

TRAIL OF THE MAGI

A Chipmunk Journey From One Side Of
Some Mountains To The Other

COLFAX MANN



TRAIL OF
THE MAGI

Also By Colfax Mann

The Gospel of Banxsome Bogg

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*A Chipmunk Journey From
One Side Of Some Mountains
To The Other*

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*For Shirlene, who made the whole journey
possible by going with and sharing the load.
You're still the best gift.*

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT CHIPMUNKS

Dear Children:

Chipmunks are a lot like people. Though they come in several sizes and their external markings can differ somewhat, inside they are all very much the same. The hopes and dreams of chipmunks differ little from chipmunk to chipmunk—they all want to love, to be loved, and to have enough to take care of themselves—just like people.

Chipmunks also are like people in that they are omnivores. They are opportunistic feeders, dining on anything from bugs to nuts, and they love berries, seeds, and even flowers. They like to secure up a little store, a cache, just as we do in our cupboards, pantries, refrigerators, and freezers. If you watch a chipmunk long enough you will see it, cheek pouches full, running off to empty the contents of its cheeks into its cache.

Like us, chipmunks do not hibernate in the winter, although they do become lazier, sleep more, and come out only when the weather is quite nice, by winter standards. During these months it is their cache that sees them through.

But there is another way in which chipmunks are like people, and this similarity is nothing chipmunks should be

proud of. You see, like us, chipmunks almost always persecute any chipmunk who is different from the norm. A chipmunk born a runt will be chased and nipped at, ostracized, and sometimes even killed, as will a chipmunk born with any unusual markings.

Mother Nature is always experimenting with life, ever trying to find stronger, more vibrant combinations, and though she fails almost every time it is the relatively few successes that have made all the variety of life around us. And we, the ordinary, do not like that she is trying to improve upon us, just as those who came before us did not like it when she made us.

But there are ways other than physical that we are being improved upon; there are other opportunities for us to become better, higher beings, and unlike Mother Nature's attempts to improve us, which are pressed upon us without our consent, we are free to choose whether or not we will take part in these other methods of bettering creation.

Chipmunks too are free to choose whether to enter into this profound transformation. This is the story of two chipmunks who, driven by the pain of being persecuted for being different, decide to risk everything, even their lives, in a desperate chance at a better existence. But what constitutes a better existence? What constitutes a better life? Is it the circumstances in which we find ourselves, or is it something deeper—something *within* us? And do our circumstances create our inner state, or does what is within us create our circumstances?

Just as people, in their lives, must determine for themselves the answers to these questions, so too must chipmunks.

CHAPTER I

A MISERABLE EXISTENCE

It was the hot time of the year, when the grasses were tall and swayed in the breeze, and when berries—blues and reds—filled the bushes for the bears and the birds. It was morning, and a lone hiker heading out on the Colorado Trail noticed all the chipmunks warily eyeing him. Stopping and reaching into a pouch hanging about his waist, the hiker withdrew a bag of trail mix. All the chipmunks leaned forward in anticipation, eyes fixed on the hiker. One chirped.

The hiker reached into the bag, took out a handful of the colorful mixture and threw it into the weeds at the edge of the trail. Then he turned and headed up the trail. As soon as he began walking away every chipmunk within sight of the event dashed toward the weeds to try score some of the trail mix. They knew there'd be delicious nuts in those weeds, along with raisins, other dried fruit, and even sweeter things than nature herself could make. Nature could keep you healthy, but man could make you fat.

As the chipmunks ran to the weeds they fell into a sort of order. The biggest, strongest chipmunks were out in front, followed by a large group of the rest. No ordinary chipmunk dared try passing the leaders, for to do so would invite violent

attack. Within the large group, however, chipmunks fought and bit as they ran, threatening one another with piercing chirps as each chipmunk tried to better his or her position by getting nearest the front of the pack, for the first chipmunks to arrive at the food would be the chipmunks who got to choose the tastiest morsels. In the midst of the large group, being forced farther and farther back with each passing chipmunk, was a chipmunk who, although full grown, was about one-third smaller than the other chipmunks. His name was Stump, not for his tail, most of which was missing, but because in stature he was similar to a tree stump—shorter than all the rest of his kind. As Stump ran he did not bother to fight with the other chipmunks to improve his position, for he knew he could not win. As the rest of the chipmunks jostled for space, the best Stump could do was try to remain unnoticed.

In fact, as Stump ran he wondered why he even bothered. The bigger chipmunks would crowd him out as they always did, and he would go away hungry as always. *It was not fair*, Stump thought, the way the strong got stronger while the weak and puny could barely get enough to get by. If he were to ever speak with the Great Chipmunk he would ask why the Great Chipmunk had made it so. Stump himself could imagine a far better way, so it did not make sense to him that the Great Chipmunk could not imagine a better world and then go about creating it.

Suddenly the whole group began crashing upon itself in a panicked effort to stop and Stump was mashed beneath the feet of several chipmunks he had managed to stay in front of. A terrible fight had broken out among the two chipmunks who ran out in front of all the rest. The group ground to a tumbling halt and dared not pass the combatants, for these two—Buster and Toadstool—were the fattest, meanest, strongest chipmunks in the area. *Let them kill each other*, every chipmunk in the crowd thought, *as long as it is not me*.

Stump wriggled from beneath the chipmunks on top of him and worked his way forward to see the fight.

By the time Stump reached the front Buster was getting the better of Toadstool, and by a good margin. Toadstool's shoulder was slightly torn, and as Toadstool got up after being tossed by Buster, Toadstool's eyes met Stump's. Stump could see in Toadstool's eyes that all Toadstool wanted was an end to the fight. As Stump stared into Toadstool's beaten eyes something new came into them. *Rage*. Immediately Stump knew the rage was not directed at Buster, but at the runt who was enjoying the scene, for as they stared at one another Stump realized he was smiling at the whole view. He was enjoying seeing the mighty fall, only now one of the mighty had caught him in his pleasure.

Stump erased the smile and looked downward as Toadstool turned away to face Buster, who had begun a charge. Buster chirped violently as he raced forward in a wild, biting advance, and Toadstool had had enough. Rather than meet the advance, Toadstool turned and ran several feet away. Buster instantly stopped advancing, for with Toadstool's retreat Toadstool had admitted defeat. Buster had what he wanted now—first choice of the food in the weeds—so there was no longer a reason to fight. He turned and looked to the crowd of waiting, watching chipmunks, knowing that none dared try passing him, and as he did he glowed in his victory. Toadstool too turned to the group, angry in his embarrassment.

“Who else would like to try me?” Buster bellowed. The entire group lowered their eyes.

“I thought so,” Buster said, and he turned to go into the weeds. The rest began to move forward.

“Stop!” Toadstool shouted and bluff-charged the advancing chipmunks. They all stopped. “Buster may pass me,” Toadstool bellowed, “but none of you will go until I say so.” He paused and reveled in the fear on the faces in the group,

and smiled. "Unless, of course," he said, "any of you want to fight me?"

Not one chipmunk made a sound.

"Okay, you may go," Toadstool said, and the crowd began filing cautiously past him. He watched them pass until Stump neared him, trying to sneak by unseen.

"Not you," Toadstool said to Stump. Stump froze and slunk down in deference. He knew what was about to happen. Toadstool needed a weak beast upon which he could vent his wrath, a poor beast onto which he could pass his own shame. The poor beast was to be Stump.

"*You disgusting stub-tailed runt,*" Toadstool snarled at little Stump. Stump slunk even lower. Perhaps the little chipmunk's body language did not defer enough, or perhaps he did not keep his eyes cast downward in complete, pure surrender. Or, more likely, perhaps it would not have mattered what Stump did or how Stump did it. Without another word Toadstool jumped on the little chipmunk, flipped Stump over on his back and dug his teeth into Stump's neck, ready to rend Stump's throat wide open.

Stump froze, more still than the rocks in the mountains that looked down on his shame, his tiny feet pointed straight up in the air like a statue tipped over on its back. He dared not move, he dared not even breathe, and he tried his best to give not even the slightest indication of resistance. Stump knew his life was in the hands of this mean, evil beast, and though he hated himself far more than Toadstool could ever hate him, for some odd reason he still hoped to live. He tried to keep from breathing, knowing any movement at all might further anger his attacker.

The crowd that had passed Toadstool was now stopped and looking back to see if Toadstool would kill the little chipmunk. They did not care whether he did or not, they simply did not want to miss the show if it happened. Once Toadstool knew they had seen his fierceness and were reminded of his

ability to kill any chipmunk other than Buster, he let go of Stump's throat and stepped back. Stump still did not move; his legs remained in the air as they had been, and he still held himself as if his throat were in Toadstool's teeth.

"The rest can go eat," Toadstool said, and as soon as he spoke the crowd of chipmunks sprang off into the weeds. He turned back to Stump. "But not you," he said. "I should kill you now—I should save you the misery of a runt's life. I will next time." As he lay there Stump could not help but feel that Toadstool was right. He would probably be better off dead. The world certainly wouldn't miss him. Toadstool grunted, then turned and walked into the weeds. Stump remained still until he heard the sound of Toadstool chasing another chipmunk off its claim. Then Stump jumped up to scurry off toward the hillside. The last thing he saw of the whole affair, in a glimpse as he began to run, was the man who had thrown the food standing just beyond the weeds, seeming to view with glee all that he was seeing, enjoying all the chaos he had created.

Stump ran around a log next to the base of the hill and hid behind it. He closed his eyes and the image of the man came back to his mind. There, quivering behind the log and letting out all the horror he had held in while trying to stay still during the attack, Stump remembered his father saying how stupid men were, how utterly lost they were in the real world out here where the chipmunks lived. That was why, Stump's father had said, men built fake worlds around themselves. But at that moment Stump would gladly have taken any other world, real or fake, if it would have saved him from this miserable one he was stuck in.

CHAPTER 2

A DREAM COMES

Stump trembled behind the log, racked by shudder after shudder, sucking in loud breaths between shudders, completely unaware of anything around him. He would die soon, he knew, for such is the destiny of a runt. Someone would kill him, just as someone had bitten off half his tail the first time he had come out to meet the bigger world. He had emerged from the den smiling and full of hope, he had re-entered it determined to hide in there forever. Had it not been for his father the other chipmunks would have killed him that day, but then, had it not been for Rockhopper, a lot of chipmunks' lives might be different.

Thinking of his lost father calmed him some, but also made him more aware of his own weakness. Chipmunks like Buster and Toadstool hated Rockhopper, for Rockhopper used his strength in good ways. Rockhopper was big and kind, able to do as he pleased, and he pleased to do good. That's what made Stump's being a runt all the more terrible—he was the son of the greatest chipmunk the river area had known. What a disappointment he must have been to his father, Stump thought, and then he wondered something he'd wondered before—was that the reason Rockhopper had

left? Because of him? Was his puny son too much humiliation to bear, even for a chipmunk such as Rockhopper? A tear came to Stump's eye as he decided, as he had decided many times before, that this must be the case. He was the reason his father had gone. Nowhere in the world, Stump knew, was there a sorrier excuse for a chipmunk than he. Stump took a deep, sad breath, and finally quit trembling.

Stump now heard coming from the distant weeds the sounds of the other chipmunks. The occasional chirp or growl let him know his fellows were still gathering their tasty bounty, stuffing their cheeks with the goodies to carry them back to their dens. Tomorrow they would be well fed and bigger, while he would be hungrier and smaller still. Yes, he would die soon. He surely would. He unsuccessfully fought back a second tear as he envisioned his future—his own kind would drive him out to a bloody, lonely death, a death that would finally repair the filthy mistake nature had made when it had created him.

"Stump," an old voice said from the other end of the log. Stump jumped and spun around. Had he been so lost in his misery that he hadn't noticed another chipmunk back here with him? He hoped the voice would belong to a friendly chipmunk, for he could not endure another beating. When Stump saw the voice's owner, he sighed.

"Oh, hi Eli," Stump grunted to the scraggly, graying chipmunk. "What do you want?" Stump didn't mean to be rude, but he was. It was no matter though, for he knew that 'Old Eli' was the one chipmunk near the river that deserved even less respect than he did.

"I want to tell you something," the old chipmunk said. "Something you need to hear."

"I've had a bad enough day already, Eli," Stump said. Eli nodded.

"I know, Stump," he said. "I was watching. And I also know your mother probably told you that I'm useless and to

stay away from me, but I need to tell you something. You'll find I'm not as crazy as they all say." He paused and pointed at Stump. "Nor are you as weak."

Stump started to look interested, then remembered something else his mother had told him about Eli, something far more defiling. Whatever interest was forming on Stump's face turned to accusation. "Yeah," Stump said, "my mother did tell me you were useless, and she also told me you steal from men. You are low, Eli. Leave me alone please. I don't wanna talk." Stump turned his back to Eli.

"Bah" Eli snapped and waved his hand as if wiping away Stump's accusation. "Why chipmunks say it's *low* to steal from men I just don't know," he said, then pointed toward the chipmunks fighting and feeding in the weeds. "*They* take from man," Eli said, "and by taking it openly they place themselves *beneath* man. Look at how they fight and frolic for the man's amusement, as if that man were the Great Chipmunk Himself. It riles me to see chipmunks behave so lowly. I am not beneath such a stupid beast as man. And, Stump, neither was your father." This caused Stump to turn back around. "Besides," Eli added, "the men get all they have *from* the Great Chipmunk anyway. I take only what was intended for me all along, rather than leave it to the men to decide whether they want to give it to me or not."

Stump shook his head. "My mother was right about you, Eli. You talk nonsense."

"Only to those who don't want to hear the truth, Stump. But *your father* understood me."

"My father? Why do you keep bringing up my father?"

Eli smiled. He had raised Stump's curiosity now, and he knew it. "What else has your mother told you about me?" Eli asked. "Did she bother to tell you I was your father's best friend?" As Eli asked this his eyebrows raised and he fixed his unblinking gaze on Stump. Stump stared a moment and Eli could see the resistance rising in his face.

"No!" Stump finally blurted out. "My father *your* friend? Never! My father was the greatest, strongest chipmunk by the river. He fought off all others to win my mother. He was a good chipmunk, not an old fool like you!"

"And he was my friend." Eli said again.

"Never!" Stump was quite offended. "My father was not a fool!"

"Nor am I," Eli said with a strength Stump had not heard since his father departed. Stump took a step backward and sank. Eli leaned forward and his face became kindly without losing its seriousness. "Stump," he said gently, "if you listen to me, then I promise you one thing—before you go to the Great Chipmunk, you will understand who the fools are, and who they are not." Stump stayed quiet, so Eli went on.

"Do you know *why* your father went away, Stump, or *where* he went?"

An attitude of civility began to come over Stump as he realized Eli might have the answer to the question that had bothered him since the day his father disappeared, the question everyone else avoided answering.

"No," Stump said politely. "I don't know why he left, or where he went. My mother said that every chipmunk has one responsibility and it's to make more chipmunks. But some chipmunks, like Rockhopper, have a second purpose—to make a journey to find a place of their own. That's all she told me."

Eli smiled a knowing grin, then looked westward. "Your mother's wrong Stump. *ALL* chipmunks have a journey to make, but most never try. Your father did. And *I* know where he went." He turned back to Stump and could see Stump's eyes fill with eagerness to know. Eli pointed where he'd been looking. "He went up the trail, Stump. Over the mountains. Where the men go."

"What?" Stump burst out, his civility gone. "I told you I've had a bad enough day already. Why would my father have

left us to go over the mountains on the man trail?" Eli looked at Stump.

"Because I told him to. That's why."

Stump drew back. "Why would my father have listened to you,?" he asked, and then both chipmunks fell silent as they heard the chatter of the other chipmunks departing the weeds with full cheeks, full bellies, and full hearts.

When it was again safe to talk Eli said, "This is why, Stump," then motioned with his paw to the other chipmunks. "*They* are content when their bellies are full," he said. "But *you* are like your father, Stump. Even a full belly would never fulfill you. That's why your father listened to me, and that's why you'll listen too. You're just like him."

"I am nothing like my father," Stump said, then looked down at his tiny body. "He's Rockhopper; I'm a *runt*."

Now Eli reached out a paw and put in on Stump's shoulder. "No Stump, you *are* just like your father. Your father was a Great Beast, as are you."

"Ha!" Stump laughed, then realized what he had done and hurried to correct any misunderstandings. "I'm not laughing at my father," he explained. "I'm laughing about me. The first time I came out of our hole I came out a runt, and I went back in it a runt with half a tail. They would have killed me that day if Rockhopper'd let them. He should have. I'll live a sorry life and die soon, maybe even today—if Toadstool feels like it."

"Bah!" Eli spit. "And they say I speak nonsense! Toadstool and his like—*they* are nothing but beggars. They take what man gives them as if it were not already theirs, and they let the men make fools of them all. Look at them! Your father never begged anything from man, he never stooped so low, and your size has kept you pure—it's prevented you from becoming a beggar. And that's why I have to tell you what I told your father, Stump. Because you *are* like him, and you can hear me. A beggar couldn't. Now listen." Eli pushed down on

Stump's small shoulder, and Stump sat down, eyes on Eli, ready to at least listen.

"Do you know where the man gets his food?" Eli asked Stump.

"No."

"He gets it from the other side of the mountains. From the other end of that trail he always walks. And do you know who gives it to him?"

"No."

"The Great Chipmunk, that's who."

Stump's head went back a little as though he had been mildly shocked. "All chipmunks talk of the Great Chipmunk," he said. "We go to Him when we die. Are you saying you know where to find Him now?"

"Yes."

"But how?"

"I saw it in a dream, Stump. Plus, it all makes sense. It made enough sense for your father to take the trail to Him. Your father is at the other end of that trail now, in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk, dwelling with the Great Chipmunk."

Stump looked up in thought, then shot Eli an accusing look. "You can't possibly know that, Eli."

"Ah, but I do. I feel it in *my bones*, Stump. But listen and see if it doesn't make sense to you as it made sense to your father." Eli pointed toward the river. "See, man takes his things, the little things he sometimes accidentally leaves by the river, and he takes those little things up that trail, over the mountains to the Valley of the Great Chipmunk. There he gives the things, as gifts of honor, to the Great Chipmunk. If the Great Chipmunk is pleased, He gives the man some food. The man may eat some of it, and then when he gets back here he must feed the chipmunks the rest. Doesn't it make perfect sense Stump?"

Stump thought. "Then what about the men who don't feed us when they come back down the trail?" Suspicion

clouded Stump's voice.

Eli smiled. He had already answered this question for himself. "They either did not make it all the way to the Great Chipmunk, or they are evil and are trying to keep the food all for themselves. You see, men have to bring gifts to the Great Chipmunk, and have to give food to us. But men are greedy and make us beg and fight one another."

Stump thought on this and Eli could see him struggling. Eli went on.

"Your father went up that trail, Stump. He gathered some gifts he would need for the journey, some of those things men accidentally drop, and he went up that trail. On the other side in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk is a fulfilled life, a life in the presence of the Great Chipmunk. There the Great Chipmunk will give you whatever you need to be happy. On this side you suffer, on that side you will be made whole."

Stump sat up, excited. A new thought had come to him. "You mean the Great Chipmunk might make me big, like my father was?"

"I mean that in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk all things will be made right."

Stump considered this, and Eli urged him on.

"Your father is waiting for you there, Stump. And you are a grown chipmunk now. You need to make your own journey."

Stump looked down as he thought. Finally he looked up, "How far is it?" he asked.

"I'm not sure exactly," Eli said. "I couldn't tell that in the dream I had. But it's a hard journey, and a longer journey than any chipmunk before has ever made. Except your father. At first the trail is wide, as it is here, along the man's road. But then it leaves the river and narrows. It climbs up and over a mountain, then crosses a stream. After much travel you will come to a ridge, from there you will look down and see the river again. In that valley where the river is... there dwells the Great Chipmunk. And there Rockhopper will be waiting for

you.”

Stump's eyes brightened. How wonderful it would be to see his father again. How wonderful it would be to live with the Great Chipmunk, never having to fight again, always having enough food, no more Toadstool. What was it Eli had said? In the Valley of the Great chipmunk all things would be made right? He would no longer be a runt!

Suddenly a sound came from the log above them and both chipmunks looked up. It was Toadstool. Stump cowered and Eli looked down.

“Talking with fools?” Toadstool sneered at Stump. “Telling you his Great Chipmunk stories, is he? Well, the Great Chipmunk isn't going to save you when I finally decide to kill you, runt. It might be tonight. Would you like to go see the Great Chipmunk that soon?”

Toadstool jumped down on the other side of the log. Stump and Eli could hear him moving away from them. When they were sure he was gone the two looked to each other.

“I'm going,” Stump said. “Tell my mother.”

Eli smiled. “I will. And Stump—be sure to take good gifts for the journey,” he said. “They must still have the life in them; otherwise they're useless. Go up the trail and look by the river where the road and river meet. That's where you'll find the best things man has dropped. That's what your father did. By the river you will find all the help you need. I promise that, Stump. By the river.”

Eli turned and walked away.

CHAPTER 3

A FELLOW TRAVELER

Stump did not watch Eli go; he was too eager to get away from his present circumstances. He bolted from behind the log and scurried up the rocky road toward the spot near the river that Eli seemed to have indicated, the place where the road and river met. Stump wanted to find some good gifts and get on his way before Toadstool came looking for him again. Though Stump felt hurried he was safe, darting from hiding spot to hiding spot only when he had made sure the way was clear. A traveling chipmunk, Stump figured, would be easy prey for any of the many things that liked to eat them. Stump was surprised how quickly and completely his feeling of security departed him as soon as he left behind his group and his family, and he was also surprised to learn that he had felt any security at all in that terrible place. Now that it was gone, though, he missed it. *How strange.*

Stump traveled on in his cautious manner about a quarter of an hour, hiding several times as hikers passed, and once storming about in wild panic when a mountain bike unexpectedly roared past him. It was immediately after this panic that he took a short break, thinking to himself that as he had almost been run over where the trail is wide, when it nar-

rowed, as Eli said it would, he probably would travel just off the trail, never on it.

When he reached the spot where the road and river began to travel together, Stump saw a most curious thing. It was another chipmunk, full grown, sitting atop a rock, looking out over the river. The chipmunk sat so still that Stump suspected a predator was nearby. Stump scanned the area and saw no danger, then eyed the sky around him and saw no bird of prey above. Still, Stump noted that what that chipmunk was doing—sitting out in the open like that—was very dangerous.

Stump scurried to a bush near the chipmunk and from the shelter of the bush called out to the chipmunk. He received no response. In fact, the chipmunk did not move at all. Stump wondered if the chipmunk was even alive. Perhaps it was a trap. But then the slightest movement, a tiny shudder, ran along the chipmunk's back, and Stump knew the chipmunk was real and alive.

"Hello?" he called again. Still no response. He eyed the sky one more time, then stepped out and sniffed the air. The chipmunk was a female, he determined.

"Hello?" he said as he slowly approached. No response. Stump was approaching from her left rear, so that he saw only her left side. As he neared her the opposite bank of the river came into view beneath her, and Stump froze for a moment as he wondered if she was staring at something dangerous over there. But a few more looks and a few more cautious steps toward her convinced Stump that there was no danger. He closed the distance between them. Stump sidled up to her on her left side and asked in a friendly voice, "Whatchadoin'?" He said it in a way that did not imply that her behavior was strange, though it obviously was. "Watching the river," she said. She sounded neither happy nor sad; just there.

"Why?" Stump asked, maybe still worrying about danger.

"So I can learn about the men who use it."

"Why?" Stump asked again, unaware of how nosy he was being.

"Nothing better to do," the female said. "Eli told me to come down here and study the men. He told me to learn about the things they use. Crazy, isn't it?"

"What's crazy?" Stump asked her.

"Taking advice from Eli," she said.

"I don't know..." said Stump.

She sighed. "Well, at least it's kind of interesting. I figure I'll just live down by the river here and learn what I might until something gets me..."

"What?" Stump burst in. He was shocked. He had never heard any other chipmunk speak so casually on the subject that consumed him—death. Stump had thought he was the only one with so gloomy a life. "Why would you do that?" he asked. As Stump asked her this he tried to come around in front of her, but as he did so she pivoted, keeping him on her left.

"My own kind don't want me," she said when Stump quit trying to come around her. "But the fox or the falcon will be glad to have me."

"What?" Stump again exclaimed. "You don't just go to the foxes for that. Look at me. I'm a runt..." here her left eye went away from the river and onto him for the first time, "...and I'm missing half my tail. My kind don't want me either, but I won't go to the foxes. I'm going to go to the Great Chipmunk instead, just as my father did. He will welcome me there."

"I'm going to go to the Great Chipmunk too," she said. "Just as soon as the fox or falcon comes I'll go to the Great Chipmunk."

"No, you don't understand," Stump said with some authority, then pointed at his chest. "I am going to the Great Chipmunk *alive*. That's what my father did."

The subtle energy of raw interest began to fill her, though

her gaze had gone back to the river and she did not look at Stump. "How?" she asked, her voice a little more pitched. "How can you go to the Great Chipmunk alive?"

Stump now spoke as if an authority on the Great Chipmunk, forgetting that most of what he knew had been told to him only moments before. "I'm going to the Great Chipmunk the same way my father did," Stump said and pointed at the road. "The Great Chipmunk is at the end of this trail, in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk. There he has all the food and safety a chipmunk could ever need. He'll fix whatever isn't right. Eli said so. The Great Chipmunk is gonna make me big."

At the mention of Eli her left eye darted to Stump, and now she spoke. "Eli said the Great Chipmunk is at the end of this trail?" she asked.

"Yes. In the Valley of the Great Chipmunk. It's the Great Chipmunk that the men go see when they walk or ride up the trail. That's why they have food to throw us—the Great Chipmunk gives it to them."

"And you say your father went there? Did he come back and tell you all this?"

Stump looked a bit sad. "No," he said softly. "Eli told me." Stump perked back up. "But it was Eli who told my father to go, and if you knew my father..." He had intended to invoke the name of his father to overcome the doubt he thought Eli's name would inspire, but he was surprised by her reaction.

"Eli is the only chipmunk who was ever nice to me," she said. "Like I said, he told me to come down here and learn the man's ways. He said he saw in a dream that I should do that. He said it was the only thing that could fix me. Make me whole. That's what he said, anyway."

"Fix you?" Stump asked, but she ignored him.

"Who's your father?" she asked.

"Rockhopper."

She looked at Stump knowingly. "That would make

you *Stump*,” she said.

“Yes.” Stump looked ashamed to be named. He fiddled a moment, kicked the dirt, then spoke. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t get your name.”

“I’m Dottie,” she said, and she now turned to show him her right side. When he saw, Stump held in a gasp. The right side of her head had a colorless oval running around her eye, back to her ear, and down to her mouth. It was a large, white dot.

“I know you,” Stump exclaimed, pointing as if he were delivering good news, which he was not. “They attacked your family for not killing you when you were born.” Stump suddenly realized he was being rude and quit pointing.

“Yeah,” she said. “They didn’t want my mark getting on the chipmunks to come. They killed my father. Rockhopper stopped them from killing my mother too. And me.”

Stump was set back. “How do you know all this?” he asked. “I didn’t even know that about my father.”

“Eli told me,” she said. “He hid me as I grew and snuck food to me. When I was old enough he told me my story and sent me down here.”

“Then he...” Stump was thinking, and he rubbed his head. There was confusion in his voice when he spoke. “Eli didn’t say you were here, but he sent me right to where he knew you’d be.”

“What do you mean?”

“He told me to come here to gather gifts for the Great Chipmunk.”

“Gifts?”

“Yeah. I have to bring the great Chipmunk gifts, things men have dropped, so He will be pleased with me and accept me and make me big. They have to be good gifts too—Eli said they have to have the life still in them.”

Dottie thought, and Stump saw the first real glimmer of life in her eyes.

"I think Eli meant for us to go together," she said.

"Where?"

"Up the trail. Over the mountains. To the Valley of the Great Chipmunk. That's why Eli said this was the only way I would ever get fixed. He knew he'd be sending you and we'd go to the Great Chipmunk together. The Great Chipmunk is going to fix me too, Stump!"

Stump stepped back and put out his tiny paws. "Wait. Wait wait wait," he said. "Do you know how hard this journey will be? No chipmunk has ever made it but Rockhopper, and we know what a great chipmunk he was. I'm a runt. I'll need all my strength to get *me* over the mountains. I can't be worrying about *you* too."

Dottie turned back to the river. "As I said, even my own kind don't want me."

Stump ran around and got in front of her. "It's not that," he protested. "I just can't..."

"You *need* me," she interrupted. Stump was stunned. "I know man's ways," she said. "I know where the best gifts are. The ones with the life still in them. Eli planned it that way."

"But..."

"And I won't show you where any gifts are until you let me come along."

"But..."

"And you'll need help carrying the gifts." She stared at him. "Some of them are heavy."

"Okay, okay," Stump said. "But you can't be expecting me to be helping you or saving you or anything. I'm only a short-tailed runt. You'll have to make it on your own."

"I will," she said with confidence. "And anyway, even if I die, either way I'm going to see the Great Chipmunk."

Stump could not argue with this.

CHAPTER 4

GATHERING THE GIFTS

“Well, we better get some gifts then,” Stump suggested to get Dottie moving.” You can't just sit and stare at the river all day.”

Dottie turned with a bit of a frown on her face. “I'm not sitting here wasting your time or mine,” she said. “I told you I know the man's ways. I know how he uses his things. I said I already know the kind of gifts you need. I know of more gifts than the two of us, and ten more chipmunks, could carry. The reason I'm sitting here is I'm trying to decide which gifts would be best to take.” She turned and pointed at a rock down near the river.

“Do you see that black rock down there?”

Stump nodded.

“Just below it is a big gift. Go get it and bring it back up here.”

Stump went to the black rock, and when he hopped over it Dottie could hear his shriek of delight.

“It's glorious!” he shouted from out of view. “Magnificent!” Then Stump emerged carrying a spent firework attached by six strings to a plastic parachute that once held it

aloft. He reached Dottie with the firework part, which was longer than his body, thrown over his shoulder, the parachute dragging behind.

"What is it?" he asked when he stopped.

"A star-maker," Dottie said. Stump looked perplexed. "Do you remember sometime back when the men made the thunder and the colored stars in the sky?"

"Yes." Stump remembered. He and all the other chipmunks had spent the night quivering while hiding from the noise and light.

"Well, this is one of the things that makes the thunder and colored stars," Dottie said. "A man puts fire to it and it flies up into the sky. When it goes up it turns into thunder and stars. It floats down on the flat thing like the hawk floats on its wings. The men picked up most of the star-makers, but they missed this one."

"Great!" Stump said. "The Great Chipmunk will be very pleased with a star-maker with wings!"

"No," Dottie said. Stump was shocked. "It's done making stars. It's dead. Eli told you to get gifts with the life still in them, right? What would the Great Chipmunk want with a dead star-maker?"

Stump nodded. "I guess you're right," he said. "But then why did you have me get it?"

"For its wings," Dottie said. "We need the wings. We can wrap up all our other gifts in those wings and carry them that way. Plus, though the star-maker is dead, the wings would still work if they could somehow get up into the air like the man does with them. I think the Great chipmunk would be pleased to get the wings."

Stump thought, then nodded happily. "Dottie, you're very smart," he said. "Eli was right when he sent you down here to learn." Dotty blushed, at least as much as chipmunks can. She had never before been complimented by any chipmunk besides Eli.

"What can we get next?" Stump asked. "You tell me where and I'll go get it!" Suddenly Dottie was feeling very good about herself, and she spoke with far more energy.

"First chew the wings loose from the dead star-maker," she said. Leave the long things attached to the wings. Bite them near the star-maker."

Stump did as she said.

"So, what can we get next?" Stump asked when he had removed the dead star-maker from the wings.

"Lots of things," Dottie said. "Men leave lots of things lying around—things the Great Chipmunk would probably love to have."

"My father always said men are stupid," Stump said impatiently. "But who cares about that? Where are more gifts?"

Dottie pointed toward the road. "First, go to the flat thing the men eat at. There, underneath, is a bug-sticker." Stump looked around for the flat thing she spoke of and when his eyes fell on a picnic table he knew that was what she meant. "What's a bug-sticker look like?" he asked, eager to run and get it.

"Like a twig," she said. "But perfectly straight and sharpened at both ends. There also may be a wound-healer there, if it hasn't blown away already. If there is, bring it too. It was unused when I last saw it; the life was still in it. The Great Chipmunk would surely like it, if it's still there."

Stump scurried to the picnic table and returned in only moments, carrying with him a toothpick and a bandage.

"Good..." Dottie said as Stump held them out before her. "And the wound-healer was still there. Good."

"What do men do with them?" Stump asked.

"Well," Dottie said, "they use the bug-sticker immediately after they eat. Men don't like bugs, and I think little black bugs are in their food. So when men are done eating they use the bug-sticker to stick the bugs that are hiding in their mouths. They jab the bugs with the sharp ends of the bug-

sticker and pull the bugs out." Dottie looked the bug-sticker up and down. "It looks like this bug-sticker still has all its life to give to the Great Chipmunk," she said. "The Great Chipmunk will be pleased."

"And what about the... what did you call it? A wound-healer?"

"Oh. Yes." Dottie grabbed the bandage and placed it over her forehead. It covered her whole face and hid her spot. "Men put it over a wound when they get one," she explained. "See how it's white on one side?" She turned it around for Stump to see and he nodded. "They take that white side off and it sticks to the wound. It must be magic somehow. It makes their wounds heal. Men put wound-healers on their little ones all the time. That's why there are so many men. It's like they never die."

"Oh," Stump said. It was not clear whether he truly understood. After a moment standing there with a confused look, Stump remembered his mission. "More gifts," he said softly to bring himself back. And then louder: "Are there more gifts?"

"Yes, and good ones," Dottie smiled. "Down by the river there, out of your sight now, is the trap the man uses to catch fish to eat. It's a floatie-thingy, round, red and white, and the floatie-thingy is attached to a thin strand of web, thin as a spider's web. But unlike the spider's web, this web does not break easy. It's a magical web strand, Stump. It pulls fish right out of the river."

"Wow..." Stump said thoughtfully. "If men are so stupid, how do they get such neat gifts?"

"I don't know, but they have them and they know how to use them. They must have extras, though, as careless as they are with them, leaving them around everywhere."

"I guess," Stump said, and he was about to run to get the floatie-thingy and the fish trap when Dottie stopped him.

"Wait," she cautioned. "At the end of that magic web

strand is a sharp, three-pointed tooth. It's that three-pointed tooth that gets into the fish's mouth and does not let go. Bring me the whole thing, Stump, but don't let that three-pointed tooth bite you. Only a man can get it out."

Stump nodded, then left and returned with the gift. It was a red and white bobber attached to a length of fishing line. At one end of the line was a weighted, still-sharp treble hook. The other end, after the line had threaded through the bobber, went on for a ways and then, where the line had broken, had nothing attached to it. Stump almost gleamed with excitement over this gift.

"Absolutely incredible!" he exclaimed.

"Get the floatie-thingy loose," Dottie instructed, pointing at the bobber. Stump hesitated, so Dottie explained. "The round thing, Stump. Figure out how to get it loose from the web strand. It's a separate gift."

"Oh," Stump said.

"But leave the three-sided tooth attached to the web strand," Dottie finished. "And don't hurt the web strand."

Stump did as she said. First he examined the bobber, his tongue hanging out as he thought. Then with all his might, and a lot of grunting, he tugged and tugged until the line was free of the spring-loaded loops on the bobber.

"What is this for?" Stump asked when he was done. He was holding up the bobber and one eyebrow was raised as he ogled it curiously.

"I'm not sure exactly," Dottie said. "It's all part of the fish trap, But I do know it floats—like a duck—and it still has the life in it."

"Oh," Stump said, no more enlightened than when he'd asked. This time his dumbfounded stare did not last quite so long. "More gifts..." he suggested, looking back toward the road and then to the river.

"Up beneath that bush," Dottie said, then pointed at a bush near a sign at the edge of the road. "You will find a

bunch of little yellow things beneath that bush. They are hollow, open on one end. They are dead. The men used them up the same night they used the star-maker.”

Stump lifted his hands in a questioning manner. “But we don’t want *dead* things,” he said.

“One of them is not dead. It’s not hollow and empty. At the end of it where the others are empty, it still has its life left. It has a silver rock, tucked halfway into the hollow end. Bring that one back to me.”

“What is it?” Stump asked, completely confused.

“A hole-maker,” Dottie answered. “Bring it to me and I’ll explain it.”

Stump ran off and returned with a bullet. It was heavy. He handed it to Dottie, who examined it, then explained.

“The men have a thing that sets the hole-maker on fire. The hole-maker pops and the silver part flies out and makes a hole in something, if it’s not too hard. I watched the men make holes in the logs over there...” she pointed “...but when they tried to make holes in that up there...” she pointed at the metal sign beside the road “...the hole-maker wouldn’t work. That thing, I think, is made of the same stuff as the hole-maker. If you go look around that thing you will find the little silver rocks that fly out, flat and dead, lying beneath that hard thing. They couldn’t make holes in it, so they died right there. But they did dent the thing. You can tell from here.”

Stump looked. She was right. “At least they made a mark before dying,” he said, and he was immediately conscious that he wanted to do the same thing now. Dottie smiled at his comment, nodded, and for a moment Stump felt very intelligent. Then Dottie went on.

“I have two more gifts with the life still in them,” she said, and then grinned proudly. “And these two are the best gifts of all.”

“Where are they?” Stump looked eagerly all around.

Dottie looked up as if checking the sky for predators,

looked all around as Stump had, then quickly scooted over and looked down to the spot she had left.

"You...!" Stump cried. "You were standing on top of them!"

"That's because these are the best gifts of all," Dottie said through her great smile. She reached down and from the small crevice she had been covering she produced a small rectangular thing. A box of matches. Stump heard something shift inside it as she lifted it.

"It's hollow," he said as if he were telling her something she didn't already know.

"I know," she said. "It's hollow, but it's not empty. Inside are fire-makers."

She set the box of matches down on the ground between them and slid it open. She lifted out a wooden match and held it up before Stump.

"This thick end..." she said, pointing to the red and white tip, "...you rub it on the side of this thing here..." she pointed at the rough strip on the side of the box "...and boom, you've got fire."

Stump's eyes were glazed over with wonder. "Wow," he finally said. "Just like men! The Great Chipmunk will never have been so pleased as when I give Him these fire-makers!"

Dottie's eyebrows slanted. "You mean when we give them to Him," she said.

"Sorry." Stump was embarrassed but kept on. "But you said there were *two* more gifts. What is the last one?" Stump felt sure this gift she had saved for last must be the best gift ever.

Dottie was excited again and she rubbed her paws together and licked her lips in delight. Her voice was higher when she spoke. "The last one is the greatest gift of all, the one the Great Chipmunk will love the most!"

"Well, what is it?" Stump's anticipation filled his voice, and he was now rubbing his own paws together and licking

his own lips. Dottie reached down into the crevice and lifted up a bobby pin. All the excitement left Stump's body.

"What is *that*?" he said, almost derisively. Dottie pulled back.

"*It's a hair-thingy*," she said, affronted. "The men females put them in their beautiful long hair."

"Why would the Great Chipmunk want that?" Stump asked. Dottie stuck it up to stump's nose.

"Smell it!" she said. He did.

"So what? It smells like flowers," Stump said through a scrunched-up nose.

"And *better*," Dottie answered with delight in her eyes. "It's the best smell in the world—flowers and fruit and morning, all together at once. That's how the men females smell."

Stump grunted. "So what would the Great Chipmunk care about that? He'll probably laugh when we hand it to Him."

"Or perhaps *She'll* cry with joy when we hand it to *Her*."

The thought that the Great Chipmunk might be a girl struck Stump from so out of the blue that all he could do was grunt again and stare, so he grunted again and stared.

"Well, don't just stand there looking stupid," Dottie instructed him as she handed him the hair-thingy. "Put all the gifts in the wings so we can carry them, and let's get going."

Stump obediently turned to do as she instructed, though as he put the gifts in the parachute he did mumble, just loud enough for Dottie to hear, "Flowers and fruit in the morning all together at once. I could hack up a grass ball."

Stump lifted the enormous bundle up over his shoulder and began walking on three legs up the trail. Dottie giggled.

"What?" Stump asked.

"Maybe we could attach it so it rides on your back," she laughed. "You know, like the men do to horses."

"No thank you," Stump growled. "Horses are as dumb as

men. C'mon."

Their journey to the Great Chipmunk had begun.

CHAPTER 5

HITTING THE TRAIL

Stump traveled in front, carrying the gifts, with Dottie walking silently behind him. It was clear to her by the way Stump continuously stopped and shifted his load that Stump was suffering under the bulk and weight of the gifts they had to take to the Great Chipmunk. And Stump *was* suffering. It was hot, very hot, and the floatie-thingy created awkward bulk while the hole-maker and the three-pointed tooth added considerable weight. Stump occasionally staggered, and when he walked through shade he slowed noticeably, not wanting the brief cool-period to end too soon. All the while Dottie watched him suffer.

They had traveled about a mile when Dottie could remain silent no longer.

"I can carry the gifts too," she said.

"What?" Stump asked, slowly turning to face her.

"I said I can carry the gifts too."

Stump looked at her while he thought. There was something in him that felt he must carry the gifts, some idea that suggested the Great Chipmunk would be more pleased if Stump suffered while bringing the gifts.

"No," he finally answered.

“Why not?”

Stump looked frustrated. “I don't know exactly. But this is *my* journey. *I* have to carry the gifts.”

Dottie was hurt. She opened her mouth to complain that this was her journey too, and she was going to be sure and point out that Stump would not have such fine gifts without her, but just as she was going to speak a shadow slid over them. They froze.

“Hawk?” Stump asked quietly.

“Yes,” Dottie whispered. “I don't think he's seen us though, or he would have dove. Or maybe your load is confusing to him. Hawks don't miss much.”

“I was stupid to quit watching the sky,” Stump said, for he knew he had been careless, as though the normal rules no longer applied now that he was journeying to the Great Chipmunk. In that instant Stump realized that the ordinary rules mattered now more than ever. He and Dottie remained still.

“Is he gone?” Stump finally asked. He was unable to see from beneath his burden.

“He is,” Dottie answered. “Relax.”

Stump took the weight off his back and turned to Dottie.

“I think you're right, Dottie,” he said. “I'm sure he saw us, but the gifts confused him. We need to be watchful, more watchful than ever. He'll be back.”

“Do you think we should walk where there is more cover?” Dottie asked. “Up here on the road we're too easy to see and there's no place to hide.”

A mountain biker roared past, raising dust and startling the two chipmunks.

“I think so,” Stump said with a cough as the dust settled around them. “It'll take us lots longer because it's gonna be harder, but up here we're dead if anything attacks us.” Stump thought a moment longer. Dottie, he knew, had not been watching because she no longer watched. She was out of practice. But *he himself*? Stump had never felt important be-

fore, and here he was already feeling too important to keep watch. He turned and looked thoughtfully at the gifts that had made him important but were also breaking his back.

“Dottie,” he said, “if you still want to help carry the load, I’ll take the help.”

Dottie smiled. “Load me up!” she said, and Stump helped her get the gifts atop her back.

“You walk in front,” he said. “Lead us down by the river. Stay close to bushes and crevices in case we need them. I’ll keep watch.”

“Good idea,” Dottie said, aware that it was her idea all along.

CHAPTER 6

ATTACKED!

The two traveled almost as fast along the river as they had up on the road, for now they were sharing the burden of carrying the gifts. When one would tire under the weight of the load the other would carry it, and whichever chipmunk was not carrying the load watched the sky and the riverbanks for predators.

Up above them on the road the occasional mountain biker roared past, and every once in a while Stump and Dottie felt the deep rumble of a Water Board vehicle passing, something they were used to seeing.

They traveled on as the sun moved across the sky, and both felt quite proud of the progress they were making. Stump had reconciled himself to the idea that by sharing his burden he was sharing his reward, and frankly, at times he was glad simply not to be alone. That was a reward in itself.

Under the burden of the gifts Dottie was strong, and as she walked along she thought about how quickly the gifts had given her life back to her. In less than a day she had been restored, and she now wanted, almost as strongly as Stump wanted, to make it to the end of the trail. At the other end of this trail was a place where she would no longer hurt because she was different. There the Great Chipmunk would remove

her blemish and for the first time other chipmunks would value her for what she really was. She mentioned this to Stump.

"Yeah," Stump said dreamily while scanning the sky. "I understand. You know what?" He paused as if considering whether he wanted to tell her 'what,' then continued. "They named me 'Stump' because I'm a runt. So every time I hear my name it reminds me why they all hate me. I hate my name."

"Me too," Dottie said. "Do you think the Great Chipmunk will give us new names too?"

Stump thought, then smiled. "Oh, yeah," he said. "He'll have to after he takes away your dot and makes me big."

"Yes, *She* will," Dottie agreed.

Stump bumped into Dottie. She had stopped in front of him and he had been too intently watching the sky to notice.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Look," she said, and Stump came out from behind her. Up ahead a bridge carried the road from one side of the river to the other. Stump saw that they were going to have to get up on that bridge to cross the river, and while up there they would be out in the open.

"The road crosses the river here," Stump said. "Eli didn't tell me about this."

"What *did* Eli tell you about the trail?" Dottie asked.

"I guess not much, really. Only that it stays wide for a while. A road. At some point it leaves the river and narrows, and then we have to cross a stream and go a long way until we're up on a ridge looking down on the river again. That's where the great Chipmunk lives, down by the river on the other side of these mountains. That's the Valley of the Great Chipmunk. But if we were going to have to cross the river sometime, I'm glad there's a bridge." Stump looked up at the bridge. "I'm gonna go scout this out."

Stump looked around, then scurried up to the road and

turned to the bridge. He immediately saw that they would be walled in while crossing the bridge, but at least the bridge was not very long. He thought of a plan, then went down the bank to tell Dottie, who had set the gifts down beside her.

"We need to get the gifts safely across," he said, "and though I don't see any signs of danger right now, we can't risk the gifts. I'll cross first, only I won't be sneaky like we've been. Anything watching will see us on that bridge whether we try to be seen or not. So I'm gonna try to be seen. I'm gonna run side to side and back and forth. If a hawk takes flight I'll run him off up the road a bit, then dive into cover. While I'm running him off you'll sneak across the river on the road and get back down into cover."

"You talk as if you're sure something will come," Dottie said. "I haven't seen anything. Do we really have to be so careful?"

"We do," Stump replied. "I think that hawk that flew over us has been watching us all along. I've only seen him twice, way up along the tops of the hills, but he was flying so he wouldn't be seen against the sky. He was keeping up with us. He's curious."

"Be careful, then," Dottie warned. Stump could hear the genuine concern in her voice.

"I will. And don't you go until I call out that it's clear, or until I've led the hawk away if he comes. Okay?"

She nodded.

Stump was off. He darted up the bank, onto the road, and stopped only a moment to check for anything that might run him over. There was nothing coming that he could see. He scurried as though panicked across the road to the far side of the bridge, up against the concrete wall, then scurried back. He reached the opposite wall of the bridge, rolled over once, then darted back across. He was acting so silly that he would have laughed at himself if the situation wasn't so serious.

From her hiding spot near the river Dottie, ready to go

with the load on her back, saw the hawk take flight. Stump had been right. The hawk was thick, she saw, so it was well fed—a good hunter. To Dottie the hawk was power and might, the chosen predator. The hawk was accurate intelligence, unquestioned choice, obvious purpose. It was Nature's favorite, perfect in all its ways. Indeed, Dottie knew the hawk was everything chipmunks were not. It was predator, they were prey. It was god of the mountains; they were but a sacrifice to its greatness. Who were they to defy such a being? The hawk dove. Dottie gulped.

She could not see Stump from where she was, so she did not know if he was running up the road yet. The hawk, though, seemed to be diving directly at the bridge, so she assumed Stump was still on it.

"C'mon Stump!" she thought. She wanted to scream to him to run, but she didn't dare. "Get running Stump! Get away!" she thought. All her best hopes flowed up the bank toward her traveling companion.

The hawk changed direction. He was heading upriver. Dottie knew then that Stump was running. "Go Stump!" she thought as she squeezed her eyes and fists tight. "Go!"

When Dottie could wait no longer she sprang up the steep riverbank as best she could while under such a load and began scurrying along the side of the road onto the bridge. She was walled in now; there was no turning back.

She looked up the bridge and saw that Stump was no longer on the bridge. He had already found cover, and the hawk was banking, rising up to look for him. Her heart soared with delight knowing Stump was safe, but then sank as deep as it could go. The hawk had seen her, and was now beginning its deadly dive. She had waited too long.

Slowed by the weight of the gifts, Dottie could see that the hawk would reach her before she could get to the opposite bank and get in cover, yet she ran on. What else could she do? As she neared the end of the bridge she saw Stump re-

emerge on the road up a ways, sneaking out of his hiding place to see what was happening. She saw the horror come over his face at the sight of the hawk diving on her. Still she ran on. She reached the edge of the bridge as the hawk hit her. Hard.

The blow sent Dottie flying off the road's edge out toward the river and separated the gifts from her. As she flew her body twisted around so that she could see the hawk lifting again with nothing in its talons, while the parachute, the 'wings' as she called it, opened, and the gifts exploded outward. Just before her twisting momentum turned her back to the hawk she looked one last time at his thick torso and saw a scar—no, a dark spot, a *mark*—a dying moon on the hawk's breast. Dottie marveled—the hawk was disfigured by a mark just as she was! She continued twisting until the hawk and the gifts were out of her field of vision, replaced by the river, and from that position she saw where she was going to land. She was going to land out in the swift-moving water.

Her breath left her. As she descended toward the river's rolling surface she heard the gifts rattling into the rocks along the steep bank, and then she was under water. When her head bobbed up several feet down the river, she could hear Stump screaming.

"Dottie!" he cried, and she saw a watery figure against the sky. Wow, she thought, he must be a fast runner to get back to her this quick...

"Dottie!" he cried again.

"The floatie-thingy!" she hollered as she went under. The river, she knew, was trying to claim her, as it did everything else that fell in. She only hoped Stump had heard her.

The river carried her away from the bridge, back in the direction from which they had come, though she was still quite close to the bank opposite the road. If Stump could not get her out, she knew, the river could carry her all the way past the spot where they had gathered the gifts, past her

birthplace, and from there only the Great Chipmunk knew where it would take her. She knew only that she would not get there alive.

“Ploop!” Dottie heard a sound next to her and turned in the water to see the floatie-thingy, the red and white bobber, traveling next to her. Stump had understood her and thrown it to her! She grabbed it and was overjoyed to find that it was far more buoyant than she was heavy, and so it held her head well above the water. She kicked her legs and in only several hard strokes was at the shore where Stump, ignoring the bobber, pulled her out. Together they scampered up the bank to the bridge, where they looked up and saw no hawk, then turned around to see the river taking the floatie-thingy to where it had tried to take Dottie.

“The floatie-thingy!” she exclaimed as she saw it bobbing away.

“Yeah.” Stump sounded disgusted. “One less gift for the Great Chipmunk. I hope He won't mind.” Then Stump brightened, though only a little. “I'm glad we took a lot of gifts.”

“It will make the wings easier to carry,” Dottie said, trying to be positive. “The floatie-thingy was very large.”

“Uh-huh,” Stump said, but his mind was in a distant place, probably in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk, imagining the Great Chipmunk's disappointment at losing the floatie-thingy.

“By the way,” Dottie said sharply, gently backhanding his shoulder and pulling him back into the present, “I am fine. Thank you for asking.”

“Good,” Stump said without kindness. He looked around at the rocks beneath them. “We need to gather the gifts. At least we're across the river. I think the hawk is gone. I think...” he paused. “...I think he didn't want us. I think he attacked our gifts. I think he doesn't want us to get them to the Great Chipmunk.”

“Why?” Dottie asked. “Do you think he wants them for himself?”

Stump thought. “I don't know for sure. Maybe that, or maybe he just hates the Great Chipmunk. I don't know, but something like that.” He was wondering, though, if the hawk disliked them having the gifts, would the hawk be the only thing that felt that way? What if the river hated the gifts too? Would it too attack them? And what about the mountains? What if they too despised chipmunks carrying gifts? What if the trail itself did not want them to pass with their gifts? What if?

Stump shivered with the thought, but he did not share it with Dottie. Those gifts, he knew, were the only things that could earn him favor with the Great Chipmunk. Only those gifts would allow him to dwell in happiness in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk, for only those gifts could make him big as he was supposed to have been. They had to protect those gifts.

They began gathering them up.

CHAPTER 7

A BLESSING

"We can't go on in the daylight right now," Stump said as they hid in the rocks after gathering the gifts. "At least not while on this part of the trail, down here by the river. There's not enough cover. That hawk will come back and take our gifts."

"What do you want to do then?" Dottie asked. "Travel in the dark?"

"Exactly. The moon was big and bright last night. If the sky is good, we'll have enough light to travel tonight."

"There are things that hunt in the dark," she reminded him.

"We'll have to take our chances," Stump said. "At least they won't expect us to be out here. The hawk knows where we are, and he knows we have the gifts. The fox and the owl don't know yet..."

"Yet?" Dottie asked.

Stump nodded, then decided to share what he was thinking. "Dottie, I think pretty soon the whole trail will know. I'm beginning to suspect there's something about going to the Great Chipmunk that other beasts, and maybe even the mountains themselves, don't like. I feel like they are all whispering to each other to *stop those chipmunks*."

Now Dottie shivered at the thought. "But why would they care?" she asked, her eyes overflowing with concern.

"I don't know. Maybe they want the gifts. Or maybe there is something that just wants to keep me a worthless runt, and it wants to keep you terribly marked."

Dottie looked down.

"I mean..." Stump began explaining. He knew he had hurt her.

"I know I'm ugly," she said, and turned around.

"That's not what I meant," Stump said. It did nothing to make her feel better.

The two waited out the rest of the daylight in hiding, taking turns sleeping and watching. They hardly spoke and Stump was glad of that. Talking with an emotionally wounded female, he was finding, could be draining. Dottie too was glad for the silence, for communicating with an insensitive male, she was finding, was near impossible.

When the moon was up Stump, who was taking his turn watching, reached over and jostled Dottie.

"Time to go," he said.

She did not yawn or stretch, for she had not been asleep. She simply got to her feet, asked if he wanted her to carry the gifts, and when he said he would carry them she helped him get beneath the load. As the load settled Stump noticed that it was far more manageable without the floatie-thingy, though it was still plenty heavy. Then Stump led them as they climbed up the steep bank to the road at the end of the bridge, crossed the road so they could walk beside the river, and stopped.

"Do you want to go down by the river?" Dottie asked.

"I think we better," Stump said. "Owls."

They descended down the bank and began making their way along the rocks between the river and the road. They spoke only to agree to take turns carrying the gifts. In that manner they traveled on for several hours, occasionally

frightened by a noise or a moving silhouette, but never completely feeling the terror of an animal who knows he is being hunted. They were cautious yet careless, dogged yet distracted, for thoughts of wholeness and thoughts of painless lives are big, happy thoughts, filling the mind at the expense of all other thoughts, including safety, if one is not careful.

Then Dottie, carrying the gifts and walking in front, saw the rock move. She froze, and all the neat ideas playing around in her mind disappeared.

"What?" Stump whispered.

"A big rock by the river. Up ahead. It moved."

"Scoot over."

Dottie silently moved to the side so Stump could see. When Stump saw what it was he spoke out in a voice so loud that it startled Dottie.

"It's a bear!" he said. "Halooo! Cousin Bear! Chipmunks passing!"

The bear turned, snorted, and waddled toward them. Stump turned to Dottie. "This will help a lot Dottie," he said. "My father always told me bears are wise—they know things other animals don't. Plus, they can bless you."

When the bear reached them it stopped and sniffed them. "Chipmunks?" it grunted in a voice as deep and hollow as the night. "At night down here? What gives, little cousins? And what's that load on your back?"

Stump helped Dottie set down the gifts, then stood up proud and excited. He pointed to the gifts. "Those are gifts for the Great Chipmunk," he said. "We're on a journey to the Great Chipmunk, to His valley at the other end of this trail. He's gonna make us whole—He's gonna make me big and take away Dottie's mark—if we bring Him good enough gifts."

"Funny," said the bear, scratching its broad, dark head. "Loads are for men, not chipmunks. And who told you the Great Chipmunk lives in the valley at the end of this trail and

wants gifts, little cousin?"

"Old Eli, a wise chipmunk who was a friend of my father's."

The bear smiled. "I know Eli. He steals from man—like a bear. He *is* wise in that respect, though he says and does a lot of strange things, yes?"

"Yes you do know Eli," Dottie said, and they all laughed, the two chipmunks in high squeaks, the bear deep and throaty.

"Well, little cousin," the bear said when done laughing, "it sounds like a worthy journey. But I must tell you something—I have wandered these mountains all my life. I know well the valley at the end of this trail. And I would never call Eli a liar, but I have never seen the Great Chipmunk there. At least not as you expect to see Him."

"But..." Dottie said, stunned.

"Now wait, sister cousin," the bear said. "I didn't say there *is no* Great Chipmunk there. I only said *I* have not seen Him the way *you* expect to see Him, not in the valley you describe as *His*."

"Well, maybe there's a reason you can't see Him," Stump reasoned. "Maybe it's because you're not a chipmunk. But perhaps you saw the Great Bruin there?"

"No," the bear said regretfully. He looked up at the moonlit mountains, then back at Stump. "All my life I've searched these mountains for the Great Bruin, and I find Him nowhere my eyes can see. I think He dwells in mountains still higher up, somewhere so high that my feet cannot take me there."

Stump looked at the bear in silence, then turned to Dottie. "Maybe the Great Chipmunk was just not there yet when our cousin was there, and now He is. *That* could be why He sent the dream to Eli, to let us know He had arrived." Stump turned to the bear. "Could that be true, Cousin Bear?"

"Perhaps," said the bear. "Perhaps. And even though I say I did not see the Great Chipmunk in the valley where you

seek Him, I still would encourage you to finish any journey you have begun. It may be that the trail you travel is of far more value than the end you seek. That has been true for me."

It was silent a moment, and in the silence Stump assumed it was time to go. "Well, thank you, Cousin Bear," he said. Then he turned to pick up the gifts and get going, but Dottie's voice stopped him. Being a female chipmunk, she was far more practical than Stump.

"How far is it?" she asked.

"To where?" Cousin Bear asked.

"To the Great Chipmunk," she said.

"That," said the bear, "I do not know. Probably farther than any chipmunk has gone before."

"Not so," Stump interjected. "My own father has gone there."

"And I hope you are right," Cousin Bear said. He turned back to Dottie. "You asked how far to the Great Chipmunk; that distance I cannot tell you, nor can I tell you if it is a distance chipmunk feet can travel. But to the valley you seek, the valley you say He is now in? That distance I *can* tell you. If you came from the trail's beginning..."

"We did," said Stump.

"...then the distance you have traveled you must travel twice more. Only the trail will become steep, the way rough, the dangers many, and the safe places few. You will endure trials no other chipmunk has yet endured, and you will need ideas no chipmunk has yet thought, for in no other way could one reach the Great Chipmunk, just as in no other way could a bear reach the Great Bruin. And, if you live long enough to reach the end of the trail, and if you do find the Great Chipmunk in that valley, then you will not have found the Great Chipmunk *you* made; you will have found the Great Chipmunk Who *made you*."

There was silence when Cousin Bear finished. Finally Stump shifted his weight, tilted his head, and spoke. "You

“speak in riddles, Cousin Bear,” he said. “Just tell me—was Eli wrong? I don't really understand everything else you say, so please just tell me—was Eli wrong?” Stump could feel Dottie's anxiousness as she awaited the bear's answer.

“Eli was right,” Cousin Bear said with a kindly, moonlit smile. “If you live you will find your Great Chipmunk at the end of this trail, just as Eli said. And He will make you whole, too, just as Eli said. Then you will understand my words. Remember, you are going to dwell not with the Great Chipmunk you made, but with the Great Chipmunk Who *made* you.” Stump was about to respond but the bear cut him off with a wave of his giant paw.

“May I bless you?” Cousin Bear asked.

“Oh please!” It was Dottie who answered.

The great beast rose up on his hind legs and raised his paws and his face to the night sky. “Be of cleverness and courage, cousins,” he spoke out into the dark air, “for only in cleverness and courage will your gifts bring you before the Great Chipmunk. And be in compassion for one another, cousins, for only in compassion will you reach the higher valley you seek. And here tonight, beneath the moon that watches over us, beside the river that quenches us, before the mountains that define us, I proclaim that my little cousins shall discover the Great Chipmunk at the end of their journey, for what else could such a journey lead them to?” The bear came back down on all fours.

“That is all,” he said.

The bear turned and waddled off, and Stump knew better than to bother him once he said he was through. Most chipmunks know that a bear is best left to do as it wishes. So in silence Stump and Dottie watched him cross the road and go up the mountainside until he blended in with the darkness and the moonlight revealed him no more. When he disappeared Stump and Dottie looked at each other.

“Deep fellow,” Dottie said.

"As are all bears," said Stump. "My father used to say something about them...What was it? Oh, yeah. He said that men were bears until men chose security over freedom and became stupid. That's what he said."

"Your father was a wise chipmunk," Dottie said. Stump nodded, looked up at the moon, then began walking again. They did not discuss the bear's words the rest of the night, but each traveler felt certain their cousin's ideas, though not quite understood, would trouble their sleep that night, and would haunt them in all they did until they either died or understood. They were right.

The rest of the night was a struggle for the chipmunks. Hopping over rock after rock wore them out, but after much effort they reached the point where the road left the river and curved up into the mountains. In the dark they found their way to the beginning of the single-track switchbacks that climbed up the mountain, and they traveled only a short distance up the switchbacks before deciding to stop. There they left the trail and dug in beneath some Gambel oak, then fell asleep just as the sun awakened. The tired travelers had traveled over six miles that day and night.

Their sleep was deep yet disturbed, for Cousin Bear had planted seeds of truth that set off alarms of confusion somewhere deep inside the misunderstanding chipmunks, somewhere deeper than their understood thoughts lived. Stump dreamed of riding a bear as a man rides a horse, and having the trustworthy bear beneath him turn into a murderous man who then devoured him. Dottie dreamed of being stepped on by a gigantic bear paw, and when the bear's large foot came up off her, every place it had touched her became as white as the pigment-less dot on her face, so that she was no longer marred by only one ugly spot, but by dozens. But such are the dreams of chipmunks who dare a journey such as theirs.

CHAPTER 8

DEADLY REST

By the time the two chipmunks rose from their troubled dreams the sun was high overhead, past its apex and preparing for its descent.

"Wow, did we sleep or what?" Stump said, rubbing his eyes.

"I guess the trail took more out of me than I thought," Dottie agreed.

"And the weight of the gifts," Stump added. "I'm hungry, you?"

"Yeah. And I smell berries nearby."

"Perhaps Cousin Bear has missed some reds," Stump hoped aloud, "or maybe he's left a few blues on the bushes for his cousins." He stood and shook off his slumber, then looked at the wings with the gifts concealed inside. "The gifts will be safe while we eat," he said, and offered a paw to help Dottie up. She accepted it.

The two searched in the brush for only a short time before finding plenty to eat. They were on the north-facing side of a hill, so the vegetation was quite thick, unlike the near-desert on the south-facing slopes across the river that supported mostly grasses.

"Thank the Great Chipmunk for berries and shade along

the way,” Stump said as they dined.

“Okay. Thank You Great Chipmunk,” Dottie said, then giggled. Stump laughed too—lightly—and looked at her. She seemed almost happy. What a change that was from the same time yesterday. And he noticed something else, too. Though he had been looking directly at her right side, so that her dot was the most prominent feature visible to him, he hadn't really even seen it. In fact, her dot was almost invisible to him, at least until he stopped to think about it. All he had seen was her smile.

When they had eaten their fill and rested an hour or so (for a full chipmunk is a tired chipmunk), they discussed their journey.

I think we need to get some of this climbing out of the way,” Stump said.

“Whatever you decide,” Dottie said.

Stump smiled a little, then looked up at the mountain. “Cousin Bear said it would get steep. I hope we don't have to go all the way to the top of this mountain. And I think we may have lots of steep climbs before we get to the Valley of the Great Chipmunk. Today I just want to get to the top of this first climb if we can, then hide and spend the night there.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Dottie said. “Do you want me to start out with the gifts?”

“I will,” Stump said. “And it will be slow going. We have to stay at the very edge of the trail, and off it if possible. So the men don't run us over. So we'll be walking through a lot of weeds and bushes.”

“It's okay,” Dottie said. “We'll get there.”

Stump could not believe how downright positive Dottie was.

Stump hefted the gifts to his back with an assist from Dottie, then the two crawled through the brush to the edge of the trail and began ascending. It would be as tedious as the

climb itself to describe their travels that afternoon, but there was one important idea both chipmunks came to realize as they climbed, each realizing it on his or her own, without words between them. That idea is this: There are times of suffering in a difficult journey, no matter how noble or how beautiful the trail, when one's notions of the importance of the journey and the reward at the end are no longer sufficient to sustain one. In those difficult times a new idea comes to join the others, and that idea will see the traveler through. The idea is simple, it is simply to *finish*. Not to be rewarded, not to be famous, or happy, or fulfilled. Just to finish that painful part of the journey, if only to put an end to the suffering. To get off the tortuous trail the traveler is on. On that climb, on that day, sharing that heavy load, both chipmunks pressed on for no other reason than to be done with it.

It was late in the day when the two exhausted travelers reached Lenny's Rest, the small clearing in the pass that marked the top of their climb. There they put down their load beneath the split-log commemorative bench and rolled over onto their backs beneath the bench.

"I could sleep right here under this log," Dottie said in a groan.

"I *am* sleeping here," Stump said, his eyes closing.

Dottie was silent a moment, trying to muster the energy to move to a safer spot. She finally uttered a quiet "Maybe we should..." but her tired body betrayed her. Both chipmunks were asleep beneath the bench.

The hunting hour came to the pass, that hour between day and night when all the beasts of the woods, hunter and hunted, are at their most alert. Stump and Dottie slept through it. They missed the last mountain bikers rolling past, they missed the dimming of the peaks around them, and they missed the distant night-call of the coyotes. Their bodies were far more tired than their minds were worried, and though their dreams were frightening, it was several hours

before their bodies would let their eyes come alive to the night around them.

Dottie was dreaming of foxes when she awoke in the darkness, and her dream was so real that she swore she smelled one. Or more.

She did.

"Stump!" she whispered as she elbowed him.

"W-w-w..." Stump began.

"Shhhhhh... Foxes." Stump sniffed the air. "I smell them," he said. "A mother and kits. Maybe teaching them to hunt."

"To hunt *us*?" Dottie asked.

"I think so," Stump said in the darkness. "I think they're already all around us."

At that moment they heard the mother fox whisper to her children. "This will be the first meat you earn on your own," she told them. "It is your blood passage—from kit to fox." Stump could have bit himself for being so stupid as to sleep so unprotected.

The night was cloudy and dark, unlike the previous night, and little moonlight filtered through.

"What do we do?" Dottie asked.

"I don't know. Scamper when they pounce. They're already all around us. If it was just the mother we'd be dead already, but she wants her kits to get us. If only I could see..."

"I know a way we can see," Dottie said.

"How?"

"The fire-makers."

Stump shook his head. "No—we can't use up another gift. What about the Great Chipmunk?" Now Stump and Dottie heard the fox mother whispering instructions to her kits.

Dottie pleaded. "If we don't use them we'll never *make it* to the Great Chipmunk," she said. Stump knew she was right. He jumped up and felt in the wings for the fire-makers, then dragged the box out from beneath the bench. The strange

sounds of the chipmunks digging through their gifts seemed to delay the foxes' attack.

The chipmunks heard the mother fox send her kits as Dottie opened the box and drew out one of the stick matches and handed it to Stump, and took another one for herself. They heard the kits creeping closer as Dottie firmly held the match, sticking straight out from her, and with a hard twist of her whole body, rubbed the match against the rough side of the box.

It didn't light; it only pushed the box away from her. She could smell the foxes close now.

"Hold that thing in place Stump!" Dottie shrieked, and she heard the foxes freeze at hearing her strange command. Stump understood her and jumped atop the box as the mother fox screamed at her kits to attack.

One of the kits burst into the clearing of Lenny's Rest, less than eight feet from Dottie, as Dottie again twisted and dragged the tip of the match against the rough side of the box. The kit had chosen her as his supper and was advancing, mouth open, when Dottie's twist brought the match, springing to life with exploding flame, right up into the face of the springing kit.

"Ahhhhh!" the kit cried as it braked and retreated. Two other kits came into the clearing and froze.

"Mom!" one yelled in a high voice. "The chipmunks have fire! Like man!"

Stump and Dottie heard the mother as she jogged through the underbrush. Dottie turned in the direction of the sound and pointed her fire-maker at the mother fox as she entered the clearing. The mother fox saw the lit match, then stopped and sat down.

"What silliness is this?" the mother fox snorted. "Chipmunks with fire?" She was trying to sound condescending; Dottie thought she sounded scared.

Dottie stabbed the fire toward her and the mother fox

drew back her head. Dottie began advancing toward the mother fox.

"The chipmunks have fire," Dottie said, "just like the man—the man who *hunts* you!"

"It... it... it is *not* right..." the mother fox cried. "It is *not* the way of things... It... It... What will my kits learn from this??? You chipmunks have mocked the way of things—you are—you are—well... you are *bad!*" Stump was enjoying seeing her pain. The mother fox was embarrassed and making excuses before her kits, trying to justify her own failure. Dottie thrust forth the match again, and this time the mother fox withdrew her face even more.

"What should we do mom?" one of the kits asked. Stump, atop the box, was almost ready to laugh out loud at the situation. He could not wait to hear the mother fox's answer.

Then the match went out. It was dark again in the clearing.

"*We will eat these chipmunks now!*" Stump heard the mother fox growl, and the foxes all began moving toward Dottie. Dottie screamed, then stopped as she heard the sound of a scratch. Light again exploded in the clearing. The foxes froze. Stump had lit his fire-maker! His weight atop the box had allowed him a good strike.

"Come to me," Stump said to Dottie, and she covered the short distance to him as he jumped from the box and moved toward her. They were about a foot from the box now. Stump looked at each of the foxes and thrust the fire-maker this way and that. "I'll burn any of you who come near!" he warned the foxes, but this time neither the mother nor her kits drew back. Stump watched as the mother fox sat down again.

"We will wait," she said to her kits. "The man may know what to do with his fire, but these silly chipmunks do not." She stared directly at Stump. "You will run out of your fire soon enough, and then things will be as they are supposed to be. You will be my kits' supper, silly fool."

Stump knew she was right, and his shoulders sank even as Dottie went to the box, withdrew another fire-maker to strike before the present one ran out. Dottie stood by the box.

"What will we do Stump?" she asked, holding the unlit match.

Stump looked around, and a deep sadness fell over him. Who was he to defy the natural order of things? The mother fox was right. He was a fool. The man *did* know what to do with fire, even as stupid as men were with other things. But he, a *chipmunk*? He was a fool to try save himself by man's means.

"We will die when we run out of fire-makers," he told Dottie, heaviness in his voice. At hearing his defeated tone the kits moved slightly forward. Stump heard Dottie sniffle as she began to cry softly, almost silently.

Stump looked down. Yes, who was he? His enemy the fox had reminded him of his lowly place in this world, and Stump the traveler was once again Stump the insignificant runt. Yes, a *man* would know what to do with his fire, just as the mother fox had said, but not a stupid, silly little chipmunk runt...

Wait a minute...

An idea, something Dottie had said, bounced into Stump's mind. Yeah, the man did know what to do with his fire, and Stump did too now. His countenance lifted, and when he spoke there was command in his voice.

"Stay back!" he yelled to the foxes, swinging the fire-maker around. Now the kits drew their heads back but did not move.

"Bring me that thing," he said to Dottie, pointing at the matchbox. She put the match she was holding under her arm and pushed the box the twelve inches to Stump.

"Open it halfway," Stump said. She did, then looked around and saw in the flickering match light the foxes watching with bright curiosity.

"Bring me the hole-maker," Stump said, and immediately Dottie understood what he was doing. Hope filled her face and she scurried beneath the bench and put down her match. As she dug out the hole-maker she heard Stump yell to her.

"Wrap everything else up in the wings," he said. She did, then put her match back under her arm and brought Stump the heavy hole-maker, which she placed atop the box as the foxes watched. Stump had not needed to tell her where to put the hole-maker, and he was glad that she so completely understood his plan without one word being spoken.

Dottie backed away from the box with mixed feelings. On the one hand she was sad, for they were losing another gift, and one full of much life. Would the Great Chipmunk be disappointed?

On the other hand she was happy, for she believed Stump's plan would work, and not only would they be alive but they also would no longer have to carry the hole-maker, by far the heaviest gift.

Stump's fire-maker began to flicker. "Give me that one," he said to Dottie, motioning to the unlit match she still held. She handed it to him and went and held the opened box in place. She could see it still was almost full of fire-makers. That would be good.

Stump set his waning fire-maker on the ground and lit the fresh match. He turned to the mother fox as he held the match high.

"You were wrong," he said. "I too, just like the man, know what to do with my fire."

With that Stump set the match to the others in the box and a loud, leaping flame erupted and engulfed the hole-maker. Stump grabbed Dottie's hand and they ran to the bench. Stump saw that none of the foxes had run from the clearing; they all stood there, panting and looking anxiously at the fire.

"Grab the wings!" Stump yelled, and Dottie threw them

up on Stump's back. Wow, he thought, the load was so much lighter without the hole-maker and the fire-makers. Stump and Dottie ran into the brush with their gifts as they heard the mother fox boasting to her kits that now those silly chipmunks would be out of fire that much sooner.

Stump and Dottie snuggled their way into good shelter at the base of a bush, then looked at each other in the dark. Enough light emanated from the burning matchbox for Stump to see Dottie's eyes, even deep in the bush. He could see she was proud of him. Then the bullet exploded.

The light was immediately gone, replaced by a sound—the hideous shrieking of a wounded animal. Stump and Dottie could hear all the foxes scattering in fear, and the mother fox shouting to her kits.

“Come to me!” she yelled. “Come to me! Who is hurt?” And above it all they heard the shrieks—loud, shrill, and unrelenting—of a panicked kit running off to the woods. The mother and the rest ran off to find him.

“We put a hole in one of 'em,” Stump said proudly. “Enough to scare him.”

“You did,” Dottie agreed, and she hugged him. “That was incredible, Stump! Genius! How did you think of it?”

Stump, had his spirits been any brighter, would have glowed in the dark. “It was something you said,” he answered. “Something you said when you first showed me the hole-maker. You said the man has a thing he uses to set the hole-maker on fire, and then the silver rock flies out. I just had to make my own thing to set the hole-maker on fire.” Dottie hugged him again, but this time it seemed to make him uncomfortable. They were silent for a time, listening to the shrieking fading away in the distance. All the rest of the woods was silent, listening as well.

“We'll get going as soon as the sun joins us,” Stump said. “It will be a lot easier going without the hole-maker. That thing was incredibly heavy.”

“Yes.” Dottie agreed.

“But we’ve got to protect the rest of our gifts. No more using them up.”

“Yes,” Dottie agreed again.

“I don’t want to get there just to have the Great Chipmunk reject us. Eli said to take lots of gifts with the life still in them.”

“Uh huh.” Dottie was tired. “Mind if I get some more sleep?” she asked. She was asleep before Stump finished his answer.

“I’ll keep watch,” Stump said, and he did. He watched the darkness the rest of the night, and though he could see little, he heard much. He heard the hunters, the browsers, the travelers, and the wind. And shortly before morning he heard the soft sound of rain hitting the leaves above them.

CHAPTER 9

A DANGEROUS CROSSING

"Is that rain I hear?" Dottie asked as she came to life deep within the brush that concealed them.

"Yes, but only soft now," Stump said. "It's not even making it down here to us. We don't want it to get any harder, though."

"Messy traveling?" Dottie asked.

"Not just that. Eli said we'd have to cross a creek. I think it's coming soon by the way he said it. And you know what happens to rivers and creeks when it rains hard—they can change from chipmunks to bears for days. If we come to the creek and it's too big to cross... well, I don't even want to think about it."

"Are you saying we better get going?" Dottie asked.

"Immediately." As if on cue the morning's first thunder exploded off close-by peaks, and before they were up and loaded the sound of the rain was louder. The storm was growing angrier, and Stump couldn't help but think that even the weather did not want him to reach the Great Chipmunk with the gifts. Was there *anything*, he thought, *anything at all* on this trail that wanted to help him rather than kill him? He ran all that he could imagine of the trail through his mind. No. Not a thing wanted him to reach the Great Chip-

munk. Not one thing.

Stump was certain that all that was around him was rooting for his ruin. Everything. It was all hard, steep, deadly, and out to get him. Every inch of it, every step of the way. Everything.

Dottie helped Stump get the gifts onto his back.

Everything, that is, except Dottie.

After helping him with the gifts Dottie seemed to linger behind him a little longer than necessary.

"Stump," she finally said, "I know it's only been two days, but those gifts are making you bigger."

"What?" Stump asked.

"The gifts. Carrying that load. You should see what it is doing to your shoulders and back."

For a moment Stump almost liked himself, but then reality came back to him. He was gruff when he spoke.

"So I'm a runt with a few muscles," he said. "I still am not big. Let's get going."

The two were no sooner out on the trail than the rain began to pound them. Though the weight of the load had been more than halved, Stump would have accepted with thanks the weight of all the gifts again if he could only have them back and not be walking through the rain and the mud.

Traveling was difficult. Their steps were slippery, muddy affairs, and the clinging trail grime added weight to their bodies and to their load. Several steep spots became chutes down which the two chipmunks catapulted, and they emerged from these slides caked in mud but grinning, their eyes and teeth being the only distinguishable characteristics in the blobs of mud they had become.

After such a slide they would stop, wipe their eyes and faces, let the rain cleanse them, then continue on. The rain was not so hard that it threatened to flood the trail in low, flat spots, nor was it so light as to be ignored. It was just enough to severely slow the speed of Stump and Dottie, despite the

trail being primarily gently downhill that day.

Due to the weather they never once stopped to eat, nor did they pay much attention to the sky or brush for predators. They did stop to rest several times, though, and during one of those rest stops they considered bedding down and letting the storm pass, but once again Stump brought up the coming creek-crossing and their need to cross it before it became supercharged with all the rainwater that filters over and through the mountain and becomes its creeks. So on they went.

In the late afternoon as the light rain fell they heard a noise that Dottie guessed to be the sky. She looked up.

"Getting worse?" she asked.

"I don't think so," Stump said, shaking his head. "I think it's the creek, Dottie." They looked at each other, their concern evident. If the creek made that kind of racket, it couldn't possibly be easy to cross. They began walking again, and as they traveled onward the sound became a rumble, then the rumble became a roar. They went a few steps more and the creek came into sight, stopping the chipmunks in awe, and at that exact moment the angry sky let loose.

"We'll never cross it," Dottie thought as she looked at the water tumbling over itself as it raced down the gully. It was a powerful, violent vision, more horrible even than the hawk with the dying moon on its breast.

"Maybe there's a bridge the men use," Stump yelled above the storm and roaring creek. He set down the gifts and approached the creek. He could see nothing on which they could cross. If there was a bridge the water was already above it.

"What should we do?" Dottie yelled from directly behind him. Stump didn't answer, but instead looked around in the rain. The creek was too wide to jump, probably three or four times too wide under good conditions, and these conditions were far from good. He looked up at the surrounding trees.

The creek had trees on either side of it, looking as though they grew out of the creek, in fact, for the creek had widened to include them within its foaming banks. Stump looked up.

He had heard of chipmunks crossing creeks by climbing trees and leaping, but this was too dangerous. A miss would mean certain death, and there were really no landing spots or good branches to grab hold of on the opposite bank. Besides, one of them would have to jump with the gifts. Jumping from a tree would not work.

He turned to Dottie and explained his thoughts on climbing and jumping and why it wouldn't work, almost shouting to be heard above the roiling water's roar. When he was done he pointed toward the creek, then looked deep into Dottie's eyes. It was a look of trust.

"You look, Dottie," he said. "Look at everything we have for and against us here. Then I want you to think about the gifts—what we can use to get across this creek. What do we have left? A wound-healer, a bug-stabber, a hair-thingy, and that three-pointed tooth-thingy. Right?"

"And the wings," Dottie shouted back to him.

"Yeah, I thought of that," he said. But I'd like to not use those here. They're the best gift we have left, plus we can wrap what's left in them to carry. Also, I don't trust using them over the creek. We might land in the creek, and then we're dead for sure."

"I agree," Dottie said and nodded her head. It was hard to hear her over the creek, but Stump knew what she had said. As she went to look at the problem, Stump hollered to her and she turned.

"Try to think of a plan that will not use up the life in the gifts we use," Stump suggested. She nodded, and while she went to try solve the problem Stump opened the wings and stared at the gifts inside. No ideas hit him; only cold, hard raindrops. In a minute Dottie was back.

"I've got it!" she hollered over the rain and the creek, and

then took Stump a little ways away, beneath a bush, where it was easier to explain her plan. There she told him how they could cross using the three-pointed tooth and the hair-thingy, and Stump told her she was brilliant.

"Plus," she added after Stump complimented her, "when we are through we can bite the web and we'll still have the three-pointed tooth and the hair-thingy to give to the Great Chipmunk!"

"Not just *brilliant*," Stump added, "but *absolutely brilliant*!" They smiled a moment at each other, then Stump took from the wings the hair-thingy and the three-pointed tooth with the web, then wrapped what was left around him. The remaining gifts—now only the wings, the wound-healer, and the bug-sticker—were easy to carry. Dottie led Stump to the creek.

"There," Dottie shouted above the roaring water while she pointed at a tree. "We'll climb that one. See that branch?" she asked, pointing at it. Stump nodded. "That's where we need to be."

The two, working together, climbed the tree fairly easily, several times trading the heavy treble hook back and forth. About halfway to the branch Stump got tangled in the fishing line that extended from the hook, but he quickly freed himself and was never in any real danger of falling. Nevertheless, Dottie held her breath as she watched him untangle himself.

Once atop the targeted branch Dottie pointed across the creek. "See that bush there?" she hollered, and Stump nodded. "We should aim there; the tooth-thingy will catch good there." Stump nodded again, then unwound the fishing line from the hook so that the line draped beneath the branch. Looking down Stump saw that if they fell, they would be in the water and dead for sure. He turned to Dottie.

"I think we should put the web through the hair-thingy now," he said, and Dottie agreed. She took the end of the fishing line from Stump and threaded it through the bobby pin.

"Okay," she said.

"Now hold on to the end of the web and the hair-thingy," Stump said. "Don't get tangled in it or it might yank you off the branch when I throw it." Dottie nodded.

Stump took the fishing line about an inch up from the treble hook and let it dangle by his side. Then, as if he had been watching cowboys all his life, Stump swung the treble hook in a circle, then another. Several more circles and Stump brought the swinging treble hook up above his head and let out a little line, so that he was holding the line about three inches below the hook, which swung around and around and around his head.

Then, with a sudden jerk, Stump let the hook fly.

Perfect. Right in the middle of the bush on the other side. He could hear Dottie cheering.

"Pull it tight!" he yelled to her without turning to look at her, and Dottie pulled until the hook set tight.

"It ain't moving!" she yelled to Stump, and Stump turned to her. They both wore grins on their wet faces.

Stump took the end of the line from Dottie, warned her not to let go of the hair-thingy, then began wrapping the line around the tree. It went three times easy, with a little left over. Stump then tangled the end of the line around the wrappings, for neither he nor Dottie could tie an actual knot—their knots were just a series of tangles. When he was done he turned to Dottie.

"You hold on to that hair-thingy when we jump, I'll hold on to you. I'm smaller. Also, if I fall off don't let go in a panic."

Dottie didn't know why he had added that. Did he think she was so stupid that she'd let go in a panic? She told him he was wrong. Stump apologized.

"I didn't mean you would be stupid enough to just let go," he said. "But it's easy to imagine you dying trying to reach for me to save me." Dottie understood; Stump was right.

"Ready?" Dottie asked as she stood at the edge of the

branch, holding the hair-thingy. Stump got behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Ready!” Stump yelled.

They jumped.

All the slack was not out of the line, so their first moments of the trip were a free fall. Both chipmunks were yelling something like “Aaaaaaaaiiiiiieeeeeeeehhh!” and then let out deep “Uuuuggghhhhs” as the line ran out of slack and the hairpin caught, stopping their fall with a great bounce. Stump slid down Dottie's waist a little.

“Hold on Stump!” Dottie yelled.

“Holding!”

Dottie's plan was working quite well. The bobby pin slid over the fishing line as easily as men's pulleys slide over their ropes when they make similar contraptions. But there was one thing the chipmunks had not thought about.

The steepness of the angle of the line crossing the creek was causing a very swift descent. They could feel themselves accelerating with each inch and as they slid over the halfway point they were already moving as fast as chipmunks run. They were going to crash hard. They crossed the three-quarters mark still accelerating, and to Dottie it looked as though the bush in which the treble-hook was tangled was racing toward them faster than hawks fly.

Then they hit. There was snapping, screaming, and then moaning in the bush.

“Stump, you okay?” Dottie finally asked above the sound of the creek.

“Yeah,” Stump grunted, “but you're mashing me.” Dottie looked down and saw it was true—she had landed on Stump.

“Well...” she said as she rolled off him, “thanks for breaking my fall.” Stump groaned.

“Don't mention it.”

After a moment to make sure all his limbs were still in place and working, Stump inspected the hook and the fishing

line, then told Dottie of his findings. "The web broke when we crashed," he said, "and the hair-thingy is gone. Plus, the three-pointed tooth is bent."

"It has no life left in it then," Dottie said. Stump nodded, his disappointment evident.

They should have been overjoyed at their accomplishment, but they were not. They had lost two more gifts, two good ones, and were down to three. Would a wound-healer, a bug-sticker, and the muddy wings be good enough for the Great Chipmunk? Stump didn't know, and neither did Dottie.

Having crossed the creek and lost two more gifts, the two chipmunks now realized how truly exhausted they were. They had not eaten all day and traveling in the mud and rain had left their every muscle sore and tired—even the muscles they rarely used.

"I think we should get something to eat and find a safe place to sleep," Stump suggested.

"I'll eat tomorrow," Dottie said. "All I want is a place to hide." Stump looked up in thought, then nodded in agreement.

They gathered themselves and struck out on the trail away from the creek, and when they felt they were a safe enough distance from the marauding water they left the trail and found some bushes to burrow down into. Even in the bushes it was wet, muddy, and cold, but they were about as safe as chipmunks ever are.

"I'm sorry we lost the tooth and the hair-thingy," Dottie said before drifting off to sleep. She said it as though it were her fault. Stump grunted.

"It wasn't your fault," he said, and meant it. "Your idea saved us. Like I said, it seems this trail is determined to make us use every gift we have before we get to the Great Chipmunk. I just hope we have something left to give Him when we get there."

"Mee toooo," Dottie slurred as she fell asleep. Stump

would soon follow, but not before addressing the Great Chipmunk out loud.

“Great Chipmunk,” he said, “if you want any of these gifts we have left, we're going to need some help along the way now.”

Stump heard no answer.

CHAPTER 10

DISCOVERIES

The two worn-out travelers slept through the rest of the daylight, through the hunting hour, and through the cold, damp night, kept warm by their closeness, kept occupied by their dreams. And what great and awful dreams they were! Dreams of Great Chipmunks (his a male, hers a female) alternately pleased and displeased by their gifts, dreams of dying-moon marked hawks, dreams of hungry foxes and their kits, dreams of mountains and skies and rivers and trails—all hunting two little chipmunks, two little chipmunks kept safe by... by what?

By a desire for something better?

No.

By luck?

No.

By the Great Chipmunk?

Not in the least.

By gifts. The gifts were all that had stood between life and death. The gifts. They were alive only because they were using up the gifts that were supposed to buy their way into a better tomorrow; they were still on the trail only because they were losing those gifts which were their only chance to ever be whole. Their journey had not made them heroes,

it had made them thieves. And thieves do not sleep well.

How silly they were, how rotten. To keep oneself alive not by one's perseverance, not by one's might, but by squandering gifts meant to please the Great Chipmunk. How evil they were. And on what had they squandered those valuable gifts? The two furry little dreamers knew exactly what those gifts were being wasted on. Them. Those gifts, rightfully the Great Chipmunk's, were being squandered on their own miserable little lives. How could they ever expect the Great Chipmunk to welcome such thieves?

But such are the troubled dreams of weary travelers, such are their burdensome thoughts and concerns. A chipmunk like Toadstool may wrestle Buster for first rights to some short-lived morsels dropped by a grinning man, but chipmunks like Stump and Dottie, chipmunks who dream of a better world, chipmunks who dare travel to a better place, those chipmunks must wrestle something far more vicious than Buster—they must wrestle themselves. They must face and do battle with their fears, their insecurities, their false hopes, their wrong expectations, and they must win, for their fight is not for the right to some passing meal that will be forgotten tomorrow, but for something far more important, something far more eternal. They fight for their very souls. They fight for the right to stand, proudly, in the presence of the Great Chipmunk as new, whole beings. They fight to strip away all that is untrue about them, all the lousy things they've believed about themselves, all the unnecessary limitations they have set. They fight for the basic right to *truly* exist—to live one's own life as one's own best self, and to love and appreciate that self. And what a fight that is.

All the societal momentum in all of chipmunkdom pulls a runt and a marked chipmunk downward, and all of the runt's experiences and all of the marked chipmunk's experiences teach them to believe themselves to be small, insignificant, even a *waste* of life. And yet there is another momen-

tum, unnoticed by many, the momentum of Life Itself, calling all creatures to a higher place and giving directions to a trail, a trail unique to each individual, a trail that leads to this higher place. And these two furry dreamers had dared listen to this other momentum, given to them as a dream, a vision, a hope, and they had put just the slightest amount of faith in that Great Idea Eli had shared with them—the idea that *they*, and thus *the world*, could be made better, maybe even made whole. These little dreamers now understood what a fight they had undertaken when they set out on that trail, but they had yet to appreciate how much help they were receiving on their way. And from Whom.

And so they slept and suffered as something deep inside them tried to process their journey. Perhaps they *were* just lowly thieves. But maybe, just maybe, they were something more. When Stump and Dottie woke to the light morning rain they were hardly aware of the specifics of the depths and the heights to which their dreaming had taken them, though they both felt as if they'd continued traveling even as they slept, possibly in some other realm, all through the night. They were not at all aware just how far they had gone.

"I'm hungry," Dottie yawned upon first stirring.

"Me too," Stump said, stretching.

They stood and worked out their soreness, then went to find food. When they ate they did not speak, but looked at one another as if measuring each other. Was she thinking what he was thinking? Was he wondering the same wonders she was wondering? Was she afraid of how this journey seemed to be evolving into something more than what they had expected? Did he too suspect the Great Chipmunk wanted to show them even more than anything they had imagined when they first began? Does she think I'm strong? Does he think I'm pretty?

When they were full they returned to their hiding place

and their gifts, then rested, each in private thought. When the time seemed right, Stump stood.

"I think we've gone about halfway," he said. "Halfway in three days. Probably take us three more days, then. Sound right?"

Dottie nodded.

"So, let's try making it as far as possible today," Stump said. "The mud's gonna slow us down, so let's make up for it by traveling until dark."

Dottie nodded again, and they were off.

That day's journey was long, wet, and uneventful, just chipmunks on a journey. Each step on the trail making stronger their legs, each moment beneath the burden of the gifts making sturdier their backs, each hour in the rain making more determined their will, and each climb and each descent making more complete their journey.

Then Stump smelled the smell.

It was late afternoon when Stump, walking in front and carrying the gifts, stopped in his tracks. Dottie froze behind him, not knowing what he had sensed.

Stump had always been better than most other chipmunks at determining what things were around by what they released, unseen, into the air, and now he had determined that something dead was nearby. Close.

"Smell it?" he asked Dottie.

"No," she whispered. "What is it?"

"Death."

"Where?"

Stump began moving cautiously forward. "Near the trail," he said. "Long dead..." he froze again. "Oh no!" he yelled.

"What?" Dottie begged. "What Stump?" Stump began running down the trail and Dottie jumped in behind him.

"Oh no oh no oh no oh no!" Stump screamed as they tore along, and now Dottie could smell it too. Dead chipmunk. Stump came to a bend in the trail but did not take it. Instead

he plunged through the weeds at the trail's edge, ran beneath some bushes, up the hill a ways, and stopped. There it was. Dottie came up behind him, breathing hard, and she could see it too.

A filthy, wet chipmunk tail poking out from beneath a bush.

Stump burst out in a horrible cry, a cry so loud that Dottie looked around expecting to see predators closing in on them.

"Stump?" she asked again, but he did not answer. Instead he walked forward to the tail, sniffed it, and pulled it from beneath the bush.

Now Dottie screamed.

There was no chipmunk attached to the tail, just one chewed-on back foot. Stump threw the gifts from him and fell to his face, screaming over and over again, "No!" Then his screams were replaced by deep, horrible sobs. Dottie could not understand why he was so stricken, but she walked to him and put an arm around his now-muscular shoulders.

"Stump..." she said, but he interrupted her.

"It's Rockhopper!" he said through his sobs. "My father!" And Dottie wept too.

After the initial shock passed Dottie knew she had to do something. She looked around, down at Stump, then picked up the gifts and went to hide them beneath a bush a short distance away. When she was done she walked softly and slowly back to Stump. He was no longer sobbing; he just lay face down in the dirt, moaning.

"Stump," she said softly as she put a hand on his back, "we need to get out of the rain. We need to hide. Surely something has heard us by now."

"I don't care," Stump said, not bothering to look up.

"Stump, we need to hide," she said again. "If we don't we're not gonna make it to the Great Chipmunk." Now Stump rolled over.

"You don't get it, do you?" he bellowed. Dottie drew back in surprise. "Don't be so dumb Dottie!" He pointed over to his father's remains. "There is Rockhopper, the greatest chipmunk either of us will ever know, and *he* didn't make it. We are *already* dead."

"What?" Dottie asked.

"Think Dottie!" Stump was blaring out his frustration. "It's obvious! Eli told us a bunch of lies! He said my father would be waiting for me in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk!"

Dottie waited a moment, then spoke softly, patiently. "So Eli did not know everything, Stump. He didn't know that Rockhopper didn't make it there. But that does not mean the Valley is not there for *you* to reach."

"Ha! I can't believe you Dottie. What makes you think *I* can do something even *Rockhopper The Great* couldn't do?"

Dottie put her paws on her hips. "You already have," she said.

"What?" Stump was stunned.

"You are here *alive*, which is more than what Rockhopper accomplished." Stump looked back down at the ground. Dottie took his paw. "I'm not trying to be cruel to his memory," she said, "but you are already greater than your father, Stump. Besides, unlike him, you are not traveling alone." Then Dottie helped Stump to his feet and led him off to the bush to hide.

Sleep did not come easy to the two chipmunks. Not only had their guts been wrenched by finding Rockhopper's remains, but they had traveled quite a distance that day, farther than they knew.

Sleep would come, though, giving Stump his only relief from the terrible grief he felt, and giving Dottie a chance to dream again. Her dreams were not scary dreams anymore; her dreams were hopeful. Something was right about their journey, something so right that they had already exceeded what Rockhopper had accomplished. They—two little, un-

wanted chipmunks, had surpassed perhaps the greatest chipmunk that ever lived, next to the Great Chipmunk Himself, or Herself, as Dottie liked to imagine the Great Chipmunk. As they slept that night the two travelers were closer to the Great Chipmunk than either could imagine.

CHAPTER 11

WALKING THROUGH THE PAIN

“Want some food?” Dottie asked as Stump stirred to life. She had gathered a few things for him.

“No.” Stump’s voice was heavy with sorrow. He rolled over and looked up through the bush.

“It’s finally stopped raining,” Dottie said. “But it’s still cloudy.”

“Yes.”

“Want to just get going then?”

“Yes,” Stump said, then quickly ate some of the food he had said he didn’t want. Dottie gathered the gifts—they now had only the wound-healer, the bug-sticker, and the wings, and she brought the small load to Stump.

“Want to carry them?” she asked. Stump nodded, his mouth was too full to talk. Stump chewed several more times, swallowed, then rudely snatched the gifts from Dottie. Dottie let out a “Hmmmph!”

“Stump, I understand you’re hurting but...”

Stump cut her off. “Let’s just go,” he grunted. As they left the safety of their bush Stump was mumbling. “Great Chipmunk will probably laugh at us... Probably get eaten today... Even Rockhopper didn’t...” On and on he went, quiet enough not to draw attention as they traveled, but loud enough for

Dottie to hear. Dottie let him complain.

Dottie did not speak to Stump all morning; she did not even offer to carry the gifts. She felt terrible for him, and it wasn't that she didn't care about his pain, but it was obvious that any attempt to communicate with Stump in the state he was in would quickly be turned negative. In mid-afternoon they took a break near some berry bushes and ate. When they were through, they lay back and let their tummies rest as they stared into the gray sky. As they rested Stump spoke.

"There's one thing I don't understand," he said.

"Yes?" Dottie tried to sound as kind as possible.

"I believe the Great Chipmunk gave Eli the dreams that told him to send us on this journey. But why did Eli say my father was waiting there for me?" Dottie didn't answer, and Stump didn't want one. "He said my father would be waiting in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk. He said he knew it—he said he felt it *in his bones*."

Dottie stayed silent, but her eyes showed her concern.

"Do you think Eli *lied* just to get me to go?" Stump asked. Dottie waited as she thought, then answered.

"No, I don't think so, Stump. Eli took care of me. He sent you to me after he got me to learn about gifts. I don't think *he* lied." Dottie put emphasis on the 'he' to indicate there might be another chipmunk she suspected of lying.

"Who *did* lie then?" Stump asked, very interested.

"I think the Great Chipmunk lied to Eli."

"What?" Stump sat up. "What are you talking about? That's nonsense."

"No it's not. Listen Stump... Let's say the Great Chipmunk wanted you to go to Her... uh, Him, right?"

"Right."

"So He gives some dreams to Eli, the only chipmunk who cares at all about two mistake chipmunks like us. Do you still follow?"

"Yeah."

“Well, the Great Chipmunk knows you won't go if He tells Eli the truth about Rockhopper. If you knew that Rockhopper died trying what the Great Chipmunk wanted you to try, you would never go. You would never believe you could make it.”

“I see,” Stump said, moving a little closer with even greater interest. “Go on.”

Dottie smiled a proud smile. “So the Great Chipmunk makes Eli think that your father made it, only because He doesn't want you to stay small and miserable.”

“So then the Great Chipmunk is a liar?” Stump looked around as if he might get in trouble for saying such a thing out loud.

“I wouldn't call the Great Chipmunk a *liar*,” Dottie said. “Would you lie to me if it would save my life?”

“Of course.”

“There you have it then.” Dottie sat back proudly. Stump was not quite comforted, though.

“But then why did He have Eli send my father off to die?” Stump asked.

Dottie thought. “*That* I don't know. Maybe he had to leave or you would always have been miserable. I really don't know, Stump. Or maybe Rockhopper was like the first chipmunks—Aidan and Ellen.”

“How so?”

“Well, there are chipmunks everywhere now, but when the Great Chipmunk made Aidan and Ellen they were the only chipmunks in the world, and they were a long way from here.”

“Right...”

“Well, in each generation of chipmunks there were some chipmunks who just had to travel farther than the others.”

“Kind of like us,” Stump said. A thick, passing cloud made the day even darker.

“Yeah, kind of like us,” Dottie said. “So that first genera-

tion would spread chipmunks a little ways out, and then the next generation would spread the chipmunks even farther, until we were everywhere. We didn't get everywhere all at once. Well, I think that just like with that, when the Great Chipmunk decided to call some chipmunks to the Valley of the Great Chipmunk—alive—well, it stands to reason that the first chipmunks who tried would not be the first ones to get there. They'd only make it partway. For all we know many more have tried even before Rockhopper went, and they probably didn't make it as far as *he* did."

Stump thought some more. "Dottie, you are very wise," he said.

"Well, there's a lot of time to think out here on this trail," she said. "And one more thing, Stump. I think we are going to be the ones to make it."

"Why?" Stump was very interested.

"Because we're *us*. We're weird, Stump. Other chipmunks might turn back if they had left anything decent behind, but we didn't leave anything worth keeping. Stump, I bet most chipmunks wouldn't even have gone. *We* had nothing to lose. And I think the Great Chipmunk wants two weirdos like us to be the first chipmunks to get there."

"I understand now," Stump said in a voice of such assuredness that Dottie went silent. Stump stood up and grabbed the gifts, finally willing to believe great things about himself. "You are absolutely right, Dottie," he said. "We *will* be the first chipmunks to reach the end of this trail." He paused, then added, "And I think I understand why He called Rockhopper out here to die. I think I get it all."

Dottie was surprised. "You do?"

"Yes. What made me figure it out was when you called us 'weirdos.'"

"No offense intended," Dottie said with a smile.

"None taken," Stump smiled back. "No, it's all starting to make sense. Perfect sense, Dottie. Maybe the Great Chip-

munk wants to show that His Valley cannot be reached only by the best chipmunks. That you don't have to be Rockhopper to get there. I think there is something else, some other thing that chipmunks don't normally value, and that's what's gonna get us there. Eli told me that Toadstool cared for nothing but a full belly. Then he said I wouldn't be happy where I was, even with a full belly. There is something else you and I have, Dottie, something that's making us even stronger than Rockhopper."

"What do you think it is?" Dottie asked.

"I'm not sure, but it's getting us farther and farther along this trail. There might not be a word for it, at least not a word chipmunks know."

"You sound like Cousin Bear now, Stump." They both laughed. Stump continued.

"I really *am* starting to get what's happening, I think. When we make it, Dottie, we're gonna prove that the Valley of the Great Chipmunk is not just for the strong and the big, it's for any chipmunk willing to travel the trail to get there. Any chipmunk who sees us then—you without your mark and me big—they will all want to live there too." Stump turned and headed for the trail, then spoke over his shoulder.

"But we need to protect the last of these gifts," he said. "That's the only thing worrying me now—getting there and being rejected."

At that very moment the sun broke through the clouds.

CHAPTER 12

ATTACKED!

The two travelers resumed their journey, and despite seeing Rockhopper's remains they felt such a level of confidence in their ultimate success that they did not even bother to stay off the trail where it was safer. Instead they walked right down the trail's center as if they owned it. Stump, in fact, felt more than confident. He felt *called*, that condition in which a chipmunk feels he will be aided and guided on his journey because there is some eternal reason why he *must* be successful. In fact, for the first time in his life Stump felt downright worthwhile, and had he known how close he was to the Valley of the Great Chipmunk he would have felt even more so. Neither he nor Dottie truly understood the great distance they had already traveled, nor did they recognize how fast they were now moving due to their light load and their physical conditioning, both of which the trail itself had created. Had they stopped to think about that, Stump might have reasoned that the trail was no longer resisting them but was now on their side, offering aid and encouragement. He might even have thought his troubles were over.

Had Stump thought that he would have been wrong.

Shortly before dark the two climbed a short hill, bent west, then turned south, moving at such a pace that they al-

most jogged around a mountain to its west side. They had come around several mountains now and had learned not to expect anything, but this time they walked on only a few moments and froze. They were there. The ridge.

They were on the ridge!

Stump ran to the edge and looked over, and there, far below, was the river. They were above the Valley of the Great Chipmunk!

"There it is!" Stump exclaimed, hopping and pointing, and Dottie moved to the edge to see for herself. Stump shook Dottie's shoulder and exclaimed, "It's just as Eli said it would be!" They stared over a while longer, then embraced and jumped up and down in joyous celebration.

"We're here! We're here!" They shouted over and over again, ignoring the fact that they were still far, far above the river—so far in fact that from their vantage point the river was just a dark, crooked little line next to a straight, tan line that was a dirt road—and they still were a good day's worth of traveling from the valley.

"We made it!" Dottie cried, and then both chipmunks suddenly fell silent and froze in place.

A shadow had slid over them. A hawk's shadow. Stump's heart sank farther probably than any other chipmunk's heart ever had, for no chipmunk could ever have been so high and with such suddenness crashed so low. He let out a grunt, something of a chipmunk curse word, and as he finished he heard Dottie say, "Protect the gifts!"

Stump looked up and saw why—the hawk was diving, and it was the same dying-moon marked bird that had attacked them the first day. It had followed them all this way and Stump knew why. Dottie was right—it wanted the gifts.

Stump grabbed Dottie's hand and they ran behind a tree that was just above the trail. The hawk could not make such a sharp turn, so it glided past the tree, its left wingtip within a foot of Dottie. The hawk rose up through the trees and

landed on a branch, then turned to face the travelers. They prepared to run to the other side of the tree if it dove at them again.

"Fools—you can't escape," the hawk said, its voice hissing and evil. "But I will play a bit if you want to. At some point you will have to move, and then you will die—as it should be."

"As it should be," the hawk had said, and Stump ran the words through his mind and out over his tongue. "As it should be."

It came up like vomit, something from deep within Stump, some long-delayed reaction to living his entire life by others' definitions of what should be. The trail had created in Stump a different picture of what should be, and for the first time in his life Stump knew that *he* was right. His own version of *what should be* was the truth.

"NO!" he shouted, and then grunted out a sound that started low and rose in pitch and intensity to a violent, primal scream. "NOOOO!" Dottie was surprised by the intensity of the anger she heard. She turned to Stump and watched as he threw, or rather *slammed* the sacred gifts on the ground in front of them and opened the wings.

"What are you doing Stump?" she asked.

Stump turned and looked at her, his eyes burning with rage. He pointed toward the hawk, then, voice low and rumbling like a miniature bear, he declared "The only thing that stupid beast has over us is that he can fly and we can't. Dottie, we're gonna fly."

Dottie was stunned but ready. Stump handed her the wound-healer. "Here, take this and guard it with your life. You'll have to hold it in one hand, though. You're gonna need the other to fly." Dottie took the wound healer and tucked it under her right arm. Stump continued.

"I'll carry the bug-sticker," he said. Then Stump took the three strings from one side of the parachute and gave them to

Dottie.

"What are you doing, fools?" the hawk hissed. Stump poked his head around the tree and looked, with those intense eyes, straight up at the hawk.

"Shut up!" Stump commanded with such authority that the bird did. Stump turned back to Dottie.

"Those are for your other hand," he said, motioning to the parachute's strings. She was already gripping the three strands in her left hand, and to acknowledge Stump's instructions she nodded and squeezed the strings for all she was worth, holding her tightened fist up for Stump to see. Stump grabbed the other three parachute strings in his right hand, bent down and grabbed the bug-sticker in his left hand, then turned back to Dottie. "When we get to the edge, *jump*," he said. "Maybe these wings will get us down to the Great Chipmunk, maybe we'll die trying." He paused and both chipmunks took a deep breath. Dottie's eyes were big and firmly on Stump. There was trust in her gaze as she awaited his command.

"Go!" he yelled, and they ran to the edge of the ridge and jumped out over the Valley of the Great Chipmunk.

CHAPTER 13

INTO THE VALLEY

The two jumped as far as any chipmunks had ever jumped, for the difficult trail had made them strong and able to do so. They heard from behind them a surprised squawk bursting from the hawk, so that the great predator sounded like a confused, common crow. Stump smiled, in fact almost laughed at the sound, but before he could he was met with a new horror.

The wings did not open. Stump and Dottie were falling, plummeting, and soon would crash into the side of the mountain and be food for the hawk he had almost laughed at.

As he fell Stump looked over to Dottie. She was holding on to her wound-healer and the wings, eyes closed, face contorted in determination. He looked up at the wings, still a jumbled, crumpled ball, and then, as he looked, he felt the wind come up beneath him. The Great Chipmunk was sending a wind up the side of the mountain, he knew, and now Stump watched as that wind opened up the wings and he and Dottie were suddenly jerked upward.

They were flying!

The wind carried them up a little, then out from the mountain so that the ground beneath them was now hun-

dreds of feet below. Stump looked down and gulped, then looked at Dottie. She still had her eyes closed. Then he remembered something.

He turned and sure enough the hawk was flying toward them. Though the wind was bringing them down now, the hawk would reach them long before they reached the valley.

"The hawk's coming Dottie!" Stump warned. She nodded but would not open her eyes. "Hold on!" she heard him yell, and she tightened her grip on the strings of the parachute as well as on the bandage. Her whole life was concentrated on simply holding on to those two things. She felt the wind of the hawk's wings as it passed, creating turbulence that shook up their own flight.

"Stuuuump!" she yelled.

"Hang on Dottie!" was his reply. The wings stabilized and she could feel Stump twisting as though he was trying to turn to face another direction. Then she heard him yell. It was not the yell of a chipmunk, but of a predator, a killer.

"Today you will die hawk!" she heard Stump shout. *"You will die like the dying moon on your breast!"*

What was he doing? Dottie wondered. Antagonizing the hawk? She wanted to scold him, to tell him to stop, but she didn't dare. All her energy needed to be used holding on to the wings and the wound-healer.

Next to her Stump was facing the hawk as it banked, and Stump saw that his words had angered it.

"C'mon!" he screamed to the hawk. *"Let's get this over with!"* The hawk dove and as it came close Stump pulled the bug-sticker from beneath his arm and prepared to strike. The hawk hit the parachute, its talons tearing the parachute open, and then one of its sharp claws hit Dottie. Stump struck.

He plunged the toothpick into the hawk's thigh with all the strength he had, all the muscle those heavy gifts had created, all the determination the long trail had wrought. The hawk screamed in pain, a sound similar to the sounds it had

cruelly drawn from countless chipmunks over the years, and then the hawk lifted, the toothpick buried halfway in its leg. The hawk squealed as it left, and the sound reminded Stump of the wounded fox kit several nights before. Then he turned to Dottie and saw the blood.

“Oh no!” Stump yelled, and as he did he also realized that the wings, now torn, were dropping them much faster. It would not be a soft landing.

“Hold on Dottie!” he yelled, but she did not answer. There was a lot of blood, and if she was conscious, Stump knew, all of her that was available was occupied right now in holding on to the wings.

“Hold on Dottie!” he yelled again. “We’re gonna crash!”

They did. They hit the top of a scrub oak bush, bounced through it, and finally fell to the ground near its base. Stump heard Dottie groaning.

“Dottie!” he hollered, and jumped to her aid. He looked at her ribs where the hawk had torn her. She was bleeding heavily; losing more blood than a chipmunk can lose and still live for long. “Can you hear me Dottie?” Stump asked, grabbing her hand. She seemed to nod, then she squeezed his hand. She was trying to talk.

“Stump,” she said so softly he hardly heard her. He leaned farther down to listen. As best she could she lifted the last gift, the wound-healer, and spoke.

“Go. Take this... to the Great Chipmunk... last gift” she said. “I’ll be... with the Great... Chipmunk soon...Stump.”

Then she fell silent.

CHAPTER 14

THE LAST GIFT

Dottie smelled something beautiful, the most wonderful smell in all the world. And she felt a light over her, a light as bright as the morning sun. She knew she was in the Valley of the Great Chipmunk. As she lay there enjoying the beautiful smell and letting the light clear her mind, she realized the Great Chipmunk was softly shaking her.

“Dottie?” the Great Chipmunk was saying. “Dottie, are you back?”

What an odd thing, Dottie thought, for the Great Chipmunk to be asking. She opened her eyes and was momentarily blinded by the light, and then a face came between her and the source of the light. It was Stump's face.

“Dottie, are you back?” he asked again. She didn't know what to say.

“What's that smell?” she finally mumbled out.

Stump sounded embarrassed. “It's, um, it's flowers and fruit and morning, all together at once.” Then he explained. “Back when you showed me the hair-thingy you said that was the most beautiful smell in all the world. You know—flowers and fruit and morning.” Now Stump not only sounded embarrassed, he looked embarrassed too. “Uh, while you were sleeping I, well, I gathered flowers and fruit, and I hoped

you'd wake up in the morning. You did. Well, late, late, late morning." Stump smiled sheepishly.

Dottie looked around and saw that the bright light was the sun rising over the ridge that guarded the east side of the valley.

"Thank you, Stump," she said, and then remembered why she was there. She felt for her wound but found it covered. She sat up, grunting in pain, and looked at her midsection.

"The wound-healer!" she exclaimed, a hint of anger in her voice. "Stump, you *used* our last gift! Now there's nothing to give to the Great Chipmunk!"

"I know," Stump said quietly, looking down at the ground. "But I had to, Dottie." He looked back at her. "I couldn't let you die."

Dottie looked at her traveling companion and grabbed his hand. "Thank you, Stump," was all she said.

Dottie ate some food, and the wound-healer truly was miraculous, for about the time the sun was directly over the Valley of the Great Chipmunk Dottie declared herself ready to travel again—with help.

Stump helped her up, and together they stumbled out onto the last few yards of the trail. They traveled slowly and awkwardly, with Dottie needing to stop and rest every few steps, but they were so close to the end of the trail that they kept on.

And then they were there. They were on the road, the river was on the other side, and directly in front of them six horses, unencumbered by saddles or men, walked past, oblivious to the two chipmunks.

"It's glorious!" Dottie exclaimed, looking around. Stump wondered if she meant the valley or just the fact that they were through, for Stump had expected more than this. In fact, Stump was becoming downright miffed. A road and a river? Was that all? They had that much back where they began. And where were the... Stump paused in his anger

to think of what was supposed to be here. You know, where are the... the... the... The What? Stump wondered. What really had been promised to them? Had anyone said that there would be anything different about this valley than the valley from which they'd come?

Yes, Stump remembered. Eli had said the Great Chipmunk would meet them here. That was supposed to be the difference. The Great Chipmunk's presence. They were to dwell in the presence of the Great Chipmunk. The Great Chipmunk was going to be here to make them whole. Stump was going to be big, and Dottie was going to lose her mark. Stump smiled a hopeful smile.

"Great Chipmunk?" he called out. "Great Chiiiipmuuu-unk..."

CHAPTER 15

THE GREAT CHIPMUNK

“Do you see Him?” Dottie asked Stump.

“No.” Stump yelled again, louder. “Great ChiiiiiiipMUU-
UUUUNK!”

There was no answer.

Stump walked out onto the road, hollering for the Great Chipmunk, looking this way and that. Still no answer. He walked up the road in each direction, calling out, his calls growing quieter and less hopeful with each several steps, until he returned to Dottie by the road's edge. Stump's face was downcast, his posture downtrodden.

“He's not here,” Stump said.

“Is it because we don't have any gifts left?” Dottie asked.

“Probably.”

Stump looked awful, as if something sick was happening in his stomach and expressing itself on his face. “But that's unfair,” he said as though the words hurt him on the way out. Dottie stayed quiet. “It's wrong,” Stump painfully added. Then he walked out to the middle of the road.

“Great Chipmunk!” he yelled, and this time there was no pleading in his voice, but anger and accusation.

“Great Chipmunk!” Now Stump's anger was boiling. “Great Chipmunk, maybe we didn't bring you your gifts, but

we needed them! Can't you at least understand that?" He looked back at Dottie, unsure what to say next. He stuttered. "And and and..." he looked back out to the road, to the river, and then pointed to Dottie and shouted up into the air, "...and I'm GLAD we used them! Yes! GLAD, Great Chipmunk! You KNOW WHY Great Chipmunk?" Dottie could see tears coming from Stump's eyes.

"Because we were WORTH IT!" Stump screamed. "That's why Great Chipmunk! That's WHY! WE WERE WORTH IT! But you? You are greedy Great CHIPMUNK! I don't even want to dwell with a Great Chipmunk so greedy that all He cares about is gifts—A REAL GREAT CHIPMUNK WOULD CARE ABOUT CHIPMUNKS—NOT GIFTS!" Stump was screaming so forcefully now that spittle flew out with his words. "WE WERE WORTH IT AND YOU'RE NOT! WE DESERVE BETTER—WE FINISHED THE TRAIL WHEN NO OTHER CHIPMUNK COULD—NOT EVEN ROCK-HOPPPPPPEERRRRRRR!" Stump fell down in the dirt and rolled, pounding the ground.

"I DON'T WANT TO BE LITTLE ANYMOOOOOOORE!!!!!" he screamed. "I DON'T WANT TO BE LITTLLLLLLE!!!" Stump stopped yelling and let his sobs take over, and for a minute or so he buried his tiny head in the dust of the road as he let his sobs wind down. When he was back in control he looked up, trying to think what to do next.

And then Stump saw the big chipmunk over on the river side of the road. Stump fell silent. For just a moment his hopes rose, thinking the big chipmunk might be the Great Chipmunk, but it was not. After a brief look the big chipmunk began jogging aggressively toward Stump, and Stump saw that the big chipmunk was as big, fat, and strong as Buster and Toadstool back home. And this big chipmunk looked even meaner. Stump stared at him in silence as he approached.

The big chipmunk stopped several feet from Stump and stood up. Stump, lying on the ground, looked like a small, dusty stone before the big chipmunk. Dottie watched from the road's edge, worried about Stump but too wounded to help.

"Shut up *runt*," the big chipmunk ordered. He obviously was used to being obeyed. Dottie thought it was a silly thing to say as Stump was already silent, but she knew it was not silence the big chipmunk wanted, but subservience. She watched Stump carefully, wondering what he would do.

Stump shook his head, then slowly lifted himself from the dusty road. Once standing he shifted around to squarely face the big chipmunk.

"What did you say?" Stump demanded, bitterness in his voice. The big chipmunk took a step forward.

"I said shut up RUNT!" He elevated the tone, pitch, and intensity of the word 'runt' to make it the hideous insult he meant it to be.

What came next from Stump was not a word but a war cry. It exploded from deep within him, full to bursting with all the frustration and anger his life as a runt had buried inside him. Stump flew at the big chipmunk and instantly the big chipmunk knew this was no ordinary runt. Stump struck the big chipmunk with all the strength that carrying his burden had built in him, and he tore at the big chipmunk with all the desire his wrecked dreams had left unfulfilled. His scream was the terrifying sound of a beast aware how crooked the world was and willing to die to make it straight. His aim was no less than to free the immense pain he felt inside and transfer it to the big chipmunk.

In less time than it takes to greet a friend Stump was on top of his enemy, ready to rip out its throat, and the big chipmunk was frozen in deference as Stump himself had been frozen beneath Toadstool only days earlier. Stump went for the kill.

"LET THAT CHIPMUNK ALONE!"

The voice Stump heard coming from the side of the mountain was so strong and so deep that Stump immediately stopped his assault. He knew it was the Great Chipmunk. He stood and turned as the big chipmunk remained frozen beneath him, arms and legs stiffly up to the sky.

"Great Chipmunk?" Stump asked. He could not see clearly, for his eyes were clouded with tears. He wiped a dusty, furry wrist across them.

"Great Chipmunk?" he asked again. Then he saw who was speaking and his heart sank. It was Cousin Bear, coming down the side of the mountain. Stump hung his head, shaking it in disbelief. How many times would he be let down?

"Stump, *what* are you doing?" Cousin Bear asked as he neared the road. Stump looked up. His face was the most discouraged face Cousin Bear had ever seen. Tears flooded Stump's eyes as he began to speak.

"The... the... the..." Stump stammered, then gathered himself. "Eli lied!" he shouted. "The Great Chipmunk is NOT here!"

Cousin Bear stopped; pity filled his wide face. "Sure He's here," Cousin Bear said, and then ambled down onto the road and stopped across from Stump. "He stands right before me."

Stump, confused, looked around and saw no other chipmunks, then looked down at the big chipmunk over whom he stood.

"Him?" Stump asked incredulously, pointing at the prostrate chipmunk. Dottie was now staggering near and she heard in Stump's voice the concern that he had just attacked the Great Chipmunk. The big chipmunk took this opportunity to jump up and scurry away. Stump watched him go.

"You can't mean *him*," Stump said as he gestured toward the disappearing chipmunk.

Cousin Bear spoke gently. "No, I mean *you*." Dottie's eyes immediately filled with understanding; Stump's showed utter

confusion. He looked down, shook his head again, then looked back up to Cousin Bear.

"Forgive me, Cousin Bear," he said, trying to be polite, "but you're nutshells, just like Old Eli. And frankly, I'm just way too tired to try figure out any more of your riddles."

Cousin Bear was kind. "Then ask me what you wish and I'll speak clearly," he said. Stump thought, first about whether to even bother, and then about what to ask. Finally he spoke. His tone was short.

"Why isn't the Great Chipmunk here?" he demanded. "Is it because we don't have any gifts? Eli told us to bring the gifts, but he didn't tell us we'd need them just to get here."

"Oh, the gifts!" Cousin Bear smiled. "I was confused by that when I met you down by the river, so I went and asked Eli what he told you. Eli said he never told you to gather gifts for the Great Chipmunk, he told you only to gather gifts. He said *men* gave gifts to the Great Chipmunk, he never said chipmunks had to. The gifts were for you. For your journey. Men are silly, they think they are separate from Great Beings and that they need to give gifts. But beasts know that all we need is given to us for our journey. All we have to do is be true to our journey."

"But he said..." Stump protested. Cousin Bear raised a giant paw and shushed him.

"No. He told you to *gather* gifts. He knew Dottie was already down there learning how to use them. He knew you would need them for your journey."

"Then why did he tell me they were for the Great Chipmunk?" Stump was exasperated.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Stump. Eli never told you those gifts were *for* the Great Chipmunk..."

"Yes he did!"

"No, Stump. You just assumed that was true because you were so sure you were unworthy to approach the Great Chipmunk as you were. You wanted something to make you spe-

cial. Only lowly men need gifts to approach the Great Chipmunk. A Great Chipmunk such as you needs only to travel the trail he is given. The Great Chipmunk gives to you, not the other way around."

Stump thought now. He did his best to remember back to Eli's exact words, and as he recalled them he knew Cousin Bear was right. It made Stump feel even worse. He turned to Dottie, looking as distraught as a chipmunk can look.

"Oh, Dottie," he said and hung his head. "I'm sorry. I've been leading us wrong all along." Dottie started to say something to console him but Cousin Bear beat her to it.

"Don't be so hard on yourself Stump," Cousin Bear said. "You made it here, didn't you?"

"I guess so."

"Yes you did, with the Great Chipmunk's help."

"How?" Stump said, anger flaring again. "There has not been one sign of the Great Chipmunk the whole way. The river tried to kill us, the foxes tried to kill us, the creek tried to kill us, and the hawk tried to kill us. If we hadn't used up the gifts we would have died! And where was the Great Chipmunk then? I'll tell you *where* cousin Bear—he was the same place He is now—nowhere!"

Cousin Bear chuckled again. "You silly chipmunk," he said. "You still don't get it, do you?"

"I've heard enough!" Stump said, and started to walk away. "You're nutshells Cousin Bear!"

"No Stump." It was Dottie. "Listen to Cousin Bear. I'm beginning to understand." At that point Dottie was the only one whom Stump would obey. He stopped and turned back.

"Okay," Stump said. There was still a remnant of defiance in his tone.

"Stump," Cousin Bear began, "those gifts you thought were *for* the Great Chipmunk, they were *from* Him." Stump's jaw dropped. Cousin Bear continued. "So each of those things that tried to kill you, you defeated them only because the

Great Chipmunk helped you by giving you the gifts you would need. That's where He was, Stump. With you all along. In your gifts."

Stump immediately knew this was true for it resonated somewhere inside him as righter than right, truer than true. Yet there were still unanswered questions.

"But Eli said the Great Chipmunk would make us whole," Stump complained.

"*And you are,*" Cousin Bear said. "How were you not whole in the beginning? Was it smallness of stature that held you back, Stump? Or maybe, was it smallness of heart, of faith in yourself, of soul? Were you nothing because your body was small, or was it your dreams that were too small, and your faith in them? You tell me, Stump. Were you too small on the *outside* or on the *inside*?"

Stump looked down at himself, then over in the direction the big chipmunk had fled. When he spoke there was acceptance in his voice.

"On the inside, right?"

"Yes Stump."

"But even that doesn't clear up everything," Stump said. "Eli also said we would dwell here with the Great Chipmunk."

"And now you do," Cousin Bear smiled.

"Cousin Bear," Stump groaned, "you said you'd talk clearly. You're still riddling."

Cousin Bear sighed a patient sigh. "Stump," he said, "When I met you by the river I told you that the Great Chipmunk you would find here would not be the Great Chipmunk *you* made, but the Great Chipmunk *Who made you*. When the Great Chipmunk summoned you, it was not to a high valley on the other side of some tough mountains, it was to someplace higher and harder to get to than that."

"What?"

"Stump, you want the Great Chipmunk to be like a man, throwing you food. You want Him to be like Rockhopper,

protecting you. You want His Valley to be a place where you never have to work or to fight for what is rightfully yours. That is the Great Chipmunk you made. In your own mind. But that is not how the Great Chipmunk does things.

“The real Great Chipmunk is too high for this valley. When He wanted you to come dwell with Him, He did not come down here to this valley to toss you food, He gave you a life, a journey that would bring you up closer to His level. Look at you now, Stump. Gone is the little runt who cowered before Toadstool, before me is a Great Chipmunk ready to fill a valley with his own great presence. You see Stump...” here Cousin Bear took one giant paw and stroked Stump's tiny head, “...the Great Chipmunk you have found is the Great Chipmunk Who has made you, and He has made you into the Great Chipmunk that stands before me. And He will continue making you more and more like Himself. The Great Chipmunk *you made* does not exist; the Great Chipmunk that *made you* lives on forever in valleys higher than these, and in this valley too now, in you, Stump.”

Two thoughts came to Stump in rapid succession. The first thought was that the trail to the Great Chipmunk should not be so hard to travel, and the second thought was that the trail would not have been so tough had he not begun his journey with misconceptions about the purpose of the gifts he was given. And then a third thought came—maybe, just maybe, it was okay that he mistook the purpose of the gifts. Yes, that seemed right. Maybe it was all perfect, mistakes and all. Maybe he needed to choose using the gifts for himself and for Dottie instead of for the Great Chipmunk. Maybe that was the most important part of the journey. Maybe. Yes. Yes yes yes.

Stump understood now, and he looked over at Dottie, then back up into his cousin's eyes. Dottie watched him with pride filling her whole being. She too knew she was whole, just as Eli had promised. The trail had done what only the

trail could do; it had taken them to a better place that was no different than the place they had left.

“So the gifts were *from* the Great chipmunk,” Stump said, shaking his head. “To get me here.”

“Yes,” said Cousin Bear. Stump turned to Dottie, who was nodding.

“Then the best gift was *you* Dottie,” Stump said. Dottie smiled and Stump turned back to Cousin Bear.

“Thank you,” was all Stump could think to say. Dottie seconded it and added, “I was right. The Great Chipmunk is a female. Me!”

Cousin Bear stroked both his little cousin's heads. Then he stood, lifted his giant paws to the sky, pointed his face upward and began to proclaim a blessing, as only a bear can.

“The Valley of the Great Chipmunk as you wished it does not exist,” Cousin Bear said in his deepest, most rumbling voice, “but this valley does. And these Great Chipmunks before me are here to settle it. Stump, Dottie—the mountains, the river, the grasses, the trees—all that you see around you is only being what it is, and it is perfect. The Great Chipmunk provided a trail so you could live likewise, as you truly are. No Great Beast, be She...” (and here Cousin Bear paused to look down and wink at Dottie, who smiled) “...be She the Great Chipmunk or the Great Bruin, or either of you, would live otherwise. In days ahead you may find other trails calling for you to travel them, and know this—as long as we travel the trails set before us Something greater than ourselves will always give us the gifts we need to remain on the trail, and the distance we travel will always bring us closer to the Giver. For now, you two Great Chipmunks will fill this valley with your own great presence, and the story of your adventure will help many others on their own great journeys. It can be no other way.”

Cousin Bear came back down to all fours, raising some dust as he did so. “You understand now,” he said to Stump.

“You see through the riddles.”

Stump nodded. He realized he still felt a deep loss inside at the death of his dream valley, but he also knew *that* valley had never really been real. Stump took his eyes off of Cousin Bear and looked around—to the mountains that would define his new home, to the river that would slake the valley's thirst, to the skies that would watch over him the rest of his life there in that place, and he did something he had not done since stepping out into the Valley of the Great Chipmunk.

He smiled. Despite the hard work that awaited him, he smiled, for he knew he and Dottie were able. He looked up to the bear.

“Will you stay with us Cousin?” Stump asked.

“No. But I'll be by from time to time. I've got my own trail to travel, you know. And a story of two Great Chipmunks to spread. I'll tell Eli you made it.”

“Tell Eli Rockhopper didn't,” Stump said.

“He knows,” said Cousin Bear as he turned back toward the mountain.

“We'll welcome any chipmunks who make it here,” Dottie shouted after him. Stump nodded.

And Stump and Dottie made the valley their home.

CONCLUSION

So, what became of Stump and Dottie in their new home? Well, if you are so inclined you yourself can hike the first segment of the Colorado Trail and relive their adventure. You can start out on the road along the river, and where the road crosses the river you can look down off the bridge and see where Dottie was saved by the bobber. Then you can finish the road, leave the river, and ascend up to Lenny's Rest, where Stump lit the matchbox with the bullet on top and scared off the foxes. After that you can descend to Bear Creek, where Dottie ingeniously used the bobby pin along with the treble hook and fishing line to get them across the creek. From there it is a long walk to the ridge, and about at the midpoint of that long walk there is a south to north switchback. Just back from that switchback is where Stump found Rockhopper's remains, though what was left of Rockhopper is now long gone.

Continue on and you will eventually reach the ridge from which Stump and Dottie, holding on to the parachute, jumped. If you have a good imagination you might look off that ridge and see a big, angry hawk with a crescent moon on its breast attacking Dottie, and you might see tiny Stump plunging the toothpick deep into the bird's thigh. From there you can imagine the torn parachute taking them all the way

down to the edge of the valley you see below you. Hike down the two steep miles to right near where the trail meets the road and there beneath one of the scrub oak bushes is where Stump used their final gift—the bandage—not to give to the Great Chipmunk, but to save his friend. There was a time when Dottie's blood was still visible beneath that bush, but the many seasons since have washed away all traces of that horrible and wonderful day.

If you are a wise traveler you will have brought along some food, and if so you can go sit on some rocks near the Platte River to dine. While you are eating, maybe, just maybe, a chipmunk will approach you to see if you will give it some of what the Great Chipmunk has blessed you with. And if that chipmunk, and others, do come near, you might notice two curious things about the chipmunks in that valley. The first curious thing is that, like Stump, all the chipmunks in that valley seem a little smaller than the average chipmunk. And the second curious thing? You guessed it. Every chipmunk in that valley has a white dot on the right side of its head.

And if you do not see the chipmunks, be thankful and celebrate. For Life, in Her ever wondrous ways, has given them new journeys and new stories to tell.

ABOUT THE SETTING, IN 2003*

This story takes place on the first segment of the Colorado Trail, a 15.4 mile stretch that begins in Waterton Canyon at the edge of the southwestern suburbs of Denver, and ends in South Platte Canyon, at the edge of the South Fork of the Platte River. The story ends there, though the Colorado Trail continues on from there another 430 miles or so, all the way to Durango, Colorado.

The first 5.8 miles of the trail is a hard dirt road that Denver Water uses to attend to Strontia Springs Reservoir. The road parallels the Platte River, which by then consists of water from both the North and South Forks, which join in South Platte Canyon before passing through Strontia Springs Reservoir and then traveling alongside the road. Along these first 5.8 miles many fishermen dot the shores, and it is from some of their litter that Dottie and Stump find their gifts.

After those first 5.8 miles the road leaves the river and goes on about half a mile, at which point the Colorado Trail moves on to packed single-track trail that switchbacks up over 600 feet through shady forest, until it reaches a pass.

Atop the pass several trails meet, and a bench there commemorates a hiker who died far too young. The spot is designated “Lenny’s Rest,” after the hiker.

From there the trail descends less than a mile to Bear

Creek, a small, seasonal stream that, while no challenge for humans to cross, can be quite daunting for chipmunks.

Within two miles the trail joins a motorcycle trail for about a half-mile and from there the trail rolls up and down as it moves westward, gaining over 500 feet until it passes along a ridge over the South Fork of the Platte far below. That ridge is 2.4 miles of switchbacks, and over 1100 feet of elevation, above the river. From there it is a steep descent down to the South Platte Valley.

In the narrow valley a small group of horses sometimes roam free along the road and riverbanks. They are not a wild herd, as a wild herd implies more freedom and self-determination than the horses actually have. Man has simply left them a little room for a home where the buffalo no longer roam. The horses of that valley are man's property, unlike the chipmunks there, which remain free to *become*.

The Colorado Trail traveler can cross the Platte on the Gudy Gaskill Bridge and continue westward to segment two of the Colorado Trail. A chipmunk, however, might want to stay in such a valley and begin life all over again.

*In 2003 I and my wife backpacked about 100 miles of the Colorado Trail. We traveled from Breckenridge back to Denver. We stayed one night at a campground just east of the Lost Creek Wilderness where we stashed some things to retrieve later. It was our first long trip and we carried way too much in our effort to cling to some comfort.

When we drove back days later to get our stuff we found that chipmunks had robbed us blind! Turns out they'll brave anything to get to trail mix. Perhaps that experience, and our relationship, were the germ for this story.

We have since moved to another state with far more space and far less people, but our time on those trails left us great memories. We loved Colorado's commitment to public open-space. The whole area where the Colorado Trail con-

nects to Roxborough Park was a delight, especially the Powerline Trail and the old road at the south end of Roxborough that the Powerline brings you to. We've seen bear and lion tracks all over that old road, and once I and my nephews hiked it with several feet of snow and no snowshoes. That place, to me, was the most remote sanctuary close to Denver. *But...* There was a time when the Powerline Trail was barely visible and that old road I loved wasn't on the park maps. A Ranger had to tell me of it. I hear that they now have bike races on the Powerline and the road is on the park map.

One last note—if the Two Forks project is ever built, the Valley of the Great Chipmunk will be lost forever beneath the water and the first segment of the Colorado Trail will have to be moved elsewhere. If you are interested in such things I recommend you contact The Colorado Trail Foundation at coloradotrail.org. And if you are going to run around in the mountains, please get a CORSAR card to protect yourself and to support search and rescue. Chipmunks may rescue each other for free, but when people rescue people it costs a lot of money! You can get your card through the Colorado Trail Foundation, an organization without which there would be no Stump and no Dottie.

Peace,

Colfax