight to a soft level spot and did just what Joyride had suggested. Because there was a full moon the stars weren't quite as bright as they are on a moonless night, so they found themselves gazing mainly at the moon. Everything was silent. For a long time no one said a word.

Finally Wilderness murmured softly, "What is the moon? What is it?"

No one answered. But they all were thinking about the question.

The minutes went by.

Lifeboat whispered, "What time is it?"

"Almost midnight," Smithsonian answered quietly, checking the watch he had found by the bathroom sink.

They knew something was supposed to happen at midnight. One by one they sat up, alert. Lifeboat nervously rubbed the magic bracelet on his left paw. Karma put her paw on Joyride's shoulder. Masquerade put her paw on Smithsonian's shoulder. Wilderness huddled against Lifeboat.

Nothing. Silence.

"Oh look," whispered Masquerade. "Look."

A black shadow was beginning to move out over the edge of the moon.

"It's an eclipse!" cried Smithsonian in an excited voice as the shadow advanced. "A total eclipse of the moon!"

They stared at the shadow moving across the bright face of the moon. The meadow was getting darker. A slight breeze sprang up.

"You know what?" asked Karma very quietly.

"Yes, I do," answered Joyride. "Let me say it."

"Go ahead."

"This is an Invitation."

"Switch the bracelet, Lifeboat," said Smithsonian.

"I just did."

And then it happened.

The stars began to move. They were very bright now because the circle of the moon was completely covered by the eclipse. And they began to move.

Brilliant rays of starlight shot out joining stars, curving and looping and creating moving shapes. A huge shining goat formed and leaped across the whole sky, tossing his horns, disappearing over the King Range. *Capricorn!*

A man wearing robes made of gleaming starlight, with one arm raised and the other pouring a shining stream of stars out of a

water pitcher, suddenly filled the heavens, turned away, looked back once over his shoulder, and vanished. *Aquarius!*

A great silver horse reared on its hind legs, pawing the sky, and then galloped across from one side of the night to the other and leaped into darkness. *Pegasus!*

Do you know what was happening? Do you know? *They were seeing the constellations come alive!* The constellations are the star pictures in the sky that we can never make out no matter how hard we try because the picture stars are all mixed up with the other stars and there really aren't enough stars in the pictures anyway!

But the woodrats were *seeing* those shapes now because of the magic in the bracelet! Seeing them *move!* *The eclipse was an Invitation!* What a terrific thing! It must have been the most beautiful thing anyone could ever see. Certainly the most far out!

And none of them said a word. They were *speechless with wonder*, as *we* would have been. They stared at the breathtaking spectacle unfolding in the radiance of the starry sky, silently, enraptured.

A man kneeling on one knee and aiming a bow and arrow appeared. He drew back the bowstring! He fired! A star arrow shot slowly in an arc across the whole sky! He rose to his feet, smiled down at the world, and vanished. *Sagittarius! The Archer!*

A giant brilliant bull with huge shoulders appeared, pawing the invisible ground, followed by a giant lion, his soundless roar filling the heavens! *Taurus! Leo!* Fading into *Gemini, The Twins*, facing each other like silver statues!

And suddenly, in a final burst of dazzling radiance, in a blaze of light filling the whole sky, *Orion, The Great Hunter!* His shining sword hanging on his belt, his club in his hand, he strode across the sky, waved down to the earth, froze still for a second... another second... and faded slowly away, faded slowly away, as the bright moon came out again, shining in a sea of silent stars.

Wilderness was the first to speak. "Wow!"

In the moonlight they could see each other again. They all had tears in their eyes. *Tears in their eyes because what they had seen was so beautiful!* Who wouldn't have tears in their eyes after seeing something like that? But nobody knew what to say. These are woodrats. They didn't know about the constellations, and their names. All they knew was what they saw, and what they felt.

Joyride turned to Lifeboat.

"Check the bracelet, Sailor."

"I just did. The Eye of the Heart is open."

They fell asleep, staring up at the moon.

Masquerade and Smithsonian woke up first and immediately rolled over to each other.

Can you believe it? Yesterday's discussion was still in their minds! That seems more than a little cold-blooded and insensitive, after the incredible exquisite spectacle they had just a few hours ago been privileged to witness, a spectacle we can be sure no one in

the world had ever seen before and no one would ever see again -- unless the rabbits come by.

You would have expected them to be dreamy, their minds filled with memories of the constellations! But both of them, as we know by now, especially Masquerade, could be very hardheaded and businesslike. They like to figure things out. And Smithsonian, you remember from Part One, was not *demonstrative*, didn't like to show his *feelings*. *Soft hearts, hard heads*.

Masquerade, as usual, got to the point immediately. "The Eye on the bracelet was open. Lifeboat checked."

"I knew it would be."

"So did I."

"Glimpse time."

"Right. And I think I have it all figured out, Smithy!"

"Like yesterday?"

"Okay," Masquerade answered impatiently. "*Partly* figured out."

"You go first."

"I see three Eye of the Heart glimpses so far. Down by Fall Guy's nest, after the Big Fight, Karma, you and me, and I bet the others, felt something in our hearts when you were honest. The only one who was honest. I think the glimpse then must have had something to do with *truth*. Right? That's what you did, you told the *truth*."

"Right, The Truth."

"Then when we saw the brother and sister ghosts who loved each other, out on the deck, the dancing lady and the man who was painting her, the glimpse was about *love*. Right?"

Suddenly she laughed and poked him in the side.

"Like you and me love each other, Smithy!"

"Most of the time! But finish what you were saying. Then it'll be my turn."

"Okay. After the brother and sister ghosts disappeared, Karma said, 'The Eye of the Heart has something to do with love.' Remember? Lifeboat guessed that he painted pictures of her a long time ago when they loved each other somewhere far away, and you saw that The Eye on the bracelet was open when Karma told you to check. See it?"

"Yes I do!"

"*Truth and Love, Smitheroonie! Truth and Love!*"

"Right! You know? It's amazing that we can figure this stuff out when we're only woodrats!"

"Amazing's the word! Amazing woodrats we are!"

"Let me finish. The Eye of the Heart opened last night. Chance for a glimpse! I think it had something to do with seeing something *beautiful*. With *Beauty*. You agree? Truth, Love and now Beauty?"

But before she could answer, Wilderness woke up, rubbed his eyes and looked around.

“What’s going on?” he grunted. “Who gets the bracelet next?”

Lifeboat was also awake.

“*You* do, you little rat!”

And he plopped the bracelet into Wilderness’s paw.

Chapter Nine

Sammy the Squirrel, Parker the Parrot and Big Momma

We're going to meet somebody new in this chapter: a young squirrel named Sammy. Some authors would call him "Sammy the Squirrel," and some would call him "Sammy Squirrel." I would choose, if I had to, and I don't, "Sammy Squirrel," but I'll just call him Sammy, which is what everyone else calls him anyway – once you *know* he's a squirrel, of course.

I haven't mentioned him yet because he hasn't played any part in the adventure until now. But all the woodrats know him, and are very fond of him, including Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper. Wilderness and Joyride know him best because they spend more time than the others snooping and wandering around in the woods. Sammy spends most of his time scampering around in the high branches, in what is called the "canopy," chattering and "scolding," which is one of the special words used to describe the sound squirrels make. Sidd knows him too, but they have nothing in common, so they always ignore each other. When grownups have nothing in common they smile and say polite things, called "pleasantries."

Early October was now starting to get a little cloudy, threatening rain, maybe even some thunder. A fog bank was

heading in over the ridge. Wilderness was down on the path below the firewood pile, foraging and humming a Beatles tune to himself. I think it was "You've Got To Hide Your Love Away."

He heard a voice calling down to him.

"Hey, Wilderness! You! Woodrat! What you up to down there? Hey!"

Wilderness looked up, searching around in the branches till he spied Sammy peeking at him.

"Hi, Sammy!" he called, smiling. "What are *you* up to?"

"Nuts! What but nuts? Hiding nuts! So long now! You rat!"

"Wait! Wait! Why don't we *talk* a little, for once?" he said quickly, hoping to get a conversation going. "Did you see the total eclipse of the moon a few nights ago? It was really something to see!"

But there was no answer. He sighed and continued gnawing tasty roots and humming to himself. A few minutes went by.

"What's a total eclipse of the moon?"

He saw Sammy's bright little eyes twinkling over at him. He had climbed down the trunk of a tree and was almost to the ground.

"Well, I certainly can't explain how it happens. Probably only Smithsonian can, maybe Lifeboat. But the moon gets slowly covered up until you can't see it anymore, and then it comes out again!"

He decided not to mention the moving star shapes because then he would have to go into all the details about the rabbits and the seeds and the magic bracelet, which would take forever. He suspected, and he was right, that Sammy could only talk about anything in short spurts, something your teachers groan about all the time and call *Attention Deficit Disorder*. All he could remember anyway was the lion.

“Oh! So long! You rat!”

And he darted like a flash up the tree trunk, keeping himself on the other side where Wilderness couldn’t see him.

Wilderness smiled and continued foraging and humming. He looked up to see Karma and Masquerade hopping around the curve by the big gray stump of old firewood. Masquerade scrambled down the road.

“Who were you just talking to, Wilder? We heard you talking.”

“Sammy. He just ran off up there.”

“Little Sammy!” said Masquerade. “He’s so sweet!”

She looked up into the canopy, trying to spy Sammy.

“Up there, Sammy? It’s me, Masquerade! Show your cute little face!”

“Sweet?” said Karma. “Cute? Sounds a little funny coming from old hardheaded you!”

“Just because I like to take care of business doesn’t mean I have no sentiments! No *warmth*! I just don’t dump my feelings all over the ground.”

She cast a significant glance at Karma.

“Like *some* people I know!”

We learned about a “significant glance” in Part One. Remember? It’s when you send a message to someone *without words*, just with *eyes*. Grownups are casting significant glances all day long, which means, of course, that grownups are *receiving* significant glances all day long, little messages which range from heart-warming to really savage -- and everything in between.

Karma laughed. “Sammy!” she called. “Oh, where *are* you?”

“He seemed interested, for maybe one second, in the eclipse. Tremendously short attention span! Like zero! I wonder if all squirrels are like that?”

“The eclipse,” said Karma, with a faraway look, as if she were trying to picture it in her mind.

They caught each other’s eyes for a moment. They had never really spoken very much about the moving star shapes. They all felt, without actually saying it, and without really understanding *why* they felt that way, that the star thing was such a special gift or miracle that it shouldn’t be followed by words, just left alone, just remembered in silence.

“Hey! Woodrats! Hey hey hey hey hey! Hey doodle!”

“Sammy!” shouted Masquerade, laughing. “You’re back again!”

"Hi, Sammy!" called Karma. "Come on down and join the party!"

"What's a party? What's a party?"

"Do you have any *plans*, Sammy?" called Wilderness, trying again to get Sammy into a conversation. "Busy little dude like you? An *agenda*?"

Wilderness laughed. He knew Sammy wouldn't have any idea what an agenda was. He was what is called *joshing* with him, a neat American slang word meaning *friendly joking*.

Sammy, actually, never had the faintest idea what they were talking about .altogether, the woodrats. All he knew was Wilderness's name and what they ate.

But he didn't scamper off. He did seem to have something on his mind, something he wanted to say.

"Guess what! *Guess what! Guess!* Rats guess!"

"We give up, Sammy! We give up! Tell us!" the three of them shouted.

"Going to the big meadow! Going to the big meadow!"

And he ran furiously back and forth on his branch, shouting over and over again, "Going to the big meadow!"

'When?' Masquerade laughed. "When are you going to the big meadow, Sammy?"

But he was gone.

They laughed, plodding back up to the orchard.

“Love that little guy!” said Karma.

Festive Bike Bash in S.F! The nervous system is made up of the brain, spinal chord and all the nerves of the body! He was a hardworking farm boy! Helps prevent heart attacks! Wildlife as Canon sees it! Mongols defeat Germans, invade Poland and Hungary! Wedding and Baby! New low prices! \$425! \$1575! \$3300! You might just become a car potato! Look Who’s Back!

Are you listening? Are you listening?

“Oh no! It’s the Messengers!” cried Masquerade.

Top Ten Winter Weekends! Carhartt Pants and Jackets 40% Off! Sock It To Me! William Rufus killed accidentally by Sir Walter Tyrel! Revival of the Hippest! Closeout on Boots! Magma is forced up under the crust! Eva’s Putting on the Ritz! Payments as low as \$69 per month! City’s Trash Bins Are becoming A Blight! Virgin Mackinaw Wool! Artist’s Vision of a Mad World! Duramax Diesel \$27,995! Chicken potpie and beef-bacon chili! Alfred Nobel invents dynamite!

“Information!” screamed Masquerade, holding her paws over her ears. “I can’t stand it!”

The three of them broke into a run, holding their paws over their ears.

All that happened on a Monday. Two days later, on Wednesday, Smithsonian was working very hard in his nest-shop.

He was searching through his stash of batteries trying to find two size C's that would work in the empty flashlight he had discovered in the wine cellar. He had many size D's and AA's, but only one size C. He felt frustrated: one more size C and he could have light in his nest! He looked up, tapping the flashlight on his workbench and thinking about where he might get a size C battery, peering with narrowed eyes out through an opening in the wall of his nest.

He saw Vasuki.

"Oh," he said to himself. "That snake."

And that was all! No huge excited reaction, no running out of his nest screaming, "Vasuki! Vasuki! I see Vasuki!" Nothing.

Absentmindedly, he watched it getting bigger and bigger, uncoiling toward the sky, thinking only about where he could get the battery.

"In the garbage bin?" he asked himself.

Then he narrowed his eyes, thinking hard.

"But maybe they *save* batteries, for toxic reasons! I wonder where?"

You are certainly wondering why he didn't go crazy with excitement, like the others had. As always, it's a matter of character.

Smithsonian, like Masquerade, was pretty hardheaded, not easily bowled over by things. He didn't *like* being bowled over, like many people, including me. He didn't like *suddenly reacting to things* all the time. This was the fourth time Vasuki had appeared, and, for Smithsonian, it was *old hat*, a common figure of speech basically meaning the same thing as *boring*.

So he just watched Vasuki for awhile and then went back to his battery stash, thinking maybe he had missed a size C.

Masquerade strolled into his nest.

"What's up, Smitheroonie? What are you working on now?"

"Looking for a battery," he mumbled, not looking up.

Masquerade wandered around the shop, occasionally picking things up, puzzling over all the weird stuff.

"Vasuki's out there," said Smithsonian, still rummaging through the rusty batteries. "You can't see him but I can. I guess my seed sprouted."

"WHAT?"

"Seed sprouted. I can see Vasuki out there."

He looked up, peering through the opening.

"There he is – but you won't see him."

"Smithsonian! I can't *believe* this! Did you get a *message*?"

Smithsonian turned to Masquerade, examining a battery and frowning.

"Now that you mention it, Yes."

"*Well what was it?*"

"A hawk is going to kill someone named Sammy in about half an hour."

Masquerade stood there for a second, stunned, and then shot out onto the driveway, shouting.

"Karma! Wilderness! Lifeboat! Joyride! Emergency! *Smithsonian* saw *Vasuki*! Come quick! Emergency! We have to save Sammy! It's a *Situation*!"

Within a minute or two the other four came bounding up the driveway.

"I have the bracelet! I'm going to save him!" cried Wilderness. "I'm coming to the rescue! Don't worry, Sammy, I'm coming to the rescue!"

Sammy, of course, was nowhere in sight, but Wilderness was so thrilled and proud to be making the rescue that he didn't care and just shouted out that he was on the way.

And now this is going to show you how *mature* Masquerade is.

Did she point her finger at Smithsonian when the others arrived, saying, "Smithsonian didn't pay any attention when he saw Vasuki"?

Did she shout, in a very accusing tone of voice, "If Sammy dies it'll be all his fault"?

NO! She did not! Instead, she said, "Smithsonian called me right away! Let's get moving!"

There's something for you to think about. And Smithsonian thought about it too. You can be sure he thanked Masquerade later, when no one else was around. He was terribly embarrassed, he felt like a deer pellet, he knew he had made a big mistake thinking only about a size C battery instead of Sammy, he knew it was no excuse that he didn't even know who Sammy was, and he apologized and thanked her.

"I owe you one," he said later, when they were alone.

They ran up the driveway, Smithsonian in the lead.

And sure enough, there was a hawk circling over the upper meadow!

"There's the hawk!" Masquerade shouted. "The message said he was going to kill Sammy!"

They all put one paw over their eyes, straining to locate little Sammy in the big meadow.

"Where is he?" shouted Karma. "He's so tiny!"

"I can't see him!" shouted Joyride.

"Watch the hawk!" shouted Smithsonian. "The hawk can see him!"

"The hawk! He has eyes like a hawk!" shouted Wilderness, completely unaware that what he said was actually a very inappropriate bad joke, considering the circumstances.

They watched the hawk circling around, suddenly wheeling in midair and dropping like a lightning bolt.

"Now!" They all shouted.

"Switch the bracelet!"

"Roger!" shouted Wilderness, quickly switching the bracelet from his left paw to his right.

"Take that!"

And then, before their stunned faces, the hawk hit Sammy like a bomb! Crunched him in his mighty talons, crushing every rib in his little body, and soared up to a branch high on a fir tree, drops of blood squirting through the air!

They stared up in stupefied disbelief.

"It didn't work!" wailed Wilderness, bursting into tears. "It didn't work!"

"Check the bracelet!" screamed Karma. "See if the Eye is open!"

"It didn't work! My turn and it didn't work!"

"See if the Eye is open! Look!"

Wilderness looked at the bracelet.

"It's open!" he screamed through his tears.

"So what? Sammy's dead!"

Karma spoke to the others calmly and firmly, in a reassuring tone of voice.

"The Eye of the Heart is open. That means this is a glimpse. It's a glimpse."

"Karma's right," said Joyride, weeping. "It's a glimpse."

Lifeboat spoke in a solemn voice, nodding his head.

"A glimpse of death."

They stared up at the hawk. He was holding Sammy and the branch with his powerful talons, tearing through the fur and ripping off pieces with his powerful curved beak and swallowing them. In a few minutes he sailed off through the air on his mighty wings, in beautiful effortless flight. High over the meadow he dropped the body and sailed off out of sight.

And briefly, just for your information, the Eye had opened even before they arrived at the meadow, when Masquerade said that Smithsonian had called her right away. Because that moment was *also* a glimpse!

After a long silence, Smithsonian asked, "Who was he?"

"Just a silly little friend," answered Joyride, tears in her eyes. "A squirrel who lived down by the orchard."

"I knew him best," said Wilderness, wiping away his tears. "He used to chatter to me."

Masquerade, also wiping away tears, added, "Just the day before yesterday he told us he was going to go up to the big meadow."

Smithsonian turned to the others.

"We have to find his body and bury it."

He turned to Lifeboat.

"Isn't that right, Sailor?"

Lifeboat nodded glumly. "Bury it."

They had seen where Sammy landed and trudged down. Joyride found it. They stood around it in a circle for a minute, and then began to dig. When the hole was deep enough they carefully placed him in it and covered it over.

"Say something, Lifeboat," said Karma. "We're supposed to say something."

Lifeboat was silent for a few moments, thinking with his eyes closed. Then he looked down at the little mound of dirt.

"We didn't really know you very well, Sammy, except for Wilderness who used to chatter with you, because you were always high up there jumping around in the trees, but we will always remember you and miss you. And wish we could have gotten to know you better."

He paused and looked at the others.

"Goodbye, Sammy."

One by one they said, "Goodbye, Sammy."

Karma looked up and said one word, her face expressionless.

"Death."

Smithsonian nodded his head, with his faint smile.

“Death.”

And what happened next you just won’t believe.

Thumping down the driveway and heading off across the meadow came a huge purple elephant with gold knobs at the end of his tusks, about ten times as big as a regular elephant. On his back was a tower like the lifeguard towers you see at the beach. Sitting on the top of the tower was a parrot with a red head, yellow cheek feathers, green wings, blue front feathers, black wingtips and a green and blue tail.

“Make way for Big Momma!” shrieked the parrot. “Here comes Big Momma! *Here comes Big Momma!*”

Lifeboat immediately turned his back, closed his eyes and folded his paws in front of him.

“Too much! This is *too much!*”

The others just stared in stunned amazement, except for Joyride, who screamed, laughing in borderline hysteria – which means real *wild* and *crazy* laughing – “*Who are you? Who are you up there?*”

The parrot looked down and screeched fiercely, flapping its wings furiously.

“Who are you up there? Who are you up there? *Who are you up there?*”

“Yes! *Who are you up there?*” shouted Wilderness.

“Yes? Who are you up there? I’m a Red-Capped Parrot! You blind? A *Red-Capped Parrot!* What did you think? A Thick-Billed Parrot? A Saint Vincent Parrot? An Imperial Parrot? A boring *Grey Parrot?* A Crimson-Winged Parrot? A Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo? A *Kookaburra?* A *Sparrow?* A *Hairy-Nosed Wombat?* Wake up! *And make way for Big Momma!*”

“What’s your name? *Redcap?*” shouted Joyride.

“What’s your name? What’s your name? My name? My name is *Parker!* *Parker!* Parker Parrot! Parker the Red-Capped Parrot! *Make way for Big Momma! Big Momma bats last!*”

Lifeboat had been listening to all this with his back turned, refusing to take part. But suddenly he just became infuriated and whirled around.

“Okay, Parker! Okay! And just who is Big Momma?”

“Okay, Parker? Okay, Parker? Who is Big Momma? You blind like the other one? You can’t see this *elephant?* This *elephant* is Big Momma! Blind rat!”

“But who *is* Big Momma?” shouted Masquerade. “We want to know who *is* Big Momma?”

“SHE’S BIG MOMMA!” shrieked Parker. “BIG MOMMA!”

“Whose Big Momma? Whose Big Momma is *she?*” shrieked Karma, wild and delighted.

“Whose Big Momma? Whose Big Momma? EVERYBODY’S BIG MOMMA! *Your* Big Momma! *My* Big Momma! EVERYBODY’S BIG MOMMA! You get it? You get it, you rats? MOTHER!”

"Check the bracelet," Karma whispered to Wilderness. "Is the Eye open?"

"Yes. *Wide* open."

"MOTHER!" Parker screeched. "MOTHER! Do I have to draw a map? *Everything alive comes from Big Momma!* She's the *Mother!*"

"Even the trees and the grass? The flowers?" asked Joyride thoughtfully.

"You deaf?" screeched Parker. "What did I say? What did I say? What did I say?"

"Stop saying the same things over and over again!" shouted Wilderness.

Parker ignored him. "Even the trees and the grass? The flowers? What did I say? What did I say? *Everything alive comes from Big Momma!* What's hard about that? What part didn't you get? And who am I? Who am I? Parker the Red-Capped Parrot! Right? I'm a *parrot!* I *parrot* things!"

"Why are you here?" asked Karma, very politely, hoping maybe to calm Parker down a bit.

"And maybe you can stop screeching? I know parrots don't have to screech all the time. They can even murmur!"

And Parker did calm down.

"Right. Right. Right. Gotta calm down. Calm down, Parker! I'm easily wound up, it's my weakness. Bad, very bad, for my

blood pressure. My B.P. I got all riled up because we're making an emergency delivery. I hear a squirrel just kicked the bucket here? Cashed in his chips?"

"Right! He was our friend! A hawk got him. The bracelet didn't work. We buried him," Wilderness shouted.

He paused for a moment to wipe away a tear.

"His name was Sammy."

Parker fluttered down from his lifeguard tower and tapped Big Momma on her head with his beak.

"This is the place. Fire away!"

And then, to the woodrats' amazement and delight, Big Momma took in a huge elephant breath through her mouth, raised her trunk, blew hard, and about a dozen little squirrels came blowing out, tumbling through the air into the woods!

The woodrats watched them sail over their heads.

"Mother of all that's alive," thought Karma. "*The Great Mother.*"

Smithsonian had an idea.

"Parker! I'm curious! Can you tell us some of the names of Big Momma's children? Just a few!"

Parker couldn't smile because his beak didn't bend. But if he could have smiled, he would have. He was very proud of Big Momma, and loved her very much.

"Just a few! Just a few! *Chuckawalla. Pronghorn. Trapdoor Spider. Starfish. Sidewinder. Lodgepole Pine. Wolf. White Spruce. Water Lily. Moose. Box Turtle. Yucca Moth. Grizzly Bear. Polar Bear. Sea Slug. Monarch Butterfly. Rose. Springbuck. Giraffe. Snail. Red Oat Grass. Zebra. Leopard. Hyena. Termite. Sable. Albatross. Honeybee. Giant Sloth. Sedge. Fern. Rhinoceros. Chameleon. Praying Mantis. Pike. Trout. Purple Heron...* Should I go on? There's no end, you know. I could go on forever. I barely began! The flowers alone would take forever! And the bugs! Longer than forever! And the fish! The birds! The trees! Life goes on forever. *Life. Big Momma is Life. All Life comes from Big Momma.*"

The woodrats were enthralled. Their world was very small, you know. They suspected there was a great *big* world out there, but they had no idea it had so much in it!

"Enough! Enough! Too much! Overwhelming," cried Smithsonian.

"Enough! Enough! Overwhelming, he says! Overwhelming!"

Parker flapped his bright wings furiously, definitely getting all riled up again, his blood pressure probably in the red.

"Let me go on! Let me go on! I'll stop at a thousand! Or a million! *Scorpions! Gorillas! Cactus! Moths!* I love it! *Mandarin Ducks!* I love Life! *Skunks! Horses! Robber Crabs!* I love Big Momma!"

"We do too!" shouted Wilderness.

"We love Big Momma too!"

Big Momma was starting to move. And speak, in a very deep voice, like the deepest note on a tuba, which plays the deepest

notes in an orchestra. Every time her huge right hoof slammed into the ground, she said, “Big” and “Momma,” in a voice like thunder.

BIG! 2-3-4, MOMMA! 2-3-4, BIG! 2-3-4, MOMMA! 2-3-4, BIG! 2-3-4, MOMMA! 2-3-4.

Parker was going wild again.

“Here comes Big Momma! Oh it’s Big Momma! Big Momma bats last! Make way for Big Momma! Big Momma on the move! Make way for Big Momma!”

As Big Momma disappeared behind the hill, her huge deep voice fading away, Parker twisted his yellow neck and took one wild last look back at the woodrats, screeching at the top of his lungs.

“Rats! Rats! Rats! Remember me! Parker! The parrot who rides Big Momma! Parker! The Red-Capped Parrot! Rides Big Momma! Big Momma, your Mother and everybody’s Mother! You owe Big Momma a life, you know! You owe Big Momma a life!”

And then it was quiet again.

They stood around Sammy’s grave. They felt empty and full, happy and sorrowful, at the same time. Empty and sorrowful because Sammy was gone and they missed him, but also happy and full because they had seen Big Momma and learned from Parker about how much life there was, what a huge enormous gigantic spectacular world of life there was out there! And anyway, there were new squirrels now!

Karma smiled, murmuring, “Death and Life. Life and Death... It’s just great. Just too great.”

Masquerade smiled back at her.

“One huge *glimpse*! One huge *glimpse* we had today, Karma! One Big *Mother*!”

Lifeboat stared gravely at the grave and *intoned*, a rarely used word these days, meaning he said it in a very slow, dignified and solemn way, holding his voice only on one note.

“Life and Death. Yes. And Birth. Don’t forget Birth.”

And he was thinking to himself, “I wonder if any of them understood what Parker meant in those last words.”

“Okay,” said Smithsonian, turning to leave.

“Let’s move on. Anyone can come back to the grave whenever they want. Let’s go.”

They walked back down the driveway. Smithsonian put his paw around Masquerade. Lifeboat put his paw around Wilderness. Karma put her paw around Joyride.

Are you wondering how they did that? How two woodrats walk with their paws around each other? They do *not* walk upright on their hind paws. The one on the *left* puts his or her *right* paw around the other one, and the one on the *right* puts his or her *left* paw around the other one. That leaves two paws still on the ground in the front and four paws on the ground in the back. Quite enough for good walking!

Smithsonian turned to the others.

“Karma and Masquerade haven’t had the bracelet yet.”

He looked at the two of them with a sly twinkle in his eye.

“Who wants it?” he asked.

He was thinking of the Invisible Trouble Maker, of course. It was a trick question. That’s why he had a sly twinkle in his eye.

“I hope it works!” said Wilderness. “It didn’t work with me!”

“Oh, yes it did!” said Karma. “It worked great!”

They stopped in front of Smithsonian’s nest, looking back at the meadow where Sammy was buried and at the top of the hill where they last saw Parker and Big Momma.

“You take it,” Karma said to Masquerade.

Wilderness handed the bracelet to Masquerade.

It was starting to rain. Lifeboat recalled a line from a sad poem he had read, written by someone who had to leave his home. He whispered it to himself.

“It rains across the country I remember.”

“What’s that?” Karma asked him.

“Oh, nothing. Just a line from a poem that came back to me.”

“I have a question,” said Wilderness.

“Ask away!” said Joyride.

"What's 'birth'? Lifeboat said 'birth'. I don't know that word."

Joyride laughed, and decided to imitate Parker.

"What's 'birth'? What's 'birth'? What's 'birth'? Don't know that word! Don't know that word! Where have you been today? Tell him, Smithy!"

Smithsonian laughed out loud.

"It's part of Life and Death, Wilder! Birth comes first, when Life begins, but you could just as well say it's really a big circle with *no* beginning. Birth, Life, Death, Birth, Life, Death, around and around in a big circle that never ends!"

"A big circle," repeated Wilderness thoughtfully. "With no beginning and no end."

"That's Big Momma, Wilder!" shouted Joyride.

"Big Momma!"

Chapter Ten

The Woodrats Fly on Pixie Wings!

Masquerade turned to Karma.

“Why don’t we go visit Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper!”

A light rain was falling, and Masquerade, Karma and Wilderness were huddled in their nest by the driveway, feeling a little bored and itchy. Wilderness was sound asleep, dreaming about the lion he had seen in the stars. In his thrilling dream lions were bursting out of Big Momma’s trunk, dozens of them, like the squirrels she had blown out on the day Sammy was killed by the hawk and Parker had screeched to them about Big Momma’s children and how much he loved life.

Masquerade continued, “We haven’t been down there since the Big Fight when we all behaved so terribly and Smithsonian told the truth. Let’s go back down and see those rats again! A surprise visit!”

“It’s raining.”

“So what? It’s just a *little* rain! Maybe it’ll clear up! And remember? Peter Pixie Pepper is a very *interesting* woodrat! Great

markings! And something a bit mysterious about him. Let's see if they really became best friends and aren't lonely anymore. And we can also get a look at some of Peter's stuff!"

Suddenly Karma jumped to her feet.

"Okay! You convinced me! It's boring in this stuffy old nest!"

They slipped out into the light rain, being careful not to wake up Wilderness, and headed down the driveway. When they got near the house they quickly darted to the left. But Helix couldn't have seen them anyway because he was lounging in the woodshed, staring into space with his one good eye, his dog mind as empty as the five-gallon bucket next to him, and his view up the driveway was blocked by the truck.

The light rain wasn't really bothering them because of their thick woodrat fur, and they chatted noisily about this and that as they passed through the orchard.

"Did you know I had a talk with Fall Guy when we were down there?" asked Karma.

"No. What about?"

"Well, I tried to talk about the Path we're on, about Sidd, the Eye of the Heart. When I asked him if he had had any glimpses, he said, 'That's a dangerous question' and turned away. He was very tight-lipped and cagey."

"Sounds like he just didn't feel like talking that day! Although..."

And here Masquerade's true *character*, the character we know so well, suddenly popped out and she immediately recalled that nothing is what it seems to be, that everyone is always *pretending* and *playing roles*, as Shakespeare pointed out, how important it is to look at the world *through narrowed eyes*.

"Although he may have secret reasons we don't know about! But what do I mean, '*may*'? Of course he does! Living down there alone all that time! He probably became a little *weird*! A *weirdo*!"

"He told me he that after his terrible fall he wanted to *think*, but he didn't know what to think *about*, and Sidd told him what to think about. But I could tell he really didn't want me to know what Sidd told him."

"Well, you know what? Let's forget about all that! Let's start fresh today! A level playing field!"

"Right on!" answered Karma. "We don't want to pin labels on anyone!"

Do you know what that means, "pin labels" on someone? It means purposely see others the way you *want* to see them, for private shameful and disgusting reasons, and never try to see them as they really *are*, never give them a *chance*. It's very popular with grownups, they do it all the time, *even though they know it's a bad thing to do*! I know that's hard to believe, and *sad* to believe, but it's true. The *good* news is that very often they feel *guilty* about pinning labels on others, because they know it's wrong, but they carefully keep that sickening guilty feeling a secret because they are ashamed, and just let it gnaw away at them when they are trying to fall asleep. Many grownups, as a matter of fact, feel guilty *all* the time!

“Exactly!” answered Masquerade, pleased that they were going to make a fresh start and forget about Fall Guy’s strange ways that terrible day of the Big Fight.

They continued down the road. When they passed the pond they glanced over and noticed that Sidd was watching them with his red eyes as they passed by, his head on its long neck slowly turning to keep track of them. They waved and quickly walked on. They didn’t feel like getting involved with a turtle as strange as Sidd.

“Now there’s someone you *should* pin a label on!” said Masquerade.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess that turtle is so crazy it just seems the safe thing to do. There’s no way to know what he’s *really* like! So pin a label!”

“I can’t put my finger on it, but I don’t think what you’re saying makes any sense.”

They tramped on down the road, mulling over their difference of opinion about pinning a label on Sidd. It was no longer raining, but the sky was gray.

“Probably rain again,” said Masquerade. “That kind of day.”

“Right.”

As they approached Fall Guy’s nest or cell, they heard Fall Guy’s voice.

“Forget about that coke bottle. Just take what you need, Pixie Pepper, and leave everything else. We’re never returning.”

“Right! We’re *serious*! We won’t look back!”

“Right! No turning back!”

“Right! Not us!”

Karma and Masquerade hurried forward. They could see that Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper were packing things into “Bridges To Literacy” tote bags. They could tell from what they had heard and what they were seeing that Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper were leaving! And weren’t coming back!

“What’s happening here?” asked Karma. “Where are you rats going?”

Fall Guy and Peter looked up, startled.

Fall Guy stared at them, appearing annoyed at the interruption and making no effort to conceal his annoyance out of politeness.

“Let me do the talking, Peter.”

He turned to Masquerade and Karma.

“We’re going off, leaving for some faraway place. Someplace remote, distant, off the beaten path.”

“Way off!” shouted Peter.

“We’re going to be hermits. Hermit monks.”

“Hermit monks!” shouted Peter.

“But you’re already far away, down here in the woods,” said Karma, “down here in the woods below the pond where hardly anyone ever goes.”

“Already far away?” answered Fall Guy. “Look at how you two just barged in on us!”

“Barged in!” repeated Peter indignantly. “Just barged in on us! The two of you!”

He turned to Fall Guy. “Let’s go! Let’s go right now! How much can we take of this barging in!”

“We’re going to find a cave somewhere, or maybe we’ll build a little hut – not a *nest*, a *hut* – and we’ll write poetry that no one will ever read...”

“No one!” interrupted Peter, shouting. “No one will ever read the poetry we write!”

Fall Guy continued. “And we’ll never speak to each other either. Just live in silence.”

Peter shouted, “Never! Not a word!”

He turned to Fall Guy with a questioning look. “Never?”

Fall Guy ignored the question.

“That’s our plan. You heard it. We mean business. And you caught us just when we’re about to take off. Goodbye!”

"Wait a minute," pleaded Masquerade. "What's the big hurry? Where's the fire? We remembered when Peter was so lonely he put you to sleep with pixie pepper so he could pretend to be you, even though you were lonely too, how happy you were when the two of you found each other and could be best friends after you were both so lonely, and we decided to come down and reminisce and just chew the fat!"

"Chew the fat? *Chew the fat?*" shouted Peter Pixie Pepper, suddenly furious. "Hermit monks don't chew fat! Didn't you hear what Fall Guy just said? *Hermit monks live in silence!*"

He took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself down.

"Give me a break!"

Karma thought of something and suddenly smiled.

"Fall Guy! You've been talking to Sidd, haven't you? This smells like Sidd!"

"Think you're so smart, Karma? You know how Sidd smells?" snarled Peter Pixie Pepper, poking his paw at her. "Well you're not the only one! We know how Sidd smells too!"

"Smells like Sidd, Karma? Smells like Sidd?" answered Fall Guy very calmly.

"Yes. You're right. I have been talking to Sidd. Got a problem with that? I often talk with Sidd. He's my favorite turtle, as a matter of fact. My favorite turtle in the whole wide world. But all of this is none of your business, none of your affair. As I said a moment ago, Goodbye!"

They picked up their “Bridges to Literacy” tote bags and turned to leave.

“Goodbye, Karma and Masquerade,” said Peter Pixie Pepper, a sudden note of sadness in his voice.

“Hermit monks just don’t chew the fat! It’s the rule,” he added apologetically. “Even when they want to!”

“Especially when they want to, Peter,” corrected Fall Guy.

And then it happened once again!

“*Vasuki!*” Karma suddenly screamed, staring wildly up into the tall trees. “*Vasuki!*”

Fall Guy and Peter whirled around, straining their eyes upward.

“What?” barked Fall Guy. “What *now?*”

“What is she seeing?” shouted Peter. “I don’t see anything!”

“She sees Vasuki, the giant snake!” shouted Masquerade, beside herself with excitement. “You can’t see him because it wasn’t your seed! I saw him once too, when *my* seed sprouted, when we rescued Jane April! *Her seed sprouted!* The rabbits! The rabbits are at it again!”

Now you can imagine how all this sounded to Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper!

Fall Guy whispered to Peter. “They’ve gone crazy. They’re crazy, bats, nuts, fifty-one fifty, booby hatch, crazy woodrats, crazy as a loon. Let’s get out of here.”

"Bats? Nuts?" asked Peter, who didn't know these words were *figures of speech*.

"We have to find the wise old owl with big eyes! We have to find the wise old owl with big eyes!" shouted Karma.

"That's the message! *That's the message!*" cried Masquerade.

"*Vasuki! Vasuki!*"

"Where? Where?" shouted Peter Pixie Pepper, craning his neck and staring wildly up into the trees. "I want to see the snake!"

"There is no snake!" screamed Fall Guy. "No snake! No snake! They're crazy!"

Masquerade suddenly realized what they had to do. She turned to Fall Guy. She knew they didn't know anything, even Smithsonian and Lifeboat, about an owl with big eyes, and she knew Fall Guy was *very well informed*. They had to *pump him for information* immediately, before he ran off with Peter Pixie Pepper.

"Fall Guy! Before you leave for the cave or the hut! Just tell us this one thing! Have a heart! *Who is the wise old owl with big eyes? Where can we find him?*"

"Not *him!* *Her!*" shouted Fall Guy, nearly insane with anger and impatience over the delay.

"It's *Sophy*, the Great Horned Owl! She lives way up on King's Peak! You'll never get there unless you can fly!"

"How will we *find* her? How will we *locate* her? King's Peak is *big!* Just answer that one last question! I can tell this delay is

driving you crazy, Fall Guy, and we're really *really* sorry, *but just one more question!*"

Fall Guy gritted his teeth and closed his eyes.

"She's nocturnal. Got that? Owls are *nocturnal*. That means they sleep in the day and are awake at night. *Got that?* And they say 'Whooooo!' All night long they say 'Whooooo!' over and over again. 'Whooooo!' Listen for that. That's how you'll find her!

He turned to Peter. "Now! Rock 'n Roll! Let's go!"

"I could show them where to find the pixie wings," Peter said shyly. "It'll only take a minute."

"Snakes! Rabbits! Pixie wings! What's going on around here? *What! On! Earth!* Has everyone gone mad?"

Suddenly Peter turned to Karma and Masquerade.

"Down there!" he said breathlessly, pointing. Past the burnt stump and across the gully! My stash! In my nest and under an upside-down yellow oven-safe casserole. You'll find pixie wings there!"

"Thanks, Peter! Thanks a million!" said Masquerade, giving him a quick high four.

Fall Guy was looking at the three of them strangely. He had suddenly realized he had been behaving very poorly. He had been very rude and inconsiderate, thinking only of himself, when Karma and Masquerade had only wanted to be friendly, starting fresh. *He realized that the invisible Trouble Maker he had warned everyone else about had invaded his own mind!*

He felt ashamed. And yes, even abashed.

“Well, good luck to you, Karma, and you too, Masquerade,” he said clumsily. “I know I’ve been a little *gruff* today, a little *crusty*, a little *abrupt*, and you must accept my sincerest apologies. And good luck to you! I hope everything turns out well with the snake, and the seeds and the rabbits, and all that business.”

Suddenly he burst into tears.

“I’ve been a jerk! A hermit jerk! Forgive me!”

“Forgiven! Forgiven!” said Masquerade, holding out her paw for a high four.

“You’ve been under great pressure, with your brave decision to travel way off the beaten path to a cave or hut and write poetry no one will ever read and live in silence. We understand. Good luck to you too!”

“Farewell! Farewell forever!” cried Fall Guy.

Peter Pixie Pepper grabbed Fall Guy’s paw.

“Come on! Let’s go now!”

And they picked up their “Bridges to Literacy” tote bags one last time, and with their paws around each other in the way I described in the last chapter, disappeared around a giant fir tree, never to be seen again. Never to be seen again in this story. Say Goodbye to them!

Instantly Masquerade turned to Karma.

“Can you still see Vasuki?”

"No. He's gone," she said dreamily. "But you saw him when your seed sprouted. Unforgettable. Unforgettable in every way."

She quickly turned to Masquerade.

"But did you hear the message? We have to find the wise old owl with big eyes! *We're supposed to ask her why she says Whooo!*"

"Got it! Got the message! The owl's name is Sophy. She lives up on King's Peak. Fall Guy told me. The only way we can get there is by *flying*. She says '*Whoooo*' all night long! And Peter Pixie Pepper told us where to find his stash of pixie wings!"

"Pixie wings! I remember when he told us about them, the stash he found when all the pixies left!"

"Right! Let's go! Down that way!"

Karma and Masquerade dashed down the slope, following Peter's directions. Past the burnt stump and across the gully. They burst into a small clearing, actually a rather charming *dell*, and there was Peter Pixie Pepper's nest. There was a sign over the front saying, "Peter's Pawn Shop: Gone Out Of Business and Closed Forever."

They read it thoughtfully, shaking their heads.

"I always suspected there was more to Peter than he was letting on... But forget it! His stash is under a yellow oven-safe casserole!"

"I see it!" shouted Karma.

Under the casserole they found a crumpled business-size envelope containing tiny round pieces of green cardboard, no bigger than a dime, each with a green elastic ribbon stapled to it.

"These are wings?"

Masquerade stared at them, frowning.

"Well, the pixies must have been very small. I've always pictured pixies as very small."

"Smaller than us, for sure!"

They stared at the envelope, exchanging troubled glances from time to time, wondering.

Suddenly Karma announced, "I'm going to try one on. See what happens. See if I can actually fly."

"Try on *two*. I've never seen anyone fly with one wing. Always *two*."

"Right. Two. Come in pairs."

Masquerade helped Karma pass the elastic ribbons over her head.

"Not around my *neck*!" choked Karma. "I have to get my front paws through!"

They positioned the wings, one on each side.

"Okay," said Karma. "Here I go! I'm going to jump!"

"No! Not in here, under the roof! Let's go outside!"

They hurried out of Peter's nest and out into the charming dell. Karma jumped and jumped until she was out of breath. But nothing happened.

Suddenly she turned to Masquerade.

"You know what? I think this is a Situation! Or maybe an *Invitation!*"

Masquerade burst out laughing. "Or maybe a *combo!* We've never had a *combo* before!"

"Switch the bracelet! Switch it!"

"Right! Here goes!"

Masquerade switched the magic Eye-of-the-Heart bracelet from her left paw to her right. She looked at Karma.

And holding her front paws out straight, a huge smile appearing on her face, Karma slowly rose into the air.

Masquerade stared up at Karma, circling around over her head, and Karma stared down at Masquerade, who was picking out some wings.

"The bracelet did it," Masquerade whispered to herself. "That was the ticket. Now the wings work. We're going to be able to fly."

Suddenly she shouted. "The bracelet did it! *We can fly!*"

Karma looked down, flying in circles and zooming up and down in roller coaster curves, laughing.

“It’s easy! All you have to do is imagine where you want to go! Like walking!

Masquerade was already struggling on a pair of pixie wings.

“Here I come!” she shouted. “Here I come, Karma!”

And she joined Karma in the air.

Now it’s hard for us to imagine what it feels like to be a woodrat who can suddenly fly. But I imagine woodrats, like all of us trapped down here on the ground, prisoners of gravity, must look up enviously at the birds from time to time, and wish that they could fly too. You know how sometimes we ask each other, when we’re just hanging around in the schoolyard waiting for our turn, “What would you most like to be?” Well, no one ever says they’d like to be a banana slug! It’s almost always a bird. Personally, I would like to be a *marine* bird, a bird that live on the coast, like a sea gull. Wouldn’t that be great?

They flew around for awhile, getting higher and higher, until Masquerade said, “Okay! Karma! This is great! But we have a job to do! *Find Sophy and ask her why she says Whoooo!* Let’s go back down, get eight more wings, four times two is *eight*, and get on with it!”

“Oh always so *businesslike*, Masquerade! Don’t you ever want to just *chill out*? It’s still morning! This flying is absolutely *great*! Let’s fly up real high and perch on a branch, like the ravens and the hawks! Look out over the wide world!”

“Okay! I’m not *that* uptight, you know! But just for a few hours!”

And she soared off with Karma.

Masquerade was one of those *plan-ahead* types, always working a bit nervously on an agenda for the rest of the day, thinking about what to do next and what to do after that and so on. Many grownups are like that. I myself! That's why she said, "But just for a few hours!" She knew it would take awhile to fly all the way out to King's Peak and find Sophy in the dark. And she didn't know how certain big birds, birds of *prey*, like ravens and hawks and buzzards, might feel about flying *woodrats*.

They flew out over the pond and up to the meadow, floated on thermals, and practiced fast dives, until they felt it was time to get wings for the others -- *get on with it*, as Masquerade said -- tell them about the seed message, and head out west for King's Peak.

They flew down to Peter's abandoned nest, counted out eight more pixie wings, flew up above the upper meadow and began their descent onto Elk Ridge.

Joyride and Wilderness saw them flying down. They were up on the driveway, happily stuffing acorns into a *New Yorker* tote bag when Wilderness just happened to look up.

"Look" he said to Joyride, pointing up. "Look there."

Joyride looked up. They were so stupefied by what they saw that they didn't even get excited. They just stared.

Karma and Masquerade, spying Joyride and Wilderness, floated down and gently landed, right beside them.

"Four-point landings!" cried Masquerade, looking around proudly. Which means all four feet hit the ground at the same time. With aircraft it's a *three-point* landing.

“Perfect! And we just started flying today!”

“Okay okay okay!” Karma said immediately, turning to Wilderness and Joyride.

“Hold your horses! We’re going to explain everything! You’re going to get to fly too! On pixie wings!”

“Start explaining!” cried Joyride, wild-eyed with curiosity and anticipation.

“I can’t believe this! I couldn’t believe my eyes! It’s *unreal!* Woodrats flying!”

“A debriefing,” said Wilderness firmly.

He didn’t *shout* it, he just *said* it, because he was still too stupefied, too *stunned*, to get excited. It was *too much*, especially on top of all the strange and marvelous things that had been happening to them since the rabbits’ visit.

“It’s called a *debriefing*.”

And Karma and Masquerade were immediately *debriefed*.

They explained everything that had happened, taking turns talking, from the moment they arrived at Fall Guy’s nest or cell to the four-point landings on the driveway. Fall Guy and Peter’s decision to become hermit monks and write poetry no one would ever read and never talk again, Karma’s seed sprouting when she saw Vasuki, the message about finding Sophy, the nocturnal Wise Old Great Horned Owl who lives on King’s Peak and asking her why she says “Whoooo!” all night, finding the pixie wings under

the yellow oven-safe casserole, and getting the wings to work by switching the bracelet. The whole trip.

"And we have to be there at midnight," said Karma importantly.

"Midnight tonight! We're flying there because it's too far to walk. With our short legs? We have pixie wings for all of us!"

She paused and looked back and forth at Joyride and Wilderness.

"That's the deal."

"Where are my wings?" shouted Wilderness, jumping up and down.

"Where are my wings? My wings!"

"If we give them to you now you'll start flying right away and we won't be able to get you down!" said Masquerade angrily. "We know you!"

"Masquerade's right," said Joyride thoughtfully. "I say we get Lifeboat and Smithsonian, tell them what's happening, what's the schedule, and then we all rest for a few hours before we take off for King's Peak. I have a feeling this whole thing is *not* going to be a walk in the park! It's the most far out thing that's happened to us yet!"

"Far out!" shouted Wilderness. Far *far* out!"

And Joyride certainly wasn't *really* wondering whether they were going to be flying out to King's Peak in the middle of the night or taking a walk in the park! She was saying they might be in

for a really challenging and maybe scary night! “A walk in the park” is another *figure of speech*. It means doing something *easy*, like scratching an itch, which is completely different from something *hard*, like flying out to King’s Peak in the middle of the night looking for an owl.

Wilderness and Joyride hastily finished stuffing acorns into the *New Yorker* tote bag and Joyride ran off to find Lifeboat and Smithsonian. They debriefed her as the three of them ran back. Smithsonian was intrigued, and Lifeboat horrified, at the thought of flying.

They crowded into Karma’s nest, feeling they should be together when they *wrapped their minds* – a really neat visual figure of speech meaning *thought it through and prepared themselves mentally* – around the incredible Vasuki adventure awaiting them that night. It’s the same thing they did by the batteries under the house the night of the dental floss escapade in the bathroom. *Ready themselves! Get psyched up!*

Smithsonian was thinking feverishly. “*It’s overcast: how will we find our way with no moonlight? Have to leave early. How will we keep in touch and not get separated in the dark? Twine: loops of twine between us, tied to our feet, maybe about five yards? All hold on to a rope? How will we see each other? Bright fender washers, the washers that are big with little holes, hanging on us. They’ll reflect when a flashlight shines on them. Flashlights! I have two: one for me and one probably for... who? Joyride? Wilderness? And how will we locate Sophy? She’s nocturnal. We’ll just have to wait somewhere till it gets dark and listen for her Whoooo! What else? What have I overlooked?*”

See? Joyride was right! It’s not going to be a walk in the park!

While they were getting psyched up in Karma's nest, Smithsonian told them about the problems he had been anticipating, and they made some decisions. At first, when they were figuring out how to deal with the problems, they were very excited, looking forward to what promised to be their greatest adventure ever.

But then, *after* they had figured out how to deal with the problems they faced that night, the mood changed. *Listing* all the problems caused them to become worried, and they started to feel overwhelmed: they got *cold feet* – a figure of speech meaning they got *scared*. Their real feet were warm.

"Do you think we can really pull this off?" said Masquerade quietly to the other five resting in Karma's nest.

So many figures of speech! *Pull this off* means be *successful*, get the job done, and as used here means *fly out to King's Peak, find Sophy in the dark, find out why she says Whoooo! all night long and get safely back home!*

Silence. They were all asking themselves the same question.

"I doubt it!" answered Lifeboat in a loud voice.

"When we had to save Jane April, for example, all we had to do was climb up the middle four-by-four and switch the bracelet. This is a horse of another color!"

Too much! *Another* figure of speech! "Horse of another color" means *something completely different!*

"We're doing it. That's all. We're doing it," said Karma firmly. "We have no choice."

"We have to try, Sailor," said Joyride. "We just have to try. And I know you know that. You don't *want* to do it, but I know, and we *all* know, that you'll be there with us all the way. You always are."

Lifeboat sighed heavily.

Wilderness was passing his leatherman tool back and forth from one paw to another.

"Remember when we were in the Helix robot and the real Helix jumped out in front of us? That was a real emergency. We handled that. We handled that, we can handle this."

They all noticed that he was speaking calmly and thoughtfully, unusual for him.

Smithsonian rose to his feet.

"Okay. Okay. We're all in this together, as always. Time to take off."

Masquerade and Karma showed the others how to put on the pixie wings with the elastic ribbons. Smithsonian hung a few fender washers from each ribbon. He uncoiled a length of rope he kept in his workshop. He had decided that the rope idea was better than tying them to each other with twine. He handed a flashlight to Joyride, keeping the other one for himself.

No one said a word while all this was going on.

They walked solemnly out of the nest and stood together on the driveway, feeling uncertain, worried and a bit frightened... but determined! Smithsonian silently arranged them on the rope. He had one end, then Lifeboat, Joyride, Karma, Masquerade and Wilderness.

And suddenly the mood was shattered!

"One for all and all for one, like the Three Musketeers! *We're going to fly!*" shouted Wilderness.

And he took off!

And because he was holding tightly to one end of the rope, the others, all holding the rope, followed him into the air! Even Lifeboat was thrilled!

Oh they sailed, laughing and shouting and pointing down! They shouted things like, "Look! A house!" and "There's a truck like the one we have!" and "There's a big pile of firewood!" and "Another truck!" and "More houses!" and "There's a meadow bigger than ours!" and "Such a long long winding road!"

Two ravens were soaring high overhead. They looked down.

"Ron! Do you see what I see down there?"

"I see! Who *are* those guys?"

The ravens dropped down and flew alongside the woodrats.

"Flying woodrats! I never thought I'd live to see the day! What next? What next in this crazy world?" croaked one of the ravens.

"Where'd you get those funny little wings, flyboy?" croaked the other.

Lifeboat looked over.

"Right! Wings! We're flying woodrats! We have pixie wings that we got from Peter Pixie Pepper's stash! They were underneath a yellow oven-safe casserole. He went off with Fall Guy to be a hermit monk so he could write poetry no one will ever read. This is our first flight! We're on our way to an interview with Sophy!"

"The Great Horned Owl! Flying woodrats! Pixie wings! Pixie wings and hermit monks! Did you hear that, Lloyd? *Goodness gracious, great balls of fire!*"

"Good luck, woodrats!" called the other raven as they soared aloft. "Say Hi to Sophy!"

The ground flowed by under them. They saw streams and ponds, valleys and rolling hills, far below. Their fender washers clinked and glinted, they laughed out loud. Every now and then someone shouted, "Stop yanking on the rope!"

Joyride shouted, "Let's try zooming down real fast and then suddenly up again!"

Down they zoomed, curving up again at the last minute.

"Let's do that again!" screamed Wilderness. "Again! This time even closer to the ground!"

Suddenly Lifeboat called out, pointing.

"Look ahead! Out there! That's King's Peak!"

They all looked at King's Peak, looming in the distance, the highest hill. It seemed much bigger, much grander, than it had when they started out.

"Our target!" shouted Karma.

"We're flying, flying, flying, flying!" shouted Masquerade. "What could be greater than this? Nothing! This is heaven!"

And for about two hours they *were* in heaven! They were in *ecstasy*, a powerful word meaning something like *as happy as happy can be*!

I'm sure you can imagine that ecstasy. Right? The same way we would feel! Flying! Like birds! Way up in the air! Way up in the sky! Wouldn't that be *great*? As happy as happy can be!

Smithsonian was the first to notice that the sun was setting.

"Look at the sun," he called out.

"It's setting, going down. It will be getting dark. But I think our timing was spot on. Soon it will be dark and we can start listening for Sophy. Then we follow the sound down to where she is."

"Mission Accomplished!" cried Wilderness. "That will be Mission Accomplished!"

They all started listening very carefully, circling around over the east face of King's Peak, as the sun slowly set in the west. It was getting darker and darker. Soon they could hardly see each other.

"Joyride! Don't turn on the flashlight yet! Save the batteries!" Smithsonian shouted.

"I hear it!" Karma and Lifeboat suddenly shouted in the same moment.

"Me too!" "Me too!" "Me too!" "Me too!" shouted the others immediately.

"Whoooo! Whoooo!"

It was Sophy. They began their descent.

"Flashlight, Joy-Joy!" called Smithsonian. "Prepare for landing."

Slowly they circled down, following the sound. The tall fir trees rushed up at them in the dim light of the flashlights.

"Careful with the rope now!" called Smithsonian. "Stay close together!"

"Whoooo! Whoooo!" getting louder and louder.

"Over there! Over there, Smithy! Shine your flashlight over there, where mine is shining!"

Immediately the two flashlight beams overlapped, revealing a huge owl sitting motionless on a thick branch. There was a small clearing below the branch. They drifted down, hovering for a moment over the clearing, then made six perfect four-point landings.

Breathless, laughing, they clenched their paws over their heads in the victory sign.

Lifeboat stamped one paw on the ground.

"We made it! We did it! Good show, Smithsonian! Good show!"

"Glad you came?" asked Joyride, teasing him as she loved to do.

"Whoooo!"

They looked up at Sophy, suddenly remembering why they came, suddenly noticing they were sitting there in near total darkness, their fender washers glinting in the dim light of the flashlights, six woodrats who had never gone further than the top of the driveway in the uphill direction and in the downhill direction Peter Pixie Pepper's nest in the charming dell. They were so excited about flying, about the ecstasy, about *pulling it off*, that they forgot the point of it all!

Immediately they recovered, remembering why they were there. Joyride whispered to Karma, next to her on the rope.

"Who do you think should speak to her?"

"Smithsonian?" Karma whispered back. "No, Lifeboat. He had that long interview with Sidd, who was so rude to him but not to me, but at least he has some experience. I vote for Lifeboat."

Joyride leaned over to Lifeboat, who was next to her on the other side, and whispered.

"Karma and I think you should do the talking, Sailor. Up for it?"

"What do the others think?" he grumbled.

"We didn't ask them!"

She paused, recalling how proud of himself Lifeboat had been when he told about his interview with Sidd, how he had stressed that he kept his dignity even though he was being terribly insulted.

"We all have great respect for you, Sailor, great *confidence* in you."

"And you should!"

Sophy was staring down at them with immense yellow eyes that seemed to shine in the dark. The woodrats felt sure she could *see* in the dark.

"Whoooo!"

Lifeboat addressed Smithsonian and Joyride, who were on either side of him holding the rope.

"Shine the flashlights on me. I'm going to do the talking."

They did.

He cleared his throat.

"O Wise Old Great Horned Owl! We are six brave woodrats who have flown here to you today on pixie wings! A seed sprouted in one of our heads, instructing us to come to you and ask why you always say Whooooo!"

Masquerade nudged Wilderness, next to her on the rope.

"I think he's doing quite well! That was very well spoken!"

"Will you be so kind as to answer our question?"

"Whoooo are *you*?"

Lifeboat was a bit startled at this question, and surprised also that Sophy's voice was so high and squeaky, sounding like the voice of a mouse or a kitten, but he recovered and answered, loud and clear.

"Lifeboat! My name is Lifeboat!"

"Lifeboat?" Sophy bellowed, in a voice like thunder.

Everyone was momentarily stunned. Lifeboat, stunned like the rest, pulled himself together and thought rapidly to himself.

"She has two voices. Trying to throw me a curve, just like that rotten turtle. She doesn't know who she's dealing with!"

"Yes!" he shouted. "Lifeboat!"

There was a very long pause.

"And what are the names of your companions, Lifeboat?" Sophy asked in the squeaky shaky voice.

And then immediately thundered, "Everyone stand up, one by one, and tell me your names!"

"Do it!" said Lifeboat to the others, his teeth gritted in anger, remembering his interview with Sidd and feeling he had been double-crossed again.

"Do it!"

Each stood up and immediately sat down.

"I'm Smithsonian!"

"I'm Wilderness!"

"I'm Karma!"

"I'm Masquerade!"

"I'm Joyride!"

"And *what* are you?" Sophy thundered.

"I already told you! Woodrats!"

Then the squeaky voice again, speaking very kindly.

"Just as I thought, my little ones! My ignorant little woodrats! You don't know who you are! Who you *really* are! I say *Whooooo!* all the time because that's the Big Question! *Who? Who Am I? Who are you?* Got that? That's the Big Question, the Big One! *Who?* is what we should always be thinking!"

"She's crazy. Crazier even than Sidd. We've run into another crackpot!" Smithsonian whispered to the others.

"Wait!" said Karma curiously. "She has something up her sleeve. Give her a chance."

Figure of speech *again!* Nothing to do with real sleeves on shirts! "Up her sleeve" means Sophy is *hiding* something, being *sneaky*, preparing a *surprise*. And owls don't have sleeves anyway!

Lifeboat, courageously continuing to be the spokesperson, and forcing himself to be polite, looked up at Sophy.

“Oh? Don’t know who we are? Could you clarify that, please?”

“He’s doing *such* a good job!” whispered Masquerade.

“No!” Sophy thundered. “You’ll find out for yourselves in the morning! When you wake up! Now *sleep!*”

And all of them immediately fell asleep.

Morning came, bright and sunny. They all woke up about the same time. For the first time they saw the small clearing clearly. Tall trees surrounded them, thickets of madrone and manzanita beneath the firs and live oak.

Sophy was gone.

“Well,” said Masquerade with a yawn.

“At least we found out why that crazy owl says Who!”

They all started to laugh and shake their heads, the way grownups do when they remember something someone said that they thought was totally ridiculous, but they didn’t want to laugh in front of that person because it would be rude.

“As if we didn’t know who we are!” cried Wilderness.

"And she called us ignorant!" cried Lifeboat angrily. "Did you get that? Called us *ignorant*! How rude can you get? That really hurts!"

"If there's one thing I know for sure," shouted Joyride, "it's who I am!"

"Right! You know who I am? I'm Smithsonian!" said Smithsonian, waving his paws in the air and jumping up and down.

"Ridiculous! Utterly absurd!" Lifeboat said indignantly. "Don't know who we are? The whole thing was a farce! That owl was as disrespectful as Sidd was when we had our interview! And those two voices! What was *that* all about?"

He shook his head angrily for a moment.

"Oh well. I did my best."

Karma had laughed at first, with the others, but she slowly got a thoughtful look on her face.

"Okay!" said Masquerade. "We accomplished our mission, now let's take to the air! Remember? *We can fly!*"

"Yes! Yes!" cried Wilderness.

"I'll coil up the rope and leave it here for Sophy to make herself a swing! We won't need it in the daytime!" shouted Smithsonian.

They rose up slowly, looking down at the treetops with delighted amazement as they got higher and higher, thrilled beyond words again.

And then the magic happened! The more magic, of course, because there's already been magic.

As they rose into the air, they looked over at each other. And they were stunned. Each one was now wearing flowing white robes with blue half-moons embroidered on them, and they soared aloft on immense gold wings! Their little woodrat faces peered out through the folds of the robes, unwilling to believe their eyes!

"Hey!" shouted Joyride. "Look at us! What's happening?"

Lifeboat was so excited he could barely speak. He looked wildly at the others, stretching his neck to look at his great golden wings.

"I've seen pictures of this!" he cried.

"We're angels!"

Immediately Joyride got a dreamy look on her face as she soared in wide circles.

"Just call me angel of the morning!" she cried.

Masquerade laughed and cried out, "We're angels! I'm an angel!"

Karma flew over to her side, laughing and speaking urgently at the same time.

"Check the bracelet! See if the Eye of the Heart is open! Do it! Now!"

Masquerade managed, with some difficulty, to push one paw out through the robes. She turned to Karma.

“Yes! It’s open! This is a *glimpse*!”

Karma shouted excitedly to the others.

“Smithy! Everyone! This is a *glimpse* we’re having here! It must have something to do with what Sophy said! *About who we are!*”

“Angels?” cried Smithsonian, laughing and pretending to be alarmed. “Are we *dead*?”

“Not me!” shouted Wilderness, laughing wildly. “*I’m* not dead!”

Just then they were spotted by the ravens flying high overhead, the same ravens they had spoken to on the way out to King’s Peak.

“Ron! Do you see what I see down there?”

“Right. Looks like angels. Angels with woodrat faces. Must be those same woodrats!”

The ravens descended and flew along with the woodrats.

“Hi there, guy!” said one of the ravens in a real friendly way. “Nice robes and wings! Who *are* you?”

He was closest to Smithsonian.

"I'm a woodrat, really, but I'm also an angel, right now," answered Smithsonian in a muffled voice, struggling to push his face out through the folds of the robe.

"Some trick of Sophy's, the wise old owl who's really just another crackpot. Two voices, you know? One of those. We've been running into a real streak of crackpots lately, turtles, rabbits, you name it. She said we didn't know who we are! Crazy stuff!"

The raven smiled. "Well, I can *see* who you are, dude! Like you said, you're an *angel*, and a *woodrat*! A *woodrat angel*! Cool!"

"Nice meeting you again!" called out Smithsonian as the ravens flew off.

He glanced down and called out to the others.

"Follow that road down there! It's the road that leads back to our hill!"

"We're angels," Karma was thinking.

"That's the glimpse. Who we really are. That's what Sophy meant when she said we'd find out for ourselves in the morning. But I *know* I'm a woodrat! A Dusky-Footed Woodrat, found statewide in California and in the northwestern region of the Baja California peninsula."

She pondered this crazy problem about who they were for awhile, who *she* was, as she soared high above the ground.

"Forget it! Too much! Think about it later," she decided suddenly, and eagerly turned her attention to the ecstasy of the flight.

She called out to the others, laughing so hard she could hardly speak.

“I’m not Karma! I’m Angel Cake!”

Masquerade was shouting over and over again, as she had on the way out, “This is heaven! This is heaven!”

Smithsonian was chanting, “Heaven! I’m in heaven!”

Joyride cried out, “My blue heaven! My.... Blue.... Heaven!”

“Life boat said, giggling, “Let’s hope it’s not the *real* heaven! Then we’d be dead!” And he burst out laughing.

“Somewhere there’s heaven! How high the moon!” Wilderness sang out, soaring in great spirals.

Suddenly Smithsonian shouted, “Look down! There’s the house! Prepare for descent!”

Descent! They all wished they could fly forever, just fly and fly forever, like birds, but they knew they had accomplished the mission Karma had learned from the seed in her head and it was time to return. They glanced back sadly at King’s Peak etched against the bright western sky, stately and unchanging.

And as they descended – I bet you guessed this would happen! – their flowing robes and huge gold wings faded away. And there were no four-point landings this time either. When they were just above the ground the power of the pixie wings suddenly vanished and they tumbled to earth. Dusky-Footed Woodrats tumbling in the grass, back home.

They sat in a circle, looking at each other with happy puzzled smiles on their faces, saying nothing.

Masquerade suddenly shouted, looking at Joyride and pretending to speak in a stern voice.

“Who are you?”

She snapped her head around and asked Lifeboat in the same stern voice.

“And *you*! Who are *you*, Mister?”

She burst out laughing.

“You too, Karma! Who are *you*?”

Karma got a mischievous smile on her face.

“Who am I? *Who am I*? That’s the Big Question! Isn’t that what Sophy called it? *The Big Question!*”

“Well, I know who *I* am!” announced Smithsonian.

“Smithsonian, the woodrat!”

He quickly looked around at all the others, swinging his paw around and pointing at them. Suddenly he burst out laughing.

“And don’t you forget it!”

Wilderness all this time had been gazing out over the ridges at King’s Peak.

"You know what? You know who I am? I'm Wilderness the Angel and I want to go flying again!"

Tears came to his eyes.

"I want to go flying again!"

Joyride burst into tears.

"Me too!"

Chapter Eleven

The King of the Birds, Way-Woo the Seal, the Sand Castle and Jefferson and Airplane Return

A few days had gone by since the woodrats had flown out to Kings Peak on pixie wings and had their brief weird interview with Sophy. Each of them had been thinking about it in their own way, according to their characters, and gradually the memory was fading from their minds. They would never forget, of course, the thrill of flying, but they knew and accepted that they were earthbound again, on their four feet, as they always had been, and life went on, as it always does, even after the most memorable thrills. Grownups know this.

Wilderness was foraging in the clearing near the pond. From time to time he had been wondering whether he was a woodrat or an angel, but there didn't really seem to be any serious question here. He was a woodrat. Maybe a woodrat who *had been* an angel, briefly, but even if that was true he was definitely a woodrat again.

He heard a voice calling him from the pond.

"Wilderness! Oh, Wilderness!"

He looked over at the pond. Sidd's head was sticking out of the water on his long green neck, looking in his direction. It was Sidd who was calling him.

"Oh, Wilderness! Come over here! I want to talk with you!"

Wilderness had never actually spoken with Sidd, although he had lost his temper once during the masterpiece riddle business and shouted that they were all "sick and tired of masterpieces." And he certainly couldn't imagine why Sidd would want to talk with him. He was a little *intimidated* by the summons – an important word meaning *almost scared* – because he remember how *rude* Sidd had been to Lifeboat, but also how *important* Sidd was supposed to be. *Rude* and *important* was a disturbing and confusing combination, and it wasn't clear to him what his attitude should be.

But, as we know, Wilderness is a very brave woodrat who prides himself on being able to *overcome* his fears and walk right up to face any challenges that might come his way. If he had a motto to guide his journey through the world, it would be, "Live Fearlessly!"

He walked right up to the pond and stopped opposite Sidd, who was, as usual, half in and half out of the water, his shell smeared with pond glop and bubbles rising up out of the water behind him.

"What."

Wilderness said "What" *flatly*, not in the tone of voice we use when it's a question.

Sidd stared at him, a faint friendly smile on his face.

"What."

"Wilderness. Do you know who Way-Woo is?"

"Way-Woo?"

"Way-Woo."

"No. Who's Way-Woo?"

"Way-Woo is a seal who lives out at Shelter Cove. Out at the ocean on the other side of Kings Peak. There's an ocean there."

"Oh."

"And do you know who Garuda is?"

"No. No idea."

"Garuda is the King of the Birds. He's a giant Golden Eagle."

Wilderness said nothing. He just stood there looking at Sidd.

"Will you remember that? Who Way-Woo and Garuda are?"

"Yes. I already remember it."

"Wonderful! I knew I could count on you! You may leave now!"

Wilderness turned to leave. Then he looked back. He felt he should say something, not just walk away.

"Thanks."

Sidd chuckled to himself.

“Don’t mention it.”

Wilderness, at first, was going to return to his foraging in the clearing by the pond, but he quickly decided he didn’t want to be where Sidd could see him anymore. He didn’t want to be anywhere near Sidd, because it would feel strange to be close enough for them to speak to each other but not say anything. You may have been in situations like that. It’s called *awkward*.

And he hadn’t the faintest idea why Sidd had asked him to remember those names.

We’ll find out.

He decided to forage somewhere else, and slowly, without looking back, wandered off up the road.

And just as he disappeared around a curve, Count Blackhole, the dragonfly messenger, gracefully settled down in front of Sidd, on the exact spot where Wilderness had been standing only a minute ago.

“Hello, Sidd! Know who I am?”

“Of course!”

“Could we have a little chat, do you suppose?”

“Of course, Blackhole! Around four this afternoon!”

“Super!”

Think back! All the way back to Part One, the chapter where the messengers rehearsed their messages. Do you remember that Count

Blackhole was the only one there who thought maybe Sidd was right when he said Karma's suspicion was true, and was wondering that maybe there really was more here than meets the eye? He wasn't sure there was nothing, as Count Thinktank was, but felt some doubt about it. Remember we recalled that Count Blackhole was a stargazer, and that gazing at the splendor of the night sky made him wonder? Count Blackhole had said to himself, his voice trailing off, "But then Sidd's no fool..." And remember we thought that Count Blackhole might request an interview with Sidd, a friendly little chat, to hear Sidd's point of view? Well that's what just happened! They'll have that chat around four in the afternoon! We'll return to hear that chat, but for now let's get back to the woodrats

*****.

Can you figure out which woodrat is the only one left whose seed hasn't sprouted?

Around the same time Wilderness was straggling up the road from the pond, relieved to be out of sight and earshot – isn't that a great word! -- of Sidd, which was also around the same time Count Blackhole and Sidd had agreed about the time for their friendly little chat, Smithsonian, Joyride and Lifeboat were lounging around in the vineyard, chewing the fat – which is something, you will recall, that hermit monks *never* do.

"Remember when Wilder said he was an angel?" remarked Smithsonian. "When we got back from Kings Peak?"

Joyride turned to him with a questioning look.

"I remember. What about it?"

"I'm just trying to piece that business together. Sophy never *said* we were really angels..."

Lifeboat interrupted, remembering that he had been the one elected to speak to Sophy and for that reason he should be the one to remind the others about what had actually happened.

“Right! Sophy said we didn’t know who we are, after asking us to tell her our names, a sneaky trick if ever I saw one, and when I politely asked her to *clarify* that, she shouted, in her thunder voice, that we would find out for ourselves in the morning.”

“And when we woke up we were angels!” said Joyride with a bright mischievous smile.

“What I was driving at,” continued Smithsonian, “is that Sophy thinks we’re angels!”

“What a nutcase!” said Lifeboat. “Why does everyone think she’s so *wise*? She’s a nutcase!”

“Well, maybe she was wrong about *you* two,” said Joyride with a sly smile, “but...”

“Oh, Joy-Joy,” interrupted Smithsonian, laughing and putting his paw around her, “maybe *you* think you’re an angel, but there are some of us who might disagree!”

“No angel as far as *I’m* concerned!” chuckled Lifeboat. “Woodrats! Just plain old ordinary woodrats!”

And the three of them lay back laughing, looking up through the grape leaves at the clear blue sky.

And that’s the moment when Joyride saw Vasuki.

“Look!” she shouted. “Up there!”

Smithsonian and Lifeboat looked up, squinting, seeing nothing but the sky.

"Oh, I forgot. You can't see it! *But I'm seeing Vasuki up there, the giant snake! My seed sprouted!*"

"I've seen Vasuki," said Lifeboat dryly. "Once was enough."

"I've seen him too," said Smithsonian. "I just can't get excited. You've seen one giant magic snake you've seen them all."

"The important thing," explained Lifeboat, suddenly turning to Joyride, "is the *message*. The message you're getting in your head right now!"

"What is it?" asked Smithsonian curiously.

Both Lifeboat and Smithsonian were lying prone – which means face down – watching ants in the grass. The thrill of seeing Vasuki, at least for them, was gone.

"What's the message?" repeated Lifeboat.

"Meet Garuda in the upper meadow at noon, then fly out to build a sand castle for Way-Woo!"

Smithsonian and Lifeboat exchanged puzzled glances.

"Garuda?"

"Way-Woo?"

"That's the message! Word for word as I said it!"

Suddenly she turned to Lifeboat and Smithsonian.

“Oh, what a great snake that Vasuki is! *What a sight!* Too bad you can’t *see* him up there!”

“It’ll fade away in a minute,” said Lifeboat.

“It’s a very *brief* sight,” added Smithsonian. “But enjoy it while you can! We won’t say a word!”

“It’s fading,” she said sadly.

“I told you,” said Lifeboat. “Now we’ve all seen it, all six of us, and there’s an end to it!”

Smithsonian rolled over and tapped Joyride on the shoulder.

“So what was that message? Say it again.”

“Meet Garuda in the upper meadow at noon, then fly out to build a sand castle for Way-Woo.”

Smithsonian rose to his full height – about six inches.

“Okay. Let’s go down and ask Masquerade, and Karma, if those names mean anything to them. This is a message! We’re supposed to *act* on it! And we only have till noon!”

“Could be an Invitation, could be a Situation,” said Lifeboat thoughtfully, as he also rose to his full height.

“But either way, we have to be in the upper meadow at noon, no escaping that. I hope it’s an Invitation!”

And just then, before they could go off to look for them, Masquerade and Karma came strolling into the vineyard.

"I saw Vasuki!" shouted Joyride immediately, at the same time as she was sadly aware that because she was the last one to see Vasuki it wouldn't be all that exciting to the others.

"I saw Vasuki, the giant snake! My seed sprouted!"

"What was the message?" asked Masquerade in her familiar business-like way.

"Vasuki! Vasuki!"

"Did she tell you the message?" she asked, turning to Smithsonian and Lifeboat.

Smithsonian repeated the message.

"Garuda?" said Karma.

"Way-Woo?" said Masquerade.

Just then Wilderness showed up.

"Where have all of you been hiding? I found a huge patch of miner's lettuce in the gully by the path to the pond. A little up from where the big tree fell. A real feast!"

They filled him in, brought him *up to speed*.

"Joyride's seed sprouted. She saw Vasuki," explained Smithsonian. *"Just like the rest of us. She was the last one."*

"We're trying to figure out what the message means," added Karma. "It's a tricky one."

"Well, don't let me interrupt. I'm sure you'll figure it out. I'll be down in the gully."

He paused to pick up a grape leaf to chew on while he strolled back to the patch of miner's lettuce.

Masquerade faced the other four.

"Garuda, Way-Woo and a sand castle. And more flying. If we can't figure it out, if no one knows anything about a Garuda or a Way-Woo, we'll just have to show up in the upper meadow at noon and see what happens."

She looked off in the downhill direction.

"I don't think *any* of us wants to run down to that crazy turtle and ask *him* who they are!"

Wilderness stopped at the end of the grape row, still chewing the leaf. He turned and walked back to the others.

"He already told me."

All heads turned.

"What did you say?" asked Masquerade.

"I said he already told me."

"*Who* already told you? Told you *what*?"

"Sidd already told me. He told me about Garuda and Way-Woo."

"What did he tell about Garuda and Way-Woo?" asked Karma, in an encouraging tone of voice. "Tell us the whole story!"

"Yes, Wilder!" said Smithsonian, looking at Wilderness with great affection. "Sounds like you must have a real story to tell! We had no idea you were friends with Sidd!"

"I don't think we're really *friends*, unless *he* thinks we're friends, because *I* certainly don't. I was down gathering miner's lettuce by the pond just now and he called me over. 'Oh, Wilderness!' he said. 'Oh, Wilderness! Come over here, I want to talk with you.' So I went over."

"And what happened then?" asked Lifeboat, clearly growing impatient. "Come on, out with it!"

"He asked me if I knew who Way-Woo was. I said No. He said Way-Woo is a seal who lives out at Shelter Cove. In the ocean on the other side of Kings Peak. There's an ocean there."

Masquerade turned to the others with a questioning look.

"An ocean? A huge body of water?"

Lifeboat, who was the most well-informed of the woodrats, with Smithsonian a close second, spoke with an important air.

"Yes. Oceans are huge bodies of water, much bigger than the pond, and they taste salty. They have immense waves that beat on the shore. I recall a line from a poem: '*Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!*' Enormous fish swim in them, and enormous boats sail on them. I didn't know there was one so close!"

“Go on, Wilder, go on! On with your amazing story!” encouraged Karma again.

“Then he asked me if I knew who Garuda was. I said No. He said Garuda was the King of the Birds. A giant Golden Eagle.”

Joyride was beside herself with excitement and anticipation.

“A giant Golden Eagle, the King of the Birds! An ocean! A deep and dark blue ocean that rolls on! A seal named Way-Woo who knows us and wants us to build a sand castle for him! Or *her*! We don’t know yet! *This is just great!*”

“He asked me if I would remember what he told me, and I said I already remember. Then I said ‘Thanks’ and he said ‘Don’t mention it.’ And that’s the whole story! Just happened!”

Suddenly he jumped up and began prancing around the others in a circle, doing cartwheels and back flips.

“And you didn’t know any of this! None of it! I guess I saved the day! Wilderness to the rescue! Wilderness to the rescue again!”

“You’re the little rat we can always count on!” said Karma, walking over to Wilderness with a big smile and giving him a big hug.

Lifeboat also gave him a hug.

“Good show, Wilder!” he said gruffly.

Masquerade turned to Smithsonian.

"What's the time, Smithy? I think it must be getting close to noon."

Smithsonian looked at his watch.

"Right! Quarter to! Let's head over to the upper meadow! The way I figure it, Garuda's going to fly us out to the ocean!"

"For sure! Heads up for a giant Golden Eagle!" cried Joyride.

They ran out of the vineyard and across the road to the upper meadow, where they all suddenly felt sad for a moment when they remembered that this was where Sammy got eaten by the hawk. They could see his grave. But then they stopped being sad when they remembered Big Momma and Parker, the Parrot with high blood pressure who loved life, and the new squirrels Big Momma blew out of her trunk. So much has been happening in the lives of these woodrats! I *told* you, all the way back on page one, that they would be having a Great Adventure! *The greatest adventure woodrats ever had!*

They sat down in the upper meadow, looking up at the sky, waiting. No one said a word.

And then a huge shadow passed over them.

Garuda.

Garuda's wings spanned the whole sky. The sun disappeared behind him. The wind from his huge wings tossed the branches of the tallest trees.

They looked up at him, spellbound.

"Garuda," said Masquerade. "It's Garuda."

And the next thing they knew they were on Garuda's back! It was magic!

Each was sitting in a little silver chair with a seatbelt already fastened. A button on one arm of the chair tilted the seat back a little if they wanted to recline.

No one could say anything. It was just too much!

"I am remembering a line from a poem again!" Lifeboat cried out, carried away by the emotions he was feeling, the thrill of the flight on Garuda's back and the memory of the poetry he loved so much!

"Listen! Listen to this! '*My heart in hiding stirred for a bird, the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*' Oh, such a great line!"

The others, of course, barely heard the great line, because they were so thrilled and excited, although Smithsonian gave Lifeboat a very brief glance and "thumbs up" with his biggest claw.

Garuda soared into the clouds – *the cumulus clouds of fair weather*, as they are called, because it was a beautiful day -- miles in the air, wheeling and dipping at tremendous speed. If not for their seat belts they would have been blown right off!

And suddenly they saw it! The ocean!

Now I don't need to tell you about the ocean, do I? What it looks like, how it makes you feel? You've all seen the ocean, right? *Try to remember how it felt the first time you saw the ocean. Big, right? Very big! Really awesome, right?* Something you could just stare out over, marveling! You thought of how *deep* it was, didn't you? How *big* the fish in it must be! How *old* it was! How many people must

have *drowned* in it, how many great ships must have *sailed* on it and *sunk* in it! And above all, how *mysterious* it was, how *wonderful* it was to stand on the shore where the land ends and another world begins!

But enough, for now, about the ocean. As you can probably guess, I really love the ocean, and think of it as *my old friend*!

Garuda began his descent into Shelter Cove. The woodrats gazed down in silence as he circled in over a beach. It was called Little Black Sand Beach, although they didn't know that.

They could see a seal swimming in the waves near the shore.

"Look down there! In the waves!" cried Wilderness. "It's a seal! That must be Way-Woo!"

And suddenly they were sitting on the beach. Magic again!.

Way-Woo's head was bobbing in the water, looking in their direction.

"Woodrats! I was expecting you! Great to see you at last! I've been waiting! You're right on time!"

"Sailor!" said Karma, leaning over toward him and speaking loud enough for the others to hear, "Be our spokesman again! You did such a great job with Sophy, so well-mannered and dignified!"

"Do it, Sailor!" encouraged Smithsonian, and the others all chimed in, "Do it, Sailor, do it!"

Once again, Lifeboat was flattered that the others recognized his skillful way of speaking to strangers. He rose to his feet.

“Way-Woo! We are happy to see you, a seal, swimming so effortlessly out there in the deep and dark blue ocean!”

Lifeboat paused, because a thought had struck him.

“I assume you *are* Way-Woo?”

“Yes! I am Way-Woo!”

Masquerade leaned over and whispered something in Lifeboat’s ear. Lifeboat nodded his head and faced the ocean again.

“Are you a boy or a girl?”

“Neither!”

Lifeboat was flabbergasted – remember that word? -- for a moment, as were all the others. Karma nudged him.

“Did I hear you correctly, Way-Woo? You said, I believe, *neither*?”

“That’s what I said!”

Lifeboat thought rapidly and then answered without consulting the others.

“Neither! That’s fine with us! We can live with that!”

“Great! It’s no big deal! This whole business between us is clearly reeking with magic, so nothing should be a surprise. Our arrangement, as I’m sure you recall, is that you woodrats are going to build a sand castle for me, here on Little Black Sand Beach. According to the contract.”

“Right!” said Lifeboat. “The contract. We think of it as a *message*, the message my friend here, Joyride, received when a seed planted some weeks ago by rabbits sprouted in her head up in the vineyard.”

“Contract smontract, message smessage, it’s all the same in the big picture! Words, words, words, I’m so tired of words! We’re on the same page, that’s all that matters. All that *ever* matters in this world of backfires!”

Another figure of speech. *On the same page* has nothing to do with books, but simply means *everyone agrees about what is going on*.

The others had been listening very attentively to this exchange, very proud of the clever way Lifeboat was handling it, although a bit baffled by the way Way-Woo spoke.

Smithsonian leaned over and whispered in Lifeboat’s ear.

“Don’t you think we should get on with the job, start building the sand castle for Way-Woo? That might take quite awhile, if we want to do it right.”

“Way-Woo! My good friend here, Smithsonian, thinks we should start building the sand castle for you. It might take awhile to do an acceptable job.”

I will refer to Way-Woo sometimes with a *he* or *him* and sometimes with a *she* or *her*, since she had said he was neither a boy nor a girl.

She had been swimming back and forth in the surf throughout this discussion. The woodrats were having great difficulty in getting a sense of his *character*, what she was really *like*,

and they had no idea why he wanted them to build a sand castle for her.

But suddenly their unspoken question was answered.

“Want to know why I wanted you to build me a sand castle?” Way-Woo asked. “Wondering about that? About the contract?”

Lifeboat turned to Karma with a shrug.

“Want to take over? I think I shouldn’t be the only one skilled at speaking with strangers.”

Suddenly he giggled.

“*Strange* strangers, like *all* the strangers we meet!”

He giggled again.

“They get stranger and stranger!”

Karma stood up and walked out to where the waves were washing up on the sand.

“Way-Woo! Yes, we *are* wondering why you want us to build a sand castle here, according to the contract.”

Way-Woo burst out laughing, flapping her flippers against his head.

“You’ll find out when you finish! If I told you now it would spoil it! Trust me! *Those who do not trust enough will not be trusted!* And your friend was right. You really should get started.”

“Right!” shouted Wilderness, “Let’s build that castle!”

They had, of course, never built a sand castle before, so they relied on Smithsonian to figure out how to do it.

“Okay!” cried Smithsonian, leaping to his feet.

“To work! Let’s begin with a big high wall, very thick at the bottom, with an opening for the door!”

They all scrambled around, gathering lumps of wet sand and plastering them in place.

“Not too close to where the waves are washing in!” Joyride cried. “The waves will wash it away!”

When they finished with the wall, Smithsonian, grunting with effort as they all were, looked at it from all sides, tilting his head.

“Looks fine! Now the moat! Castles have *moats* around them, like a river running all the way around the walls!”

Way-Woo was furiously flapping on the water with her flippers now, waving his head and making a weird wild honking sound.

“Great job, woodrats! According to the contract! Hey! I just had an idea -- which is not strictly speaking true because I had it planned all along! How about I entertain you while you work away with little pithy remarks that won’t make any sense to you until you give them some serious thought after you’ve suffered more?

Lifeboat was about to answer, but decided that Way-Woo’s offer was so crazy there was no point in responding to it.

"Here goes! *Not collecting treasures prevents stealing!* How about that!"

They were digging the moat now, moving a lot of heavy wet sand. The moat filled up with water that seemed to be under the sand everywhere.

"Look!" shouted Joyride. "It's working! The moat is filling up with water! This is going to be a real castle!"

"More words count less! Another winner!"

"Now we need a drawbridge over the moat where the door is!" muttered Smithsonian. "We'll have to use driftwood. There's a lot of it back there by the cliff."

Karma, Joyride and Wilderness scampered back and forth from the cliff, bringing in driftwood.

All the while, the waves folded thunder on the sand, wave after wave breaking, washing in and then hissing back to meet the next wave. Sea gulls flew overhead, squawking, and pelicans floated by far out on the water, scouting for fish.

"The sage stays behind, thus he is ahead! Oh, what a winner that one is!"

"Bigger pieces of driftwood," said Smithsonian. "The small ones fall into the moat."

"In action, watch the timing! Oh, there's one! There's one! Anyone who forgets that might as well throw in the towel!"

Figure of speech! *Throw in the towel* means *give up!*

They finished a good solid drawbridge.

“Now the *battlements!*” cried Smithsonian. “Towers all around the rim of the walls!”

This was hard to do, because the battlements kept falling off into the moat.

“My battlement fell into the moat!” shouted Wilderness.

“Dryer sand for the battlements!” cried Smithsonian. “Dryer sand!”

“*Better stop short than fill to the brim!* Get that? Get that, woodrats? If not, you’ll learn the hard way!”

“Now the *keep!* Now the *keep!*” cried Smithsonian. “A huge tower in the middle! With an opening at the bottom for the Great Hall!”

This was hard to do. They could build the keep, but whenever they tried to make a Great Hall at the bottom the keep caved in.

“Reinforce the Great Hall with driftwood!” cried Smithsonian. “That’s the only way to keep the keep from caving in!”

“*Precious things lead one astray!* Oh, is *that* ever true!”

They placed strong pieces of driftwood inside the keep to support the walls of the Great Hall.

"It's working," grunted Masquerade. "The driftwood's keeping the keep from caving in."

"Now a chimney on the top of the keep!" cried Smithsonian. "It's really starting to look like a castle!"

"High winds do not last all morning! Remember that, woodrats! Remember that one when it looks like all is lost!"

They built a really handsome chimney. By now they were exhausted and wanted to take a break, but Smithsonian urged them on.

"We're almost done!" he shouted.

"All we need now is a *Gatehouse*! A little house just on the inside of the gate opening where the drawbridge crosses the moat. That finishes the castle! It looks great!"

"He who stands on tiptoe is not steady! Oh, is *that* ever true!"

They finished the gatehouse and fell back on the sand, gasping. It had been a very great effort for them, definitely the greatest effort they ever made in their lives. They had never worked so hard.

"This was one hard job," groaned Lifeboat. "I hope Way-Woo is satisfied."

"Yes. What about Way-Woo?" groaned Masquerade. "Is he or she still out there?"

"He who knows he has enough is rich, my friends! And Yes! That's one great castle! A *great* castle! Look at those battlements! Look at that keep! My congratulations to the architect!"

Smithsonian lifted himself on one paw, too tired to rise to his feet.

“Thank you. Thank you, Way-Woo.”

“Accept being unimportant!”

Karma turned toward the surf, where Way-Woo was lazily swimming back and forth, humming to herself and waving his flippers.

“We accept,” she said in an exhausted tone of voice. “And we’re glad you appreciate our hard work.”

“Oh, I certainly do! Garuda won’t be back for another hour. Why don’t you just lie there and admire your work? You’ve earned that!”

And that’s what they did, dozing off from time to time but very proud and pleased when they looked at the castle.

“You know,” said Lifeboat, “that really is one fine castle we built. One fine castle.”

“One *fine* castle,” said Joyride.

“Look at it! Will you just look at it!” said Masquerade. “Who would have believed it?”

“Another success,” Karma pointed out. “Like when we rescued Jane April.”

They didn’t notice the tide was coming in. Except for Smithsonian, they didn’t even know what tides were.

But they did begin to see what was happening to their castle.

“The moat looks like it’s getting deeper,” said Wilderness curiously.

“One great moat!” shouted Masquerade, who was lying on her back with her eyes closed, half asleep.

Karma ambled over to take a closer look.

“If it gets much deeper it’ll wash away the drawbridge.”

Feeling a little worried, they dragged themselves over, one by one. The water in the moat was licking at the driftwood drawbridge.

They stared at the rising water. There was an opening now in the moat where the water swished in from the edge of the waves and then back out again.

“Where’d that opening in the moat come from?” asked Wilderness. “It wasn’t there before.”

He tried to close the opening with more sand, but it didn’t work. The sand just got washed away.

Suddenly the drawbridge fell into the moat and was washed out with the water swishing back into the waves.

“The drawbridge!” cried Joyride.

Way-Woo was swimming back and forth out in the surf. She was watching them with his big brown eyes.

"Having a little *trouble* there, woodrats?"

Lifeboat immediately looked up and faced Way-Woo, his head turning back and forth as Way-Woo swam back and forth.

"We're a little worried that something may be happening to the sand castle we built for you. I'm sorry to have to tell you that the drawbridge just caved in."

"Caved in, did it? That drawbridge was part of the contract, you know!"

"Lifeboat!" shouted Joyride.

Lifeboat whirled around.

"The wall is caving in now! The Gatehouse fell into the moat!"

"My Gatehouse?" asked Way-Woo, raising both flippers into the air in a gesture of alarm. "Fell into the moat? How can that be? Are you sure?"

"Of course we're sure!" shouted Masquerade angrily. "Something's happening to the ocean! It's getting higher!"

"Something happening to the *ocean*? How can that *be*? Are you *sure*?" asked Way-Woo in a very surprised tone of voice.

Wilderness was jumping up and down now, his eyes riveted on the crumbling sand castle.

"The whole wall just went down and the battlements with it! That great battlement I built! It's nothing but wet sand! The whole castle is turning back into sand! All our work!"

Way-Woo was slapping the water into a splashing froth with her flippers, spinning around and waving his tail in the air.

"The world is ruled by letting things take their course! It cannot be ruled by interfering!" she screamed. *"Write that down! Write that down, woodrats!"*

Karma, speaking in a strangely calm voice, pointed at what was left of the castle.

"The keep. The keep is caving in too. The Great Hall is gone."

Suddenly Smithsonian whirled to face the others.

"The tide is coming in! Oceans have tides! I forgot! The tides rise and fall, the ocean water comes in and out, high and low! That's what happened here! The tide came in!"

"It was a trick!" shouted Masquerade. *"Way-Woo lives in the ocean, he or she knows about tides! He or she knew all along that the castle would be washed away! A mean cruel nasty trick!"*

"Definitely a trick," muttered Smithsonian angrily.

"I don't like Way-Woo anymore!" shouted Wilderness.

"Wait!" said Karma suddenly. *"Wait!"*

She turned to the others.

"I just figured it out! Remember we asked Way-Woo why she or he wanted us to build a sand castle, according to the contract, and she or he said we'd find out when we finished?"

"We remember," said Smithsonian gloomily.

"Well, we just found out!"

"Found out *what?*" shouted Joyride.

Way-Woo was listening to all this, cackling to himself and rapidly twisting her long seal whiskers. Suddenly he shouted to them, her raspy voice ringing out over the surf.

"Right! Found out *what?* Found out *what*, woodrats? You did all that hard work and it came to *nothing*! I see no castle there! Do *you* see a castle there?"

Here she started chanting in his raspy voice.

"No castle, no castle, no castle! No castle anywhere! No castle, no castle, no castle! *No castle anywhere!*"

"Oh, so *mean*, such a *mean seal!*" cried Joyride.

"Oh, I'm such a meany, Oh, I'm such a meany!" Way-Woo sang out.

They stood around the place where their wonderful castle had been. The strong walls, the moat and the Gatehouse, the Keep and the Great Hall and the battlements. The proud chimney. There was nothing left at all, just wet sand with the water washing over it, back and forth.

All they heard was the sound of the waves. All they saw was the great deep and dark blue ocean stretching away to the horizon, vast and calm. Peaceful. The sun was setting, and there were

billions of flickering little sparkles on the surface of the water. Seven pelicans flew by on silent wings.

Suddenly Masquerade and Karma exchanged glances and began to chuckle.

Smithsonian started to chuckle too.

Lifeboat and Joyride joined in.

Finally Wilderness.

And then they were all laughing out loud! They just couldn't stop laughing! They fell down on the wet sand and rolled around, laughing!

"No castle! It's all gone!" laughed Masquerade.

"Like it never was!" laughed Smithsonian.

"The woodrats found out!" Way-Woo shrieked from the surf, spinning on his tail and clapping her flippers.

"They found out! Found out why I wanted them to build me a sand castle! Now they know! Now they know!"

The woodrats, still laughing, turned to face Way-Woo. Lifeboat stepped forward.

"Way-Woo!" he cried, laughing as he spoke.

"We are *sorry* that your castle is *kaput*! But we know that was part of your contract! So we are also *happy*! We were happy when we were building your sand castle, and we are happy now to see it gone!"

Masquerade chimed in.

“And we are not angry with you – although we were for a minute there -- because you knew about the tides and knew all along that the castle would be washed away. No blame!”

“Yes! It’s been a *great* day!” said Way-Woo, finally no longer dashing back and forth across the surf pounding her flippers, now just lazily swimming around in the waves, looking at them over his shoulder.

“You’ll always remember it, I bet!”

She swam close to the shore, almost out of the water.

“Always remember why I wanted you to build me a sand castle!”

Karma laughed and waved.

“Always!”

“And do you remember I told you all this is magic?”

“We remember!”

“So now watch this!”

And she leapt up into the sky, clapped his flippers once, and disappeared!

They stared for a moment at the spot where she or he had just been.

Smithsonian turned to Karma.

"Well? You know what I'm going to ask."

"Of course I do, Smitheroonie!"

She held up the bracelet.

"The Eye of the Heart opened when we all laughed. *It was a glimpse.*"

"A glimpse of *what?*" demanded Lifeboat.

They all looked at each other.

And all at once they burst out laughing again!

They felt a sudden rush of wind. They looked up. I'm sure you know who just returned to take them back home!

"Garuda!" they all cried.

Once again the great Golden Eagle flew close to the ground, once again they all found themselves sitting in the silver chairs with seat belts that had a button on the arm you could push if you wanted to recline. Once again they took to the air, this time in a darkening sky. They looked back and watched the sun set over the deep and dark blue ocean stretching away to the ends of the earth.

They could hardly keep from smiling whenever they thought of the great castle they had built that day!

In only a few moments Garuda flew down over the upper meadow, and just as they had suddenly found themselves sitting on the beach, they suddenly found themselves down on the driveway in front of Smithsonian's workshop nest. Back home.

Lifeboat smiled and shook his head.

“Well! Enough for one day?”

But Masquerade suddenly had a thought. Can you guess what it was, if you remember how it went when all the other seeds sprouted?

“Karma! You never switched the bracelet!”

They all froze for a moment, exchanging confused and worried glances.

“Do it now,” Smithsonian muttered, gritting his teeth and staring down at the ground.

“Do it now!”

She did.

And who do you think came bouncing down the driveway again?

You guessed it! There they were!

Jefferson and Airplane!

“Oh, here we are, here we are!” sang Jefferson, waving his Frisbee.

“Back again! Back with the woodrats!”

Then they sang together, as if it was the greatest thing in the world!

"The rabbits are back, the rabbits are back, the rabbits, the rabbits, the rabbits are back! Watch us bounce! Watch us pounce! How many gallons in an ounce? Oh, what a great *rhyme* that was!"

They came bounding down the driveway, doing front flips and pirouettes, back flips and high kicks, their arms outstretched, grinning from ear to ear, Airplane wildly swinging around the backpack with Vasuki inside.

"I don't believe it! I don't believe it!" cried Lifeboat. "Those crazy rabbits again!"

"The rabbits, the rabbits! Screamed Wilderness.

Joyride turned to Lifeboat, pointing her paw.

"But remember how we *missed* them! We all cried and wanted them to stay! *You* cried, Sailor! We even wanted to go with them! And they gave me my *birthday party*!"

"They planted those seeds in our heads! You have to give them credit for that!" said Smithsonian with a big smile, waving to Jefferson and Airplane.

"And the bracelet," said Masquerade, nodding her head. "They gave us the magic bracelet with the Eye of the Heart on it."

"They started off the whole thing!" shouted Wilderness. "It was crazy but it was also terrific! If not for those seeds and all that crazy stuff I wouldn't have got to fly with pixie wings!"

Suddenly he turned to Jefferson and Airplane, who were dancing in a circle around the woodrats, clapping their paws.

"And we know you're best friends with Sidd!" he cried in an accusing tone of voice, turning around so he could keep facing the rabbits. "You were in cahoots all along!"

"Cahoots!" cried Airplane. "Cahoots! I haven't heard that word in a long time! It reminds me of *hoots*! And that reminds me of *owls*! And that reminds me of *Sophy*!"

"Probably another friend of you two?" asked Smithsonian, smiling slyly and winking at Jefferson.

"Friends! Friends!" cried Jefferson. "Oh, what is so precious as true friendship? So rare? We have so many friends! You can't imagine! And you rats are our *best* friends!"

"Oh, *that* again!" snorted Masquerade. "I bet you two tell everyone they're your best friends!"

"I bet they know Way-Woo!" shouted Wilderness.

"Way-Woo?" said Jefferson. "The seal who's neither a boy nor a girl? Of *course* we know Way-Woo! We're best friends!"

"Rats!" shouted Airplane, suddenly rushing up to them and whispering as if it were a secret, looking all around as if someone might be trying to overhear.

"Did you get to see Vasuki again?"

Then he suddenly shrieked.

"As if I didn't know! *As if I didn't know!* It was all part of the plan! The plan, the scheme, the agenda, the program, the crude outline!"

"I know why you're here," said Karma quietly.

Jefferson whirled to face her.

"What? *Why?* What did you say? What? You know why? Okay! *Why do you think we're here?* I bet you don't know! I bet you a *billion pesos* you don't know!"

"You're on!"

"On!" screamed Airplane. "*On*, she said! The bet's on! *The big bet's on!*"

"*You're here to take the bracelet back!*"

Jefferson and Airplane immediately collapsed to the ground. Purple smoke came out of their ears. They began doing pushups, counting until they had done ten. They sat up, gasping, staring at Karma. They helped each other to their feet.

Still staring at Karma, they leaned against each other trying to look very casual, as if they didn't have a care in the world.

But Karma knew, and we all know, that she had guessed right. They were there to take back the magic bracelet with the Eye of the Heart on it. Which wasn't really very nice. You *never* take back a birthday present.

Jefferson leaned over and whispered in Airplane's big rabbit ear.

"Should we lie?"

"You mean be dishonest?" Airplane whispered back.

"Yes. A billion pesos is a lot of moolah!"

"But we don't have any cash with us anyway! We're flat broke!"

"We'll just give her a bad check!"

"Sounds right."

Jefferson turned to Karma, clearing his throat.

"Somehow, by some crazy freak reminding me of myself, you guessed right. And I seem to be out of cash today! Will you accept a check?"

"Yes. I will."

Jefferson got a sly grin on his face.

"Okay. Okay... At the same time as *I* hand *you* the *check*, *you* hand *me* the *bracelet*. That make sense? Can you handle that?"

"Be careful, Karma," warned Wilderness, who had been listening very carefully.

"We're all watching, Jefferson," said Masquerade. "No funny business!"

"Funny business! Funny business! *From us?*"

The woodrats rolled their eyes. This was the craziest remark they ever expected to hear in all their lives!

The exchange was made without incident. Jefferson hung the bracelet over his ear and Karma tore up the check.

“Okay!” cried Jefferson. “I see we’re all on the same page! It’s been a pleasure doing business with you!”

“Likewise!” smiled Karma.

The rabbits looked at each other. Airplane pulled a huge clock out of the backpack with Vasuki in it and held it in front of Jefferson. He didn’t know how to tell time himself and always showed the clock to Jefferson, who also didn’t know how to tell time but pretended he did.

“My goodness!” cried Jefferson. “Half past a horse’s butt! We better get moving!”

And once again, as they had the first time they left when all the woodrats cried and wanted them to stay, they started to grow larger and larger.

“We’re late for a very important top secret private appointment! Nobody you know!” Airplane shouted down.

Larger and larger, looming over the meadow like mountains.

“Wish we’d had time for you to fill us in on what you’ve been up to since we saw you last!” laughed Jefferson in a voice like thunder.

Fading and fading, becoming transparent.

“As if we didn’t know! As if we didn’t know!” thundered Airplane, laughing wildly also. “*As if we didn’t know!*”

And they were gone.

The woodrats sighed and flopped to the ground.

They lay on the ground for almost an hour, no one saying a word. They were remembering everything that had happened, all the way back to when it all began, when they had gathered in front of Smithsonian's nest to talk about Karma's suspicion and what they could do to distract her so she wouldn't be preoccupied.

They remembered being frightened by the Helix Double under the house by the humming batteries.

They remembered the dental floss escapade in the bathroom, which was dangerous and thrilling and showed them all that there was something magic about Karma because of the way she spoke to Rebar.

Wilderness remembered his Vision Quest when he made the dental floss mistake and was rescued by Fall Guy in the dark, although he didn't know at that time that it was Fall Guy.

Lifeboat remembered his interview with Sidd.

They remembered it all, the whole great adventure, lying there in the driveway.

The rabbits, the birthday party under the ground, the magic bracelet birthday present, Vasuki, the seeds planted in their heads.

They remembered meeting Fall Guy and Peter Pixie Pepper, the Big Fight, learning about the Invisible Trouble Maker. They remembered Jane April and the man who painted a picture of her, the eclipse of the moon and the constellations coming alive, they remembered Sammy and Parker and Big Momma, they

remembered flying on pixie wings and Sophy the Wise Old Owl and building the sand castle and Way-Woo the seal.

They remembered what they had glimpsed when the Eye of the Heart was open.

It all streamed through their minds, streamed through their minds...

Masquerade looked up.

"Now what?"

Around four o'clock that afternoon, while the woodrats were busy building Way-Woo's doomed sand castle, Count Blackhole, the dragonfly, according to the arrangement, returned to the pond for his little chat with Sidd.

"Sidd! Good to get together at long last! I've been a secret admirer of yours!" said Count Blackhole cheerfully, fluttering down in the mud at the edge of the pond in front of Sidd.

"I'm pleased! What's on your mind?"

"I'll get right to the point. That's probably your style too. No small talk. 'Custody of the Tongue,' as they say."

"Shoot, Blackhole!"

"Well, it's about this business of 'more here than meets the eye.' Karma's suspicion. Which, I know, you verified. Told her she was right."

"Right. She's right."

"And you spoke about this 'Eye of the Heart,' and 'glimpses.' This 'Eye of the Heart' which can *see*, in glimpses, the more here than meets the eyes of the head."

"Right again, Blackhole!"

"And this suspicion kicked off a whole giant chain of events for the woodrats! Rabbits, seeds planted in the woodrats' heads, a magic bracelet, a giant snake named Vasuki! Glimpses!"

"You're well-informed! Totally well-informed! Up to speed all the way!"

Count Blackhole paused and thoughtfully licked one of his wings.

"I'll cut to the chase. I have come to agree with you! Although I am, as you know, a member in good standing of Count Thinktank's Messenger Organization, along with the other Counts, Showtime, and Anchormann, all of whom are firmly convinced that there is *nothing* here that doesn't meet the eye, I have come to agree with you."

"And how come, Blackhole? Why is that?"

"I think it's because I am a stargazer. I spend a lot of time gazing up at the stars at night. It makes me wonder. It makes me think there is more here than meets the eye. As a matter of fact, I am quite certain."

"Are you going to hand in your resignation?"

"I already have. Thinktank was furious, begged me to reconsider, but there was nothing he could do."

"Good! Good show, Blackhole! You did the right thing."

And here Sidd held out one of his muddy feet, Blackhole extended a slender feeler, and they accomplished what among people would be shaking hands.

"And so, if I understand correctly, I am now on the Path, the Great Journey."

"Indeed you are! Each glimpse is a step forward on the Path. The stars are a great place to have glimpses. You may need nothing more!"

"And what about the woodrats? They too are on the Path?"

"The woodrats! My dear Karma, and all the others. Smithsonian, Wilderness, Lifeboat, Masquerade and Joyride. I think of them often. Very often."

"What will become of them?"

"Oh, Blackhole, Blackhole! What will become of them? No one knows what will become of those on the Path! No one knows. Some will forget every glimpse they ever had. Some will forge on ahead. Some will just live out their lives as if they had never heard of the Path. Some will only remember the Path in the very last minute of their lives and find themselves at Path's End! Karma and Joyride, Masquerade and Smithsonian, Lifeboat and Wilderness! I love them, you know!"

Count Blackhole noticed that Sidd had tears in his eyes.

Epilogue

Lifeboat was the first to die.

Joyride discovered him in the morning. He died in his sleep, with a smile on his face. He had a magic dream pillow under his head, stuffed with rosemary and mugwort he had gathered with Wilderness.

Smithsonian died next.

Masquerade found him slumped over his workbench. A pile of old batteries were stacked neatly in front of him.

Wilderness died next.

Karma found him down in the orchard, his leatherman tool gripped tightly in his paw.

Masquerade died next.

Joyride found her in Smithsonian's abandoned workshop, one of Smithsonian's screwdrivers on her lap.

Karma died next.

Joyride found her in the upper meadow by Sammy's grave.

Joyride is still alive.

The End