

No One Can Trust a Fox

ECHOES OF SILVA ISLAND
BOOK TWO

G. S. TELLER

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*To Flurry, Picnic, and Tickle
(and Quill)*

Publisher's Preface

This story features a hunter whose practices—setting hundreds of traps throughout a prairie and neglecting to check them for days or weeks—do not reflect the way responsible hunters actually conduct themselves. Responsible hunters take great care to minimize animal suffering, follow ethical guidelines, and honor the stewardship God has entrusted to mankind over creation.

We want to be clear: we are not anti-hunting. Scripture affirms that God has given humanity dominion over the animals (Genesis 1:26-28). And in a fallen world, responsible hunting for food, clothing, and wildlife management remains a legitimate and necessary practice. When a deer population grows beyond what the land can sustain, or when wildlife poses genuine threats to human communities, hunting serves the created order rather than violates it.

The hunter in this story is deliberately portrayed as a worst-case example—someone who has forgotten (or never learned) the responsibilities that accompany his authority over creation. His journey toward repentance and right relation-

ship with both the Creator and the created order is central to the story's message.

Our hope is that families reading this book together will be prompted to discuss, among many other things, what it means to exercise dominion *rightly*—with wisdom, care, and accountability to the One who entrusted it to us.

Soli Deo Gloria

—Mustard Seed Press

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A Very Long Time

DEEP IN A DENSELY WOODED AREA on the Island of Silva, a little south of Crystal Falls and just slightly east of the Sway River—right off the... Wait a second! Do you have your map with you? Sometimes stories are much more interesting when you have a map to follow. You're more likely to travel *with* the characters on their adventures when you see the woods, rivers, falls, mountains, valleys, caves, and all the rest. But...if for some reason you don't have access to a map right now (perhaps this is a bedtime story), you're free to listen or read without a map. That's okay too. But I think, if you're able to use one, you'd enjoy it more with a map! And yes, some of you can create the map in your head as you go along, which *is* very impressive! But I'm convinced that *if* you're able to look at one, a map will still be very beneficial to you as well. And if you're not able, perhaps someone will describe the map to you (if you ask them nicely).

Very good. You have your map now? Or, you're ready to create it in your mind? Then...where were we?

Oh, yes: a little south of Crystal Falls and just slightly east of the Sway River—right off the bank—there lived a family of

four near a huge tree. It was no *ordinary* family, mind you. It was made up of an owl, a mouse, a beaver, and a skunk.

Certainly, you might be wondering how that happened—especially since Great-horned Owls typically eat mice and skunks, and none of these animals, generally, are so cordial with each other that they would call themselves friends, let alone family. In this particular case, the mouse, whose name was Squeak, was very small—even for a mouse. And while being smaller than most isn't always advantageous, in Squeak's case it was greatly welcomed. For most predators thought him to be so little that he wasn't worth the energy to eat—not even as a snack. And so it was with the owl, whose name was Hoot. He never even imagined eating Squeak. And so why not befriend him?

As for why he wouldn't eat the skunk...no, we're getting ahead of ourselves. As for how these four specific animals came to call themselves family, you'll understand that as we get along in our story. For now, though, you just must be content in knowing that they *are* friends—such good friends, who share their lives together—that they consider themselves family. In a real sense, they had adopted each other as siblings.

Well...that is to say three of them had. Hoot was looked at more as a wise uncle to the other three. Nonetheless, they loved each other as much as any family could, and they cared for one another no matter how inconvenient it sometimes could be.

Now Squeak had an unquenchable love for all of them. You must know that. But over the past several months, he had especially grown significantly close to his adopted sister, Misty, the skunk. The two had an unbreakable bond like no other siblings in Woodland Haven (Woodland Haven?—do you see why you'll want your map?)—or perhaps the whole Island of Silva. They played together, laughed together, cried together. And while they each had their own private thoughts which

they didn't always share (and everyone has private thoughts they don't always share—that's okay), one thing they could both count on was trust. They could—and did—always trust each other.

Why does this matter, you might ask? Well, the reason this is important to know is because our story begins with a very peculiar question...



"Where is Misty?" Squeak wondered aloud, inquiring about his dear sister skunk, in his small, but somehow not-too-squeakish voice. "I haven't seen her since last night."

"Perhaps went to the waterfall," replied Hoot, in his old, husky tone. He really had no idea where Misty was, but he didn't want to worry Squeak.

"Hm," was the only response Squeak could think of at the moment. And after finishing rubbing his eyes from having just woken up, he started about his morning chores—mostly collecting nuts and berries. But he found it difficult to concentrate, not knowing what happened to Misty. Surely she would have told him if she was going to leave the camp last night.

You see, Misty had a habit of venturing out in the middle of the night somewhat regularly. This was the arrangement she made with them when she first joined their group. And part of the condition of her joining the group was that they would not follow her or try to find out where she went during these late night outings. And in return, she would always ensure they had a fire by which to warm themselves (yes, that's right—she knew how to start fires!—something generally only raccoons knew how to do). When Misty first joined this family, she made clear to them that these outings were nothing to worry about, but that she could not give them any further details—no matter how often or forcefully they pleaded. But

she did always tell them—without fail—*when* she was leaving and *when* she expected to return. So to disappear without a word and not come back was very unusual and caused quite a stir. As mentioned earlier, she was very trustworthy. So clearly it was a matter of great importance that she vanished without a word.

About half an hour after Squeak woke up and wondered where Misty was, the beaver, whose name was...well, Beaver, came up out of the river with three fish in his sack. "I was just at the waterfall, and I didn't see anyone there," he stated, in his scholarly voice and customary friendly tone.

"Were you expecting to see someone?" Squeak asked.

"No...well..." Beaver now a little flustered with himself. "Misty, I mean. I didn't see Misty at the waterfall. That's who you were talking about earlier wasn't it?"

"That was ages ago," Squeak exclaimed. "How far away were you when you heard us?" thinking Beaver's hearing must be amazing.

"I'd say he was about a mile out," responded Hoot, not giving Beaver a chance to answer for himself, and only joking.

"Oh, Hoot!" replied Beaver. "Surely you don't believe that! I was just over there, not ten feet away from the bank. ... I was just being quiet is all."

"Why did you take so long to come over then," inquired Squeak.

"Well," Beaver thought, "I was lost in thought trying to replay in my mind the events on the way here from the waterfall, desperately trying to remember if I had seen any signs of her at all."

"Did you?"

Beaver hesitated... "No."

Do you want to know something interesting? That's not all Beaver was doing. He was wondering about what happened when he got to the waterfall and found those three fish he

returned with tied up for him, next to a note from some friends.

He dropped his sack of fish near the fire they had going—the fire Misty had started just a couple days ago. “Should we be worried?” he asked. “It’s not like her to disappear without saying *anything*.”

Hoot took a breath and slowly responded, “I’ve been thinking on that very point since early this morning, Beaver. She’s gone off before, but never in the dead of night—not without telling us at least. It could now well be six hours since she’s been gone. To begin a search, though. ... We must think of the ramifications of that too.”

Now...one more note before we go on, and then I’ll stop interrupting (probably). I must warn you: you might be tempted to think this next part is a little boring. Well, it’s not. But it *is* quite a lengthy discussion.

How can a lengthy discussion *not* be boring? That’s a fair question. But if you think about it, most of your life is probably some sort of discussion—with family, friends...God... maybe even yourself (if you’re like me). And what helps make this discussion not boring (besides having a map handy if you’re able) is if you try to imagine yourself in their situation. Someone you trust greatly and love deeply has vanished—without a word. ... What do you do? ...

“I think we should look for her!” ventured Squeak.

“Yes” answered Hoot, “but how ought we to do it? ... If we all leave at the same time and Misty returns, what will she think happened? Especially if this fire goes out? But if we search for her one at a time, how are we to cover all the places she might be? For if one of us goes south, when she has gone north it could take a very long time for all of us to be reunited again.

“Let us say Beaver goes south, while Misty has gone north. Misty finally returns, and then you, Squeak, head

south to retrieve Beaver. But Beaver, being diligent in his search for Misty does not return the way he came, and neither does he go so far south as to cross the Little One's River to the human territory; but instead, he travels east with the river toward Stag's Prairie, then up north and then west again. Meanwhile, you are either continually going south well into the human territory, or you return north, or you also make your way east.

"But at that point, perhaps now you've been gone so long that Misty or I go out to search for you. Because now we're not truly sure of what has happened to you. And what of Beaver? Has he returned yet? Or is he himself still searching for Misty?

"Do you see the predicament?"

The other two thought about it, with their scrunched faces giving away how hard they had to think through everything Hoot had just said. But then Squeak spoke up, "But Hoot...I still think it's possible for us all to search for her at the same time and not miss her."

"How can that be? These woods are so very vast, and not even I have seen the whole of them."

"But that's exactly my point! There are only certain places we can be sure she went.

"For instance, she's never been across the river, at least that we've seen. So we can be somewhat confident that she didn't go west. On the other hand, while she has been south before, it's only been on a few occasions, and she's always followed the river bank pretty closely.

"Now for the east, that can get a bit tricky because we know she loves to swim. ... Isn't she funny?" he paused to laugh, as skunks do not normally enjoy swimming. "And she's been known to visit any of the three lakes to the east.

"That leaves the north. And when she *has* made her midnight ventures—the ones she's told us about at least—she

always *returns* from the north. Well, the northeast to be more precise.

“So...there are three of us, and three main directions she would likely have gone. Is it probable that we’d find her if we each set out at the same time, each taking one of the three directions, and then return when we’ve either found her or have at least thoroughly searched those areas?”

Beaver sat perplexed at the insightfulness of the little mouse, while Hoot considered carefully the possible outcomes. After a few minutes, Hoot thoughtfully replied, “Squeak, your reasoning is quite excellent. My only hesitation with this plan is on the off chance that she *has* gone west or for some other reason is not in one of her usual locations, and then returns while we are away—what will she think? Will she wait for us to return? Will she leave again going out to look for us? Will she think we have set up camp somewhere else—especially if this fire has gone out? ... After all, we have lately talked of one day looking for a new camp.”

Squeak had pondered that question before Hoot even asked it, and quickly responded, “I understand that, Hoot. I do. But I think if we leave her some sort of message here at the camp, and if we commit to only checking the places she’s likely gone and then come back, we can guarantee that we’ll be reunited soon enough.”

“But what is soon enough?” Beaver asked. “Suppose we each go in the three directions, when might we expect to see each other again here at the camp? Certainly we don’t anticipate everyone returning from their quest in a few hours.”

“A few hours are out of the question,” Hoot responded. “More like a few days at the very least—and that’s assuming someone finds her immediately. And even then, we won’t *all* have returned by that time.”

There was an eerie silence for a short time. For they had never been away from each other for more than a few hours at

a time since they had become a family—at least not all of them at the same time. Yet now, with the sudden disappearance of Misty, they're thinking of leaving each other for several days.

But it was so unlike Misty to do something like this, that Squeak couldn't possibly think she did it of her own free will. No. She was missing on account of some accidental tragedy—or worse, something sinister. Thus he couldn't handle it anymore. "So what do we do then?" he spoke loudly, almost a yell.

Hoot answered, "I do think we should act on your plan, Squeak; but I also think it would be wise for us to consider it more carefully and plan a few more details. For instance, what is a reasonable time frame to expect us all to come back to camp—with or without Misty?

"Let us say that one of us goes east and immediately finds her and returns. They together reach camp by the end of the second day. It's safe to assume that the one who has gone north will already have been back, because he would have traveled the shortest distance.

"But what of the one who goes south? It's quite a journey if he heads all the way into the human territory—should the need take him all the way there. How much time should we allow for a search of that area before the trip back home? How long should the others wait before sending someone to look for our southern traveler? Or let us say the northern traveler returns with Misty by day two. The southern traveler returns by day seven. But the eastern traveler hasn't yet returned. What then?"

There was another break in the conversation when Beaver, who was trying to keep up with the math and distances in his head, spoke up, "I think I've got it.

"We give our north-goer two days total. A half-day to get all the way to the mountains, the rest of the day and half of

tomorrow to search for her, and then return by the end of day two.

"The eastern traveler will have four days total. The entire day to get to Lake Corgo, as that's the farthest east. It won't take long to search the area, but let's be generous and say it takes half a day. By the end of tomorrow, he'll have been able to search Lake Corgo and make his way northwest to Lake Diamond. Since lake Diamond is so big, he should have the entire day to search. By day four he should have enough time to travel west to Lake Newell, search the area, and be back by sunset.

"Our southern traveler should have a week. One and half days to get south into the human territory, four days to search the area, and one and a half days for the trip home.

"What do you think?"

"It sounds right to me," Squeak said impatiently, not really even evaluating it.

"Yes," Hoot reluctantly agreed, "but I still think we haven't yet planned on what to do if someone else ends up missing during this rescue mission."

Then Squeak interjected rather abruptly, "We need to find her!

"We can't just keep talking about all the different situations that could or might happen. I know plans are important, but we have no idea what has happened to her. And the longer we sit here making plans, the longer she's out there...she's out there...well, I don't know what's happening because she's out there. What if she's hurt, or trapped, or...or..."

Hoot could see where Squeak's mind was going and gently reassured him, "Squeak. I cannot claim to know exactly what has happened. But I do know that she is clever and resourceful. I have to believe that whatever has happened, whether or not she needs our help, she is most likely alive and well."

Silence again, but only for about ten seconds, though it

seemed like ages. "Well," Squeak broke the silence, "should we decide what to do when each of us gets back as it happens, and at least start our search now? We know when each of the travelers *should* be back if they take all the time allotted..."

"Good enough for me," Beaver exclaimed.

"Very well," Hoot acquiesced. Though he still wanted to plan for the various contingencies, he knew he couldn't plan for them all. And Squeak was right about the urgency. For they truly didn't know what had happened to Misty. "So who goes where?"

"You're the smartest one," Squeak answered. "I think you should decide."

Hoot thought for a moment, being slightly thrown off from the comment of him being the supposed smartest one. After all, while he was typically looked upon as the one with the most wisdom in their family, it was Squeak who came up with this elaborate search plan. But not having sufficient time to comment on that remark he simply answered the question:

"Well, Beaver is by far the superior swimmer. So I think it obvious that he should travel east and check all three lakes.

"As for the south... While the trip south isn't too dangerous in Woodland Haven, once our traveler enters the human territory, it becomes much more difficult. While the birds there are no threat to me, they may in fact try to make an end of you, Squeak. Yet, they're not the main concern. We must remember the various cats the humans let roam around that area. And the closer you get to the cats the more dangerous it becomes. I would hate to send you along that route, Squeak. Therefore, I will make my way in that direction...which...leaves the north to you," he ended with some hesitation.

"I can handle the north," Squeak declared bravely.

Bravely, because the north was known to be home to several vicious animals and harsh habitats. Birds of prey much

less friendly than Hoot lived where the mountains connected with the forest. There were also snakes, coyotes, weasels, and badgers. And for the last couple of months there have been stories making their way through the forest of a dangerous, deceitful fox—a fox who is known for his stealth. And who knows what trouble he may be stirring up?

Hoot could already see the thoughts of Squeak. “Don’t worry about the fox, dear Squeak. I’m sure he’s the least of your concerns. ... There are more dangerous animals to be thinking of.”

“I’m not worried about them. I know who I am. I know I’m so small that most would not even think of eating me. You’ve never thought of eating me. I wouldn’t be worth the energy. But I am worried about the fox—not that he would eat me; but that he would somehow trick me. ... Maybe he’s already tricked Misty, and that’s why she’s missing.”

Squeak began to tear up at the thought of it, when Beaver then began to encourage him, “There, there, friend. Misty is quite smart to be taken in by some clever fox. If anything, had she encountered him, she just as likely would’ve outsmarted him hours before he even developed a plan for how to fool her.”

“Wouldn’t that be something!” exclaimed Hoot, with some joy in his tone at last!

“You’re right,” Squeak confirmed. “She is *very* smart! Besides, what would he want with her anyway?”

After a little more discussion and encouragement—and most importantly, a prayer—they wrote a note on a dried, sturdy leaf for Misty, in the event that she would return to camp before any of them (the note was written in raccoon script; for that was the only written script animals could understand). Then, as it was still early enough in the morning, they each went their separate ways: Hoot to the south, Beaver to the east, and Squeak north.



A few hours later, it had now been excessively quiet near the tree that they had come to know as home for a little over a year. And they left the fire burning so that if Misty returned before they did, she would immediately know they hadn't left for good, or perhaps that nothing bad had happened to them. The fire was becoming increasingly more enjoyable in the evenings, as the autumn was coming to a close, and winter would be arriving soon. And it had also come to be a significant source of warmth, comfort, and hope to all four of them. And if anyone were to return in the evening, just seeing it from a distance would stir up strength enough to finish the journey.

But then...the quiet of this beautiful scene was abruptly interrupted! For a very strange and most disturbing thing happened.

A duck named Paddle waddled out of the river bank—having heard most of their conversation several hours ago (he was very patient to wait this long). He walked up to the note they left for Misty, grabbed it with his beak and tossed it into the fire. After the note had burned up, he then extinguished the fire by kicking dirt over it until it was completely out. And he patiently endeavored the tedious task of moving the logs around to make it look as though a fire never existed.

Lastly, he grabbed the sack of fish that Beaver had left near the fire and then vacated the camp. While he was simply doing what he was told, it was almost as if he was the only one who knew the hard truth, that none of them would return to this camp for a very long time.

There Was Nothing He Could Do

PADDLE WAS A MYSTERIOUS PEKIN DUCK. He never really said much to most of the woodland creatures. And he spent most of his time with Grizzle, a giant but young brown bear. Grizzle had protected Paddle ever since he can remember—ever since he broke his right wing when he was still a duckling. It eventually healed, but only in a way that made it so that he couldn't fly.

However, he could swim and waddle very efficiently. He was strong and fast—and could cover long distances in a short amount of time. After he picked up the sack of fish that Beaver left behind, he headed back north up the river, toward Crystal Falls, to then go far east following the foothills near the forest and a little through Shade Swamp. This would eventually land him at the cave in which Grizzle lived. And though he was confident our family of four would not return to their campsite for quite a while, he was altogether unaware of the trials he himself would face on his way back to Grizzle's cave.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves.



When Hoot took off south toward the human territory, he started at treetop level with his flight. Being a Great-horned Owl, he of course had excellent vision and could see things from a much higher distance; but he was also getting older and wanted to make sure he could spot *any* sign of Misty's whereabouts.

It was quite a journey south, as he had mentioned to Squeak before they left. Sometimes he would stop for a rest and perch on a tall tree, perhaps eat something for nourishment, and then fly off again. It was a good fifty miles total from their campsite all the way as far south as one could safely go into the humans' territory, performing a thorough search throughout the land, and then return home. And that was quite a distance at Hoot's age. He was not alone though. As he traveled south he would not just look for Misty or signs of her presence, but he would stop and chat with the other animals to see if they perhaps had seen her.

Making conversation with other large birds was easy enough. Hoot would run into other owls, some falcons, an occasional hawk. The only birds that weren't very helpful were vultures. To be clear, none of them knew where Misty was or had even seen signs of a skunk. But the vultures weren't even interested in listening to Hoot's dilemma. They just shrugged their shoulders and didn't offer an answer at all. Of course, vultures weren't known for their friendliness or helpfulness. But it still seemed rude.

However, when he wanted to talk to some of the smaller animals, like squirrels and chipmunks, he wasn't as successful in getting full conversations with them either. Most of them would run into their homes scared while others would remain hidden in their homes but yell at him from inside—pleading for him to leave immediately. Of course, they did not know Hoot personally and had no idea he didn't plan on eating them. So they had all the reason in the world to hide

from him—despite his promise that he meant them no harm.

Thankfully, some brave creatures, upon hearing his pleas for help before he landed near them, would stay put and wait for him to ask his questions.

“I haven’t seen a skunk around these parts—at least not since the Great Storm,” remarked one oversized squirrel with his three little kits playing tag behind him.

“And before the Great Storm?” Hoot inquired more precisely.

“Well, there were a couple families that lived about two miles east of here. But ever since the storm, I’ve not seen any of them.”

“And you have no idea of what happened to them?”

“Died in the storm most likely. At least, that’s what I heard. ... Although...” he started to reach further back in his mind. “I do remember hearing about one of the kits surviving.”

“Boy or girl?” Hoot pressed.

“I can’t say that I remember, or even knew to be honest. ... I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“That’s alright. Thank you for the help you’ve given. I’m much obliged,” Hoot remarked as he took off continuing his search south, following the Sway River further toward the human territory.

As the sun began to set he searched to find a place to spend the night. Thankfully, one such place appeared quite readily. An empty—or so he thought—eagle’s nest. It was conveniently located just north of Little One’s River, which made for a great resting spot. Once he crossed that river he would effectively be in the human territory; so he’d much rather sleep in that safer place. He settled down there and began preparing his mind for tomorrow’s task.

He would have to fly across the Little One’s River toward

Blossom Falls. He would stay east of the Sway River, but planning strategically, he would fly as far south as he could toward the human houses and make a speedy, but very cautious trip east toward the end of the island. After that he would travel back west to the Sway River, but on that trip he would be further north. He would continue this zig-zag pattern until he was back at Blossom Falls. And the further north he got, the less danger he would be in from the humans.

As he finished his plans for tomorrow, he thought about how poor Misty must be feeling—without her family. Or did she come back already? This was such an emotionally difficult situation. Reflecting on this, he then turned his attention to Squeak and Beaver—praying for them, and thinking of how they were doing in their search.



Beaver, for his part, was getting tired. He had three lakes to visit in order to see if Misty had gone for a swim. The main problem was they were fairly spread out. Lake Corgo was the smallest in perimeter, but the deepest of them all. It was also the furthest east. As they discussed in their plan, Beaver decided to start with that one and then work his way back home to camp.

At first, you might be tempted to think (especially if you have your map), “Wouldn’t it be easier if he searches Lake Newell first, then Lake Diamond, and then Lake Corgo? If Misty is at either one of the first two, Beaver would find her much quicker.” And that makes sense. However, not only was Lake Corgo the furthest, but it was also the lake Misty enjoyed the most.

Though not as old as Hoot, Beaver was a little older than Squeak and Misty; and traveling through the woods was not as easy for him as it used to be.

However, due to the location of Lake Corgo and their camp, it wasn't strictly east, but more southeast. And this was actually helpful for Beaver, because as he made his way south-east, he eventually came to Little One's River and was able to swim almost the entire rest of the way.

Yet, even with swimming, it took him quite a while to arrive. And when he did, strangely, the lake was vacant. It usually was the least visited out of the three lakes. But generally there were some ducks or deer that would stop by from time to time. At present, however, Lake Corgo didn't just look empty. It looked abandoned! It was as if no living creature had ever or would ever set foot near it. This gave Beaver a slight chill as he thought of all the potential things that could have or might have happened to Misty.

"Oh Creator, let it not be!" he cried out in prayer, but resolved to not stray from his mission. As he cautiously approached the lake, he was determined to make some of his greatest dives. And great indeed they must be, as Lake Corgo had a depth of thirty feet. Obviously Misty would not be able to dive down that deep. But Beaver needed to be able to prove to himself, and his family, precisely what he was certain of in his own heart—that Misty's body was *not* at the bottom. But there was only one way to know for sure.

Though the evening had started to set in, Beaver thought it best to do his search of this lake *before* the end of the day, and then find a place to rest for the night.

As he first dove into the lake, he swam to the middle, and went about a third of the way down just to get acclimated to the water. He took a couple laps around the perimeter, which took no time at all, and then swam toward the middle again. His plan would be to dive straight down as fast he as could to see how far down he could make it in one breath. Of course, his hope was that he'd be able to make it down, search for a couple yards, and then come back up. But he wasn't at all

confident that would happen (and, unfortunately, for good reason).

"All right," he said aloud to himself: "For Misty!" And taking a deep breath dove as hard and as fast as he could toward the bottom of the lake.



As for Squeak, he made his way north with a determination he had never felt before. As mentioned previously, he loved all his family equally, and yet he felt a particular closeness with Misty. Maybe it was because she was the only girl, or perhaps because she was the latest to join them. Maybe it was because she was the most playful and enjoyed a good practical joke every now and again. Maybe it was all those reasons and many more. Either way, she was the closest thing he ever had to a sister—at least since his mouse family left him during the Great Storm; and he loved her dearly. He was not about to let her get captured or hurt or any other way taken from him without putting up the greatest fight he could.

So he sprinted as fast as possible toward the northeast along the path she would typically come from when she returned from previous midnight walks. Oh, those midnight walks! What was she doing? And why was she always so secretive about them?

Squeak couldn't think about that now. He had to stay focused on looking for signs of her or where she had been. But it was hard not to reflect back on those nights when she would leave:

"I'll be back soon, Squeak" Misty would say with a smile, in her soft sweet voice. "I'll only be gone for an hour or two."

"And why can't any of us come with you?"

"It's private. But I'm not up to any trouble, if that's what you're worried about. I promise."

"But what do you do when you're away?"

"I told you. I can't tell you anything about it. Not yet."

"Then when?"

"I don't know. Maybe tonight when I get back" ...

The memory began to fade, as Squeak realized he had been running full out for over three miles. Thankfully he was nearing the marshy area before the mountains and could get a drink to refresh himself. He started to take a big gulp of water that had accumulated on a leaf, as he continued to ponder his memories:

"How was your meeting?" Squeak asked sulkily one night upon Misty's return.

"What meeting?"

"I know you're not alone the whole time."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because every time you come back you look like someone who has just had the most wonderful dream, and then they woke up to find that it was their real life the whole time."

"My goodness, what a description! I can't lie—it's actually how I feel. ... But how does that mean I must have been with someone else?"

Squeak sat there for a few minutes, not wanting to say what was on his mind. Ever since he watched his mouse family float down the river on a raft without him, he struggled with thinking he was lovable—lovable enough to stay with at least. He put his thoughts aside and asked plainly, "Are you leaving us?"

"Squeak, no! Never! ... I could never leave you! Or Beaver, or Hoot. Why would you think such a thing?"

"Because you're obviously meeting with someone else on these secret midnight strolls you take."

"Let's say I am. And I'm not saying that I am or am not. But I want to play this out with you. If I am meeting with

someone on these occasional walks I take, why does that have to mean I'm leaving you?"

"Eventually you'll have to choose, won't you?" Squeak asked as his voice began to clearly portray his fear. "You can't stay with two families. Eventually you'll have to choose one. And when you come back to us with that glow about you—with...with that dream-come-true look you have; how would you not choose whoever it is you're meeting?"

Misty's eyes began to drop a tear of joy, never fully realizing until just now how much Squeak loved her. "Oh Squeak! My sweet, dear brother! Do I look so truly amazing when I come back here?"

Squeak nodded.

"Did you ever wonder then—if I am meeting with someone, or even several someones—what I might look like to them when I come from spending time with you?"

Taken aback, Squeak wasn't sure how to respond. Did she mean to say she had that same glowing look after spending time with him?

"Perhaps," began Misty, "I go to these meetings to confirm again and again how deeply committed I am to my family. To *you!*"

Squeak woke up. He had been asleep a full half hour at the marsh. Or was it a swamp? Its name was Shade Swamp, but most of the creatures of Woodland Haven always referred to it as "the marsh." Hmm... "Misty!" Squeak said aloud, waking himself from his distracting thoughts.

After ensuring he had had enough water for his continued journey northeast, he noticed the forest was pretty much ending into the lower hills of the mountains. Up ahead were several caves. Surely if Misty had come this far, she would have visited one of the caves for shelter if it was too dangerous to come back right away.

And then he noticed something in one of them. A fire!

A fire! A fire! Of course, that must be her! She's the only one he knows who can start fires. This is terrific! Squeak ran as hard and as fast as he could to the cave with the fire, which was actually much further away than he initially thought. By the time he got there the sun was well on its way down, and he was very tired from all the running. But he did make it, which was truly an amazing feat!

When he finally arrived, as the darkness of the evening began to set in, he approached the cave carefully. He peered in and saw—or thought he saw—what appeared to be a skunk-sized animal huddled over the warmth of the fire.

"Misty?" he called cautiously. "Misty, is that you?"

There was no answer. Squeak approached more slowly as the sense of this situation began to feel increasingly precarious. Surely Misty would have answered. But maybe she just couldn't hear him...?

"Misty?" he called out again.

"There's no Misty here," said a soft but powerful voice behind him, and now blocking him from leaving the cave.

Squeak gasped and briefly closed his eyes—not for fear of his life but for fear of what that voice might mean to Misty's fate. For though he had never seen one before, he just knew that was the voice of a fox.

Without turning around, he replied, "Do...do you know where she is?"

"What difference does that make? What relation does my knowing or not knowing where this Misty is have to you?" the voice answered as his words echoed through the cave.

There was a brief silence followed by Squeak responding quietly but firmly, "I'm not afraid of you!"

"Well...that's good," the voice answered, "then why don't you turn around and face me?"

"Because I don't want to fall into one of your traps. If this isn't Misty, who is it?" Squeak respectfully demanded, keeping

his eyes on the skunk-sized creature huddled over near the fire, thinking that once he turns around, this animal that is not Misty will attack him.

"The question unfortunately is not who he *is*, but who he *was*" the voice answered, "And I assure you, unless Misty was an adult, male raccoon, this was not and is not Misty."

Being both relieved and terrified at the same time, while keeping his voice steady Squeak replied, "Did *you* kill him?"

To this the voice simply said "Turn around, and we can talk about it."

"I know who you are," Squeak said as he began to turn around—only to see yet another shadow instead of the physical form producing the voice with which he was conversing.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. There've been stories...about a..."

"Yes?"

"About a fox. A dangerous fox known for his stealth. And I've fallen right into one of your traps, haven't I?"

"Hah hah hah..." chuckled the voice in a sort of teasing way. "I would like to think myself that clever and say, 'Yes,'" he continued. "But I'm afraid not. ... However, how can *you* know? ... Whether *I* say yes or no, would you believe *me*?"

"Well, I..."

"No," said the voice, stepping out of the shadow and into the light of the sun (as it was now setting completely) confirming Squeak's suspicions of who he was, and now very purposefully making himself a barrier between Squeak and the outside of the cave. "You know who I am. And I know who I am as well, along with all the things they say about me. ... I am a fox. And so if I say you've fallen into one of my traps, or that I know where some animal you call Misty is, or that I'm going to eat you—even though honestly, you're so small that I wouldn't be tempted to eat you. ... No matter what I say, it's going to be very difficult to believe me, isn't it? Because the

one thing you've been told about me—your whole life—is... what?"

Squeak mumbled something softly under his breath.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. Could you repeat it?" the fox asked.

"No one . . ." Squeak started and then trailed off with a mumble. Then seeing he was not going to get anywhere until he spoke the whole sentence, he cleared his throat and declared, "No one can trust a fox!"

"Ahaaa...indeed. No one can trust a fox. So if that's the case, then why ask me for any information at all?"

Squeak was unsure of what to say or do at this point, as he reflected on the fox's words. His whole life he was told that no one could trust a fox. But if that were true, then what information would he really hope to gain from talking with this fox? For no matter what the fox told him, he would have to assume it was not reliable.

But then again...the fox had proved himself reliable with some things already. For as Squeak turned around from facing the fire, he did notice that the dead body near the flames was indeed that of a raccoon. And—again, though Squeak was small—the fox so far still hadn't tried to eat him. So that was a good start. Alas, still unsure of what actually to do, Squeak had to do something, so he just said the first thing he could think of: "*Should* I trust you?"

The fox was surprised by this question but didn't hesitate to respond, "Of course you should trust me. You may even find me the most trustworthy animal you've ever met. But if you're smart, you'd also stay cautious. For right now I'm on a dangerous journey."

"A dangerous journey?" Squeak replied, sounding as if he was in disbelief, though he wasn't.

"Hmh," the Fox muffled under his breath. "Yes. A very dangerous journey. When you look at what's next to the fire,

wouldn't you assume my trip has been dangerous enough—so far at least?" The fox stopped to hear the silence, as he knew the mouse wasn't going to answer. Then he continued, "Either way, which piece of information is more pressing to you? The details of my journey? Or the whereabouts of your friend you call 'Misty?'"

"My friend, of course!" Squeak interjected with no hesitation. "And she's not just my friend. She's my sister!"

"A tiny mouse with the sister the size of a raccoon. Interesting..."

"She's not a raccoon. And I really need to find her. So could you please either tell me where she is, if you know, or let me pass by and be on my way?"

The fox sat on his hind legs and looked thoughtfully at the scared little mouse. Then, as if nothing Squeak had just said mattered to him, he simply responded, "I think not."

Squeak was surprised and exasperated, but there was nothing he could think of to reply in this instance. So the fox continued.

"At least...that is...I won't let you pass tonight. The sun is already down, and the night birds in these parts are very keen on eating *anything* they see—even tiny, tiny mice."

"And what about tomorrow?" Squeak insisted. "Will you let me go tomorrow?"

"I don't intend to keep you from your quest, little one. But you really might be interested in helping me with mine—if you don't think it's *too* dangerous that is."

"I can't!" Squeak declared, somewhat frustrated that the fox seemingly didn't understand how much finding Misty meant to him. "I must find Misty!"

"Ah yes," the fox spoke reassuringly. "I know. But did you ever even think to ask who I might be looking for on my journey? ... While I'm not looking for your sister, I do believe I'll

soon come across a friend of mine who knows the exact location of your missing skunk.”

Bewildered by what the fox said and how Squeak had never told him his sister was a skunk, he found himself unable to speak. Then all of a sudden, the fox moved to the side of the entrance of the cave in order to let the wind in just enough to blow out the fire. And although Squeak could see just fine without light, the fox clearly would not let him escape. “Good night” were the last words Squeak heard him speak. And in an instant, the cave went dark, and there was nothing he could do.